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## "It's not a science isolated in a bubble": Grave Encounters in Forensic Anthropology in Colombia and Peru

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Anthropology

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## Abstract

My doctoral research explores the experience of forensic anthropologists in places of sociopolitical unrest, specifically focusing on Colombia and Peru. Forensic anthropologists, who specialise in identifying skeletal remains, analysing skeletal trauma, and providing expert opinions on the circumstances of death, often serve as expert witnesses in legal proceedings. However, in Latin America, the concept of witnessing extends beyond the courtroom, encompassing a broader spectrum of knowledge generation. This dissertation examines the diverse encounters faced by forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru, including encounters with human remains and the legacies of political violence, encounters with the families of the missing, perpetrators, and a precarious institutional landscape. I argue that these encounters shape the moral experience of forensic anthropologists – making them not only *unwanted witnesses* but *moral witnesses* – and exposing them to specific risks, dangers, stressors, and emotional impacts. The research presented here suggests that the entire context of forensic anthropological work can potentially shape forensic anthropologists in profound ways. The findings indicate that the impact on forensic anthropologists extends beyond the immediate tasks they perform, such as interacting with bereaved families or encountering perpetrators of violence. The broader sociopolitical landscape, characterised by pervasive violence and precarity, also plays a significant role in shaping these professionals. My findings suggest that the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce, the things they witness, and the sociopolitical context they operate in all contribute to shaping their personal lives and decisions. The research further posits that the conditions under which forensic anthropologists work create an environment conducive to *moral injury* – an injury to one’s moral conscience which stems from witnessing or participating in events that go against one’s moral beliefs. These same conditions and contexts provide the discursive and practical resources that forensic anthropologists utilise to manage their experiences, cope with their work’s psychological and emotional impacts and navigate the multifaceted challenges inherent in their profession.

## Keywords

**forensic anthropology in Latin America, Colombia, Peru, moral injury, moral witnessing, scientific detachment**

## Summary for Lay Audience

My doctoral research explores the experience of forensic anthropologists in places of sociopolitical unrest. Forensic anthropologists analyse skeletal remains for identification purposes, interpret injuries evident on bones, and determine the approximate time elapsed since the individual's passing. Forensic anthropologists often work in difficult contexts shaped by political violence, human rights violations, and widespread insecurity. My project focuses on the narratives of forensic anthropologists working in Colombia and Peru, where forensic anthropological investigations have been central in aiding to uncover, document, and address political violence. Forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru face various encounters: they encounter the human remains of individuals who were murdered and tortured, they work closely with the families of individuals who were forcibly disappeared, they encounter perpetrators and violence directed at them, and they encounter specific challenges when working for governmental institutions. Those encounters shape the experience of forensic anthropologists – making them not only *unwanted witnesses* but *moral witnesses* – and expose them to specific kinds of risks, dangers, stressors, and emotional impacts. My research suggests that forensic anthropologists can potentially become deeply affected by their work in ways that go beyond their day-to-day tasks. This research shows that their entire professional environment, including the broader social and political situation, can have a profound impact on them. It is not just interacting with grieving families or encountering criminals that can affect forensic anthropologists. The overall climate of violence and uncertainty in which they work also plays a big role. The knowledge they produce, the things they witness, and the social and political environment they work in, all can influence their personal lives and decisions. The conditions of their work can lead to *moral injury* – an injury to one's moral conscience which stems from witnessing or participating in events that go against one's moral beliefs. Despite these challenges, forensic anthropologists find ways to cope. They use the very same work environment and experiences to develop strategies for dealing with the emotional and psychological impacts of their profession. By recognising their complex encounters, we can better understand the moral challenges and personal implications of forensic anthropological work in these regions.

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The great enemy of morality has always been indifference. [...]

To remain good means to remain wide awake. We are all like men walking in the bitter cold and snow. Woe to him who gives way to exhaustion, sits down, and falls asleep. He will never wake again. So our inmost moral being perishes when we are too tired to share the life and experiences and sufferings of the creatures around us. Woe to us if our sensitivity grows numb. It destroys our conscience in the broadest sense of the word: the consciousness of how we should act dies.

– Albert Schweitzer, *Reverence for Life*

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## Preface

In March 2021, I participated in a webinar called ‘Writing Public Anthropology.’<sup>1</sup> One of the speakers was Professor Jason de León, a prominent anthropologist and author whose research is concerned with human migration between Mexico and the United States. He noted that the stories he encountered during his research impacted him so much he did not want to “sanitise” them, or “overthink them to a point where they just kind of lost all of the emotional oomph to it.” At that time, I did not know that only a few months later I would feel the same about the stories I encountered during my research on the experience of forensic anthropologists working in Colombia and Peru. The passion of the forensic anthropologists I met, and their devotion to the missing and their families captured me. The pain people expressed for what Colombia and Peru and their fellow citizens endured stayed with me. For instance, consider the perspective shared by a taxi driver in Bogotá regarding the persistent violence in his country:

*Es muy penoso. Es muy penoso porque la gente extranjera así como tú se da cuenta de todo.*<sup>2</sup>

Colombians are aware of what foreigners see; of what I saw, and how they are globally perceived. And, as this man’s statement suggests, it pains them. When writing about the ‘New Colombia,’ Tom Feiling (2012, x) notes, “Colombia is left with a war that most outsiders show no interest in and a reputation for crime and violence that is second to none. It is both demonized and ignored. Most people can’t even spell its name properly.” This reputation, I would argue, is accompanied by national stereotypes which media reports covering the “sensational, bloody war that Colombia’s cocaine cartels were waging” in the 1980s and 1990s have played a part in creating (Ibid.). Stereotypes that linger on four decades later. Entering the security area at Toronto Airport, a security officer pointed to my boarding card and whispered *Bogotá* to her colleague which prompted him to direct me to a side table for a more thorough screening. In my interactions with several Colombians, I

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<sup>1</sup> part of California Series in Public Anthropology

<sup>2</sup> “It’s very painful (or embarrassing). It’s very embarrassing because foreign people, just like you, realise (or see) everything.”

noticed a desire to reshape international perceptions. Their statements seemed to stem from a deep-rooted need to defend their cultural identity and present a more nuanced view of their country. This passion was evident in their words, which appeared to be driven by a mix of national pride and a wish to correct any misconceptions foreigners might hold about Colombia and its people. I was told not to assume that Colombia is like the depictions you see in films – the reality would be different from the violent portrayals that are sometimes shown on screen. Other Colombians told me unprompted that Colombians are very hard workers. That “rich countries” might have the perception of the opposite being true is a widespread fear in Latin America, a Chilean friend<sup>3</sup> noted, especially among Colombians. “Colombia,” he said, “is a country with many wounds” and indeed, it can be a “disheartening place” (Kirk 2003, 289). The proof can be found all over Bogotá: the Colombian National Police and the Military patrol its streets; city walls are plastered with graffiti speaking of the horrid human rights violations committed by the very institutions citizens should be able to rely on for protection; Bogotá’s graveyards overflow with young men and thousands of unidentified individuals; displaced Colombians camp on the sidewalk in front of the building that houses the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (JEP); national newspaper and media reports speak of seemingly never-ending violence, massacres, *los desaparecidos* and most of all, *narcotráfico*. “Occasionally,” human rights worker Robin Kirk (2003, 5) writes, “I hear Americans say that Colombia has a ‘culture of violence’ that no amount of financial aid or military intervention or human rights advocacy will change. Of all the mutual misperceptions, this is the one I abhor the most.”

So do I.

Let me tell you what else I saw and experienced in Colombia. In the *Chicaque* National Park I watched in amazement how a white blanket slowly settled over the lush green canopies of moss-covered trees; a phenomenon which gives the Andean cloud forest its name. Colombia houses the greatest selection of flora and fauna in the world. I saw examples of Colombia’s rich cultural history, one of them being the filigree gold ornaments produced by Colombia’s Indigenous communities. Colombia produced some of the best-known artists in the world

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<sup>3</sup> Personal conversation on November 17, 2022.

like Nobel prize-winning novelist Gabriel García Márquez, painter and sculptor Fernando Botero, and internationally acclaimed actors like Sofía Vergara, Manolo Cardona and Juan Pablo Shuk.

I encountered a taxi driver enthusiastically singing and whistling along to the Colombian national anthem on the radio. A book clerk did not ask what I thought about Colombia, he asked me what I thought about *his* country. I drank the best *chocolate caliente* and had the most amazing food, and, interestingly, the best German bread outside of Germany. I experienced sincere kindness and hospitality. I met people, who were genuinely curious about what I thought about their country. People, who, despite my limited Spanish, never gave up on helping me. People whose faces would light up when I knew what a *tinto* was. People who invited me – soaked to the bone and scared – into their home and took care of me after I got lost on my hike through the previously mentioned national park. I met people who, despite the frustrations, challenges, and dangers they endure, despite perhaps not always being proud of their country, are not giving up hope on Colombia and its potential. I met people who *believe* in Colombia. Many of those individuals took time to share with me, to entrust me with, their personal stories and thoughts. For this, I am grateful. I hope that my research and this dissertation do their stories justice. This dissertation aims to serve as an encouragement to know about and comprehend the world of Colombian and Peruvian forensic anthropologists and not to accuse anyone or any groups mentioned therein of their actions, thoughts, or feelings.

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## Chapter 1

The disappearance is one of the most brutal things that can exist in today's war. It is the inhumane of the inhumane.

– Elsa Sánchez de Oesterheld<sup>4</sup>, Argentina, 1970s

### 1 Introduction

My doctoral dissertation explores the moral experience of forensic anthropologists<sup>5</sup> investigating cases of political violence in Colombia and Peru. Latin America is a region most severely impacted by violence, forcing millions of individuals to endure ongoing uncertainty in their daily lives (Chinchilla and Payan 2019; Centeno and Lajous 2018). Countries in the region struggle with the legacies of brutal dictatorships, civil wars, and continuing political violence. Those legacies are reflected in contemporary projects of peace and reconciliation and a collective memory of trauma. In addition, the region's recent history has been shaped by the proliferation of armed groups, by violence from drug cartels and organised criminal groups, and by a rise in homicides, disappearance, extortion, and human trafficking. Perhaps more than anything else, though, the region is known for not just violence as such, but the forced disappearance of thousands of civilians (Fonseca and Cruz 2021; Cardoza 2020; Torres Dujisin 2020; Vilalta 2020; Calmon 2019; Ferllini 2017; Fondebrider 2016; Bender 2012; Kaiser 2005; Robben 2005). Forced disappearances stand out as a defining feature of the history of political violence in Latin America. While some have referred to forced disappearances as

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<sup>4</sup> (in Robben 2005, 261). Her husband and four daughters were forcibly disappeared and assassinated by the Argentine military regime in the 1970s.

<sup>5</sup> In contexts of the Global North, there is often a clear distinction made between the fields of forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology. However, in Latin America, the line between these two disciplines is frequently more blurred (Fondebrider 2015b). Additionally, not all my informants described themselves solely as forensic anthropologists but oftentimes as bioarchaeologists, or both. However, my informants were or are involved in forensic anthropological investigations of cases of political violence.



“Argentina’s nightmare,” because of the strong association of disappearances with the *Dirty War*, disappearances as a form of political violence have shaped the experience of violence more broadly throughout Latin America (Robben 2005, 277). To provide some numbers: “more than 200,000 people disappeared and/or were murdered in Guatemala between 1960 and 1996; 15,000 in Argentina between 1976 and 1983; 70,000 in El Salvador between 1981 and 1991; 70,000 in Peru between 1980 and 2000; 3,000 in Chile between 1973 and 1989; and thousands in Colombia, an estimate that increased daily” (Fondebrider 2016, 67). However, the numbers only tell part of the story. *Los desaparecidos* – the disappeared – of previous decades are not forgotten and searched for by their relatives and forensic anthropologists to this day (Peccerelli 2014; Taylor 2006).

At the time of this writing, organised crime groups are thriving across pandemic-stricken Latin America, exploiting “distracted governments and desperate populations to tighten their grip over swathes of the economy, political structures and, often, territory as well” (Americas Quarterly 2021, 3; Fonseca and Cruz 2021; Alvarez 2020). The region’s recent progress is under threat, as indicated by a “new anti-democratic wave” and the slowing of the region’s anti-corruption initiative (Americas Quarterly 2020, 2; Americas Quarterly 2019). Neighbouring Colombia and Peru have been called “sister countries”<sup>6</sup> (Popolizio Bardales 2019, 15). Both countries have roots in a colonial social structure, a majority Catholic population, and a shared historical context (Neira Samanez 2019). Moreover, both countries are highly polarised; their societies, especially the Indigenous communities and *campesinos* (rural cultivators or peasants), have suffered immensely during internal conflicts. It is this shared history of political violence that is most relevant for thinking comparatively about the conditions in which forensic anthropologists work. While the Civil War in Peru has officially ended, significant social inequalities and the marginalisation of Indigenous communities persist (Yezer 2008). Colombia, despite achieving a peace agreement with the guerrilla group FARC-EP<sup>7</sup>, is marked by numerous

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

<sup>7</sup> the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army, Spanish: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*

persistent conflicts and social inequalities. In that sense, violence continues to shape the contexts in which forensic anthropological work is carried out in both countries. Given the persistent instability and violence in Colombia and Peru, compounded by the lasting effects of colonial injustices such as racism towards Indigenous communities, a collective memory of trauma, and the plight of families looking for their disappeared loved ones, it is crucial to acknowledge these realities as integral to understanding the moral experience of forensic anthropologists working in these regions.

Forensic anthropology is a global field, with forensic specialists working around the world in places marked by conflict and violence, which include the Balkans, Rwanda, Somaliland, and, of course, Latin America. It has been noted that the contemporary uses of forensic anthropology in cases of political violence originated in Latin America, specifically in Argentina (Fondebrider 2016). The Dirty War in Argentina (1976-1983) was a period of state terrorism characterised by brutal military rule and widespread human rights abuses. This era saw between 10,000 and 30,000 individuals killed or forcibly disappeared by the ruling military junta (Rodríguez Cuenca 2004). In reaction to these disappearances, the *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* movement arose, dedicated to seeking justice, and bringing global attention to these atrocities (Robben 2005). In 1984, renowned forensic anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow taught young Argentine students the application of forensic anthropology in cases of political violence (Cardoza 2020; Tcach Abed 2020; Fondebrider 2016). The approach to forensic anthropology in Latin America differs significantly from that in the United States and Europe due to its unique sociopolitical and historical context (Rodríguez Cuenca 2004). Unlike in the Global North, forensic anthropology in Latin America does not have academic roots but rather evolved from societal needs driven by political violence (Ubelaker 2016). This contrast highlights one of the key distinctions between the two regions. In Latin America, the discipline had to address multifaceted concerns deeply intertwined with sociopolitical circumstances, necessitating a focus on issues related to political and legal contexts, logistical and security challenges, and establishing connections with victims' families and communities (Fondebrider 2016). Snow stressed the importance of the collaboration

between scientists and the relatives of the missing in Latin America (Fondebrider 2016) – another key distinction between the approaches in the Global North and the South.

In Latin America, a close relationship based on mutual trust is maintained with the victims' relatives to the extent that it is them “rather than a judge or the forensic anthropologists, [that] are the true protagonists” (Ibid., 68; Sáenz de Tejada 2020; Teach Abed 2020; Torres Dujisin 2020). The process with the families is “unrelated to the traditional field of forensic anthropology,” according to forensic anthropologist Luis Fondebrider (2016, 69). Forensic anthropologists spend hours with the families explaining technical procedures such as the complexities of identification, and the realistic likelihood of discovering remains. It also involves potentially emotional conversations such as listening to “their histories, [trying] to understand [...] how the disappearance of their loved one has affected the family and changed their lives” (Ibid.). The interaction with families is an aspect that will be explored, thereby showing how the local context shapes the work and (moral) experience of forensic anthropologists. The next section will address the importance of context-specific narratives of forensic anthropological work.

\*

Each country is different. Latin America [doesn't exist] as a concept. Colombia [is] different than Peru; Peru, Argentina. Each country has its own personality. Europe, Germany [is] different than France than Italy than Spain. Is very difficult to generalise.

– my informant Miguel

In his book *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* (2015), human rights scholar Adam Rosenblatt argues for a unified, global approach to forensic anthropological work on cases of political violence. He calls for a “historically informed set of reflections on human rights forensic investigation as a distinct, networked *field* of global activism and scientific practice, rather than a loose collection of cases” (8). At the same time, Rosenblatt acknowledges that it is tempting to question the value of discussing international forensic investigations broadly. He notes: “Every new forensic

investigation is so complex, so forcefully shaped by the political and cultural context in which it is carried out, that perhaps the only stories we can tell are stories of individual countries and their exhumations” (44). Yet, he goes on to advocate for a meta-investigation of forensic anthropology on cases of political violence, and he focuses especially on aspects such as the ethical values involved in such work and the role of various stakeholders. I would suggest, however, that it is through both, the explorations of similarities in international forensic investigations using meta-analysis, and the context-specific analyses of local differences that our understanding of forensic anthropological investigations of cases of political violence can be extended. My research indicates that local narratives should be valued as they reveal unique contextual elements that may not be understood when applying a broad brush across international contexts. A leading figure in forensic anthropology, Luis Fondebrider (2016) assesses:

there is no single criterion for the type of contribution made by forensic anthropology to the context of political violence, which are therefore designated as “humanitarian,” “human rights,” “war crimes,” or “genocide” investigations, all of which are but incomplete names that simplify the complexity of the problem. This situation may be due to the fact that most of the practitioners of such name applications do not have a profound and comprehensive insight into what political violence entails, the different local contexts, or the judicial and humanitarian dimensions of the investigations. (65-66)

Fondebrider’s statement highlights the complexity surrounding the role of forensic anthropology in contexts of political violence, where various labels like “humanitarian,” “human rights,” “war crimes,” or “genocide” investigations are used. These labels, while attempting to categorise the work, oversimplify the intricate nature of the issues at hand. While Rosenblatt (2015; 2010) seems to view all forensic anthropological efforts in investigative cases of political violence as human rights (activism), the practical reality on the ground reveals a more intricate and nuanced situation. The complexities of political violence demand an approach that considers the unique sociopolitical dynamics, historical backgrounds, and cultural sensitivities of each situation. My research moves beyond simplistic labels and contributes to developing a deeper understanding of the intricate web of factors at play in such scenarios.

My North American informant Mike, who has experience as a forensic anthropologist in Colombia and around the world, stated: “What really matters, it’s the politics, it’s the psychology [...]. Our technical problems are little problems. We’ll do an experiment; we’ll figure that out eventually. Real problems are so much contextual.” At a later point in our Zoom interview, he clarified: “As I said, our real problems are not methodological, they are not biological in terms of, you know, ‘how do I get a more precise age estimate on this skeleton?’ *Our real problems, I would argue, are structural and political and maybe psychological.*” Based on first-hand accounts of forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru, this dissertation shows that every sociopolitical context presents distinct complexities, which affect the lived experience of forensic anthropologists. In turn, it is essential to grasp the environment in which they operate. However, the dissertation does not solely focus on detailing the historical and sociopolitical background of Colombia and Peru. Instead, it delves into how this background influences forensic anthropological practices and the responses of forensic experts to these circumstances. I will frame their (moral) experience employing two overarching notions<sup>8</sup>: that of *encounter* and *witnessing*. These will be detailed in the following section.

\*

## 1.1 Theoretical Framework: Encounters of Unwanted and Moral Witnesses

*Encounters* and *witnessing* are integral components of moral experience, each contributing distinct dimensions. Encounters represent the contextual backdrop within which forensic anthropologists engage with moral dilemmas, and which may result in impacts on the self. The experience of forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru entails aspects that can be characterised as challenges. However, framing their experiences as challenges *only* would be reductive as it fails to capture the complexity of

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<sup>8</sup> My dissertation not only relies on these two overarching concepts. It will also employ various notions throughout the work as necessary to provide an understanding of the multiple aspects discussed in the encounters of forensic anthropologists.

what they face. The concept of encounters, which is more neutral, allows for an exploration of their various interactions in all their subtleties. “*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*,” philosopher Martin Buber (1995, 12) states, – “All actual life is encounter” (Buber 1970, 62). The two primary ways in which humans can perceive the world, according to Buber, are captured by the word pairs: I-Thou<sup>9</sup> and I-It (Herberg 1956). We can view the world merely as an object for analysis and measurement, treating it as a distant entity to be utilised and dominated (Ibid.; Neyerlin n.d.<sup>10</sup>). This perspective, known as the I-It relationship, signifies a “relation of person to thing, of subject to object,” emphasising a utilitarian approach that involves objectification and control (Herberg 1956, 14). This subject-object dynamic reflects a sense of separation or alienation. It is in the I-You relation in which the encounter happens. It has been noted, “Only when we include [the world] in an act of relation, an emotional attitude can develop, and encounter occur. A human being realises his humanity<sup>11</sup> through movements of relation”<sup>12</sup> (Neyerlin, n.d., 4). The concepts of relation and detachment will be crucial elements within the intricacy of the encounters of forensic anthropologists and will be investigated throughout the dissertation. The kinds of encounters that forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru face extend beyond the exhumation and analysis of human remains. Rather, these encounters encompass engagements with a diverse array of entities, including grieving families, guerrilla and paramilitary groups, governmental bodies, and enduring historical legacies. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these encounters, a more comprehensive understanding of the (moral) complexities and implications on the self, inherent in forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru, can be attained.

Examples of ethnographic studies showcasing professionals navigating diverse encounters and moral dilemmas in their professions include Paul Brodwin’s book

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<sup>9</sup> or I-You

<sup>10</sup> n.d.: no date

<sup>11</sup> German: *Menschsein*

<sup>12</sup> Translation from German by me.

*Everyday Ethics: Voices from the Front Line of Community Psychiatry* (2013) and Sameena Mulla's book *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention* (2014). Brodwin delves into the ethical challenges faced by mental health clinicians working with marginalised individuals in the United States healthcare system. Through ethnographic research, Brodwin explores the moral dilemmas and struggles of these frontline providers as they navigate issues of coercion, dependency, and consent in their daily practice. The book sheds light on the complexities of community psychiatry, revealing how clinicians grapple with maintaining their professional ideals amidst systemic constraints and ethical quandaries. Brodwin's work prompts reflection on how to responsibly care for the most vulnerable members of society. Mulla's book explores how nurses balance collecting forensic evidence with providing care to sexual assault victims. The author highlights the challenges faced by nurses in preserving evidence while addressing the needs of victims, shedding light on how institutional practices impact the experiences of victims in terms of justice, healing, and recovery.

The second key notion employed in this dissertation, *witnessing*, embodies the consequences of their encounters on the self; that is, as a witness, as an expert who produces certain knowledge, sees things, and is potentially harmed by it. Gabriela Polit Dueñas (2019) introduced the notion of *unwanted witnesses* when writing about the experience of journalists in Argentina, Mexico and Colombia. "Journalists," she notes, "are witnessing truths that those in power are withholding from us, and they are seeking truth in spite of the dangers and the risks necessarily implied in that search. They have become the unwanted witnesses" (120). Polit Dueñas further writes:

I heard journalists speak candidly about the risks and challenges of their profession. They shared experiences about the complications faced when dealing with police corruption, the emotional pressure of listening to people who are searching for their loved ones with no support or attention from authorities, the courage needed to understand the complex manifestations of resilience, and the self-restraint needed to write objectively about the cruelty displayed in the man forms of killing. (4)

Numerous parallels exist between Polit Dueñas' exploration of journalists in Latin America and my research on forensic anthropologists. Both professions face similar risks

and challenges, such as encountering the sorrow of families of forcibly disappeared individuals, managing their emotions alongside the pursuit of (scientific) objectivity, and witnessing the horrors within their home nations. They work in sociopolitical environments marked by persistent violence and instability, posing threats to their safety and mental well-being.

Witnessing, when viewed through a focused lens within the realm of ‘forensics,’ pertains to evidence presented in legal settings – forensic anthropologists in the medicolegal setting act as expert witnesses. As such, they provide specialised knowledge in areas like the identification of skeletal remains, skeletal trauma, and expert opinion on the circumstances of death. In Latin America, however, this concept extends beyond the courtroom to encompass a broader scope of knowledge generation. Forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru face various encounters – encounters with human remains and the legacies of political violence (they witness human rights violations), encounters with the families of the missing (they witness the families’ grief and suffering), encounters with perpetrators and violence directed at them (they witness the conflict directly) and encounters with a precarious institutional landscape. This expansion allows for a perspective shift towards understanding witnessing as a moral act in these contexts. Those encounters shape the moral experience of forensic anthropologists – making them not only *unwanted witnesses* but also *moral witnesses* – and, as my research will show, expose them to specific risks, dangers, stressors, and emotional difficulties.

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## 1.2 Project Significance: Contributions to the Field of (Forensic) Anthropology, Studies of Trauma and Emotions

My doctoral research makes contributions to various fields of study, including forensic anthropology in Latin America, anthropological discussions on forensic investigations of political violence, and studies on trauma and emotions. By bridging these disciplines, my project can offer valuable insights and advancements to each of them.



Numerous books on forensic anthropology have been published in recent years. In my dissertation, rather than focusing on identifying gaps in the existing publications, I am engaging with different bodies of literature. These include works on Latin American forensic anthropology teams and first-person memoirs.<sup>13</sup> In *All That Remains: A Life in Death* (2018), British forensic anthropologist and anatomist Dame Sue Black provides insight into the work of a forensic anthropologist, drawing from her extensive global experience. She delves into the complexities of examining human skeletal remains to reveal vital details about individuals and the circumstances surrounding their deaths. She also addresses the psychological impacts of her work. After a distressing event led to unusual behaviour, for instance, Black questioned if she had encountered signs of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Clea Koff's *The Bone Woman* (2004) is a memoir that details her experience as a forensic anthropologist in the United States, in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Rwanda. Interestingly, she describes her struggle with balancing the emotional impact of her work and maintaining scientific detachment. Moreover, she addresses the issue of safety. She recalls being caught in a crossfire in Rwanda when several men were killed close to her guesthouse. However, Koff further notes that they would normally not be subjected to this kind of situation:

Forensic scientists like us necessarily deal with people who are already dead; we aren't usually (ever?) there at the indefinable moment when a person [...] is shot in the face, inhales lake water, and stops breathing. (67)

*Unnatural Causes* (2018) by Richard Shepherd is a first-hand account of his personal and professional experience as a British forensic pathologist. The memoir is not within the realm of forensic anthropology, yet it is intriguing for my research due to its candid account of the profound psychological impact of this kind of work, and the management of emotions and detachment. Shepherd openly discusses his experience with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The dissertation will highlight the rarity of discussing these effects within the forensic anthropology

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<sup>13</sup> This list of publications is by no means exhaustive.

community. Sue Black's comment on Shepherd's book further underscores this aspect:

I'd like to tell you about Richard Shepherd, or 'Dick'. I know him very well; he was the first pathologist that I worked with in London. We've shared 30 years of a career together, which is a delight because he's brilliant company. I've always respected his expertise as much as I cherished his friendship, but he surprised me. I'd never known that he was going through the personal difficulties conveyed in this book, in relation to coping with the cumulative trauma that he had experienced over his professional life. (in Styles 2019, n.p.<sup>14</sup>)

Black expresses surprise at learning about Shepherd's "personal difficulties," indicating that these struggles were not apparent despite their long history together. One dominant theme in much of the first-person literature on forensic anthropology is the issue of scientific detachment and objectivity. Scientific detachment is an aspect my research will delve into in much detail. The literature mentioned addresses the issue of scientific detachment and the emotional and psychological effects of forensic anthropological work. However, it originates from a Western viewpoint, and it cannot be presumed that similar experiences occur in other settings. Hence, my research examines how these factors manifest in different contexts, particularly where forensic anthropologists interact closely with the families of the missing.

According to Fondebrider (2016, 65), "there is still a lack of understanding about the nature of the work and the contribution made by organizations and individual anthropologists" in and from Latin America. My research enriches the body of knowledge on forensic anthropology in Latin America by presenting a comprehensive portrait of forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru. There is an increasing amount of anthropological literature focusing on forensic investigations related to human rights violations and the excavation of mass graves (see Ferrándiz and Robben 2015; Rosenblatt 2015; Crossland 2013; Wagner 2008). In these discussions, some researchers highlight the dangers that forensic anthropologists face when investigating cases of political

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<sup>14</sup> n.p.: no page

violence. Adam Rosenblatt (2015) briefly addresses how individuals responsible for human rights violations may seek to hinder forensic investigators from uncovering evidence of the crimes. He mentions instances where “direct threats” were made against these investigators (59). Roxana Ferllini (2017) outlines some of the challenges forensic anthropologists may face in places of unrest. The professionals involved in human rights investigations, the author notes, face various harmful encounters, such as “openly hostile aggression,” including “verbal abuse” in Spain and “attacks” in South America, and the threat posed by unexploded devices (99). Further scholars and forensic anthropologists themselves address risks and hazards, forensic anthropologists may be subjected to (see Roberts et al. 2016a/2016b; Checker et al. 2011; Koff 2004; Maples and Browning 1994; Joyce and Stover 1991). Because the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce can potentially become evidence of political violence and human rights violations, the work of forensic anthropologists in Latin America can become politically charged as various parties, including governments, armed forces, and guerrilla groups, all of whom have been involved in political violence in the past, have a vested interest in blocking forensic anthropologists’ efforts in uncovering evidence of crimes committed. Forensic anthropologists in Latin America themselves have addressed explicitly their compromised safety. Forensic anthropologists Clyde Snow and Fredy Peccerelli, for instance, stated they received death threats in Argentina and Guatemala, respectively, due to their involvement in investigations of political violence (Hagerty 2023; Jones 2016; Lubbock 2005; Giles 2004; Joyce and Stover 1991). A study conducted by Juan Pablo Aranguren Romero (2023) suggests that Colombian forensic anthropologists may be exposed to safety risks within the sociopolitical environment they work in. One Colombian informant noted: “It was a really dangerous time<sup>15</sup>, and it was really hard for me. People we worked with were murdered, and it was immensely sad” (687). While it remains uncertain whether the source was referring to fellow forensic practitioners being targeted, she did emphasise that “feeling afraid was inevitable” and that receiving

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<sup>15</sup> The interview excerpt does not specify the timeframe to which the interviewee is referring. The interview took place in 2016.

professional support helped “to manage fear” (Ibid.). My project outlines such incidents and explores how those conditions shape their experience and sense of self.

There also has been an increasing number of publications focusing on the experiences of forensic anthropologists in Latin America. The book *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell* by Christopher Joyce and Eric Stover (1991) chronicles the career of forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow, his work on cases of political violence, and his founding of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF<sup>16</sup>). It was in Argentina where Snow first became aware of the importance of incorporating the families of the missing in forensic anthropological investigations. He also taught his young Argentine students about his mantra *If you have to cry, you can cry at night* (Snow 2004, n.p.<sup>17</sup>) which will be discussed throughout the dissertation. This credo highlights a contrast between emotion and clinical detachment; with the latter being considered inherently connected to the forensic scientist’s role of conducting objective investigations. This binary is associated with a separation between the public and private realms. Whereas detached conduct is expected in public, in the private sphere, the forensic anthropologist is allowed to let emotions manifest. In the edited book *Forensic Anthropology Teams in Latin America* by Silvia Dutrénit Bielous (2020), multiple authors outline the origins and development of various forensic anthropology teams in Latin America. It provides an overview of the teams’ achievements and challenges faced. Concerning the psychological impacts of their work, César Tcach Abed (2020, 66), for instance, notes about members of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team:

All of them recognise the traumatic condition of their work and the mark it leaves in their lives. In the beginning, “we all dreamed of bones, skeletons,” said Luis Fondebrider. “We all had nightmares,” acknowledged Mercedes Doretti. Each one has their own way of handling the effects of the job, Miguel Nievas admitted, and attributed his psoriasis to the consequential nervous tension.

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<sup>16</sup> Spanish: *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*

<sup>17</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.

Psychological studies by Juan Pablo Aranguren Romero and Gabriela Fernández Miranda focus on the emotional experiences of forensic anthropologists in Latin America as they face the grief and pain of the families of the missing. As previously mentioned, forensic anthropologists in Latin America interact closely with the families of the missing. This close relationship and seeking antemortem data includes listening to the families' stories of grief and pain, which, in turn, may psychologically impact forensic practitioners. Aranguren Romero's paper (2023) explores the management of emotions and coping strategies of forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru when confronted with narratives of suffering within a context of severe atrocities. Consequently, the study shows "how the experiences of forensic anthropologists oscillate between a marked professional commitment and the need for distance so as to safeguard their own emotional well-being" (679). Moreover, Aranguren Romero's research revealed that the forensic anthropologists interviewed manage the psychological effects of their work using different positive approaches. These methods involve recognising the resilience of victims and communities, taking breaks, creating distance, or potentially transitioning out of forensic anthropological work altogether, along with seeking therapeutic assistance. Aranguren Romero's paper in collaboration with Fernández Miranda (2021), and Fernández Miranda's research (2019) highlight the theme of frustration forensic anthropologists in Colombia face, and what drives them to continue working even when the chances of success are low. Aranguren Romero and Fernández Miranda note that few studies have examined the emotional experiences of forensic professionals working in armed conflict and politically violent settings. Alexa Hagerty's book *Still Life with Bones* (2023) provides an account of the author's personal experience in exhumations at mass grave sites, of those affected by atrocities, and the work of forensic practitioners in Argentina and Guatemala. The book addresses the science of forensic anthropology, offering an exploration of grief, justice, and the aftermath of genocidal violence. Hagerty mentions forensic practitioners in Guatemala and Argentina dreaming about the dead. The dreams consist of dreaming about "sleeping in pools of blood" (89) or "a skeleton emerg[ing] from a closet dressed in [the forensic scientist's] sister's clothes," "dismembered legs in their beds, swimming pools with severed torsos, and digging up a brother's body" (Ibid.). Another forensic anthropologist disputes these reports, stating,

“No one dreams. You stop dreaming after the first few months” (Ibid.). Informants of Aranguren Romero’s and Hagerty’s study also mention harmful coping strategies such as heavy drinking. One informant states that a psychologist once suggested, “it’s important to eat well, take physical exercise, not drink to excess” (Aranguren Romero 2023, 687). The informant adds, “But at that time, everything that could be done to excess, we were doing it, looking for all the escape valves possible.” Hagerty (2023) notes, “A joke circulates on forensic teams: *My therapist is Doctor Jameson*, referring to a bottle of whiskey” (89).

As outlined briefly, these publications address the issues of maintaining scientific objectivity, the management of emotions, and the personal and psychological implications of the work of forensic anthropologists, underscoring the need for more research in this area. Even with literature that has begun to recognise trauma or emotional impacts, further understanding is needed regarding the complexities of the lived experience of forensic anthropologists. While I am thinking with and alongside the aforementioned literature on forensic anthropologists and their experience, using the notions of *encounters* and *witnessing*, my research delves into the moral experience of forensic anthropologists. It explores how they seek to navigate the ethical dilemmas and challenges of their work and come to terms with what they witness. That can include issues of trauma, but it is not fully limited to it.

I will draw from a range of trauma approaches. The ethnographic studies on trauma and social suffering by scholars such as Arthur Kleinman (1987; 1977; 1973) and Veena Das (1990) elicited a paradigm shift in the field of trauma studies by making social scientists “realise the pre-eminence of the meanings and subjective experiences of trauma events from the perspective of the affected within their prevailing sociocultural contexts – something that universal categories of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychiatric disorders exclude in their sole focus on the medicalised understanding of the survivors’ experiences” (Gupta et al. 2019, 71). Similarly, Aranguren Romero and Fernández Miranda (2021) assess that most studies that have interpreted the personal experiences of forensic practitioners have done so through the lens of PTSD. Both authors explore the emotional experiences of forensic professionals working in armed

conflict and politically violent settings, and therein focus on the interaction between forensic anthropologists and the families of the missing. The authors believe that the pathologising framework of PTSD is limiting because it fails to acknowledge the intricate dynamics between forensic practitioners, families of missing individuals, and their work environment. Aranguren Romero (2023, 680) argues that while previous studies on PTSD in forensic teams addressed the possible psychological effects of forensic inquiry, the portrayal of these professionals' work was significantly restricted as the studies only used a "standardized characterization" of the experience of those who encounter the suffering of others, based on the concept of contagion. My project will explore trauma perspectives beyond the prevailing posttraumatic stress disorder concept.

Building on the work of psychologist Konstantinos Papazoglou and sociologist Brian Chopko (2017), I suggest that another way to think about the impact of what forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru witness can be through the analytic category of *moral injury*. I will not psychoanalyse my informants' narratives on stress, trauma and emotions, however. Rather, I am interested in showing how forensic anthropologists manage emotions while engaging with families of missing persons, hearing their stories, witnessing their grief, and examining the remains of individuals similar in age and of the same nationality. As will be shown, forensic professionals face balancing the belief in the necessity of scientific detachment for unbiased work, of needing to remain emotionally detached to fulfil their scientific duties as the families' potentially only hope for answers, establishing emotional distance for their own psychological well-being, while at the same time demonstrating empathy to build trusting relationships with the families. Moreover, I am connecting their experience to some of the institutional realities, the conditions, and the social and political context of their work. Is it, for instance, different working for the government versus working for a non-governmental team in Colombia? Moreover, my research explores the emotional effects of being *unwanted witnesses* and *moral witnesses* on forensic anthropologists which not only includes the interaction with families but also the knowledge they produce, which, as my research will show, can have impacts on their safety. Rebecca Lester (2013, 758) highlights "the importance of [the] temporal expansion of trauma." In the context of Colombia and Peru, the exposure to stressors for forensic anthropologists – that potentially result in trauma or moral injury – is not a

sudden, one-time event but rather chronic in nature. Furthermore, what my research will show is that some forensic anthropologists are not simply “done” (Ibid.) with what they witness throughout their work but what they witness also comes to influence how they think of themselves as persons, both in terms of their intimate relations with potential family, and even in a sense as a generation or in national terms. They have become morally injured.

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By examining the moral experience of individual forensic anthropologists in Latin America, my study broadens our understanding of their contributions to the investigations of cases of political violence. Additionally, by doing so, it will give impulses to reassess current approaches in Europe and North America, especially considering work with Indigenous communities in Canada. Latin American forensic anthropologists engage closely with the relatives of the missing, which goes against the widely held stance of clinical detachment that European and North American forensic anthropologists appear so insistent on maintaining (Sáenz de Tejada 2020; Tcach Abed 2020; Torres Dujisin 2020; Fidel 2019; Fondebrider 2016; Fondebrider 2005). By giving an account of the work approach in Latin America, my research will aid in developing an understanding of the work of forensic anthropologists that, depending on the local context, goes beyond the prevailing Western model of forensic anthropology (Fondebrider 2016).

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### 1.3 Conducting Anthropological Research during a Pandemic: Methodology and Analysis

Initially, my doctoral research project was planned as a multi-sided approach. I had envisioned accompanying forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru. However, the ever-changing situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns



necessitated frequent adjustments to my plans<sup>18</sup>. I had planned to conduct remote interviews using the communication platform Zoom until the peak of the pandemic passed and travel resumed. That this was merely wishful thinking became apparent with the appearance of the Omicron variant followed by more lockdowns and more uncertainty. I decided to completely cancel fieldwork; it was safer to remain where I was, not just for health reasons. A fellow international doctoral candidate and friend told me about the uncertainty she experienced on her return to Canada from her fieldwork in Mauritius. She had just made it back in time before Canada shut its borders to international travellers. It made me wonder, had they not let her back into Canada would they have sent her back to her home country? Rumours circulating in campus hallways suggested that having an international study permit along with a university letter stating you need to be in the country would theoretically serve as sufficient justification for re-entry. As an international student, I was hesitant to put that theory to the test. I tried to convince myself that I needed to draw a final line under the prospect of travelling for my project and that it was for the better. I nearly succeeded in convincing myself of that until my remote interview with Eduardo in March 2022.

Eduardo is Colombian and one of twenty-five forensic anthropologists working for the *Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación* (CTI), the Technical Investigation Unit of the Attorney General's Office in Bogotá. He told me that there are currently around fifty to sixty forensic anthropologists working in Colombia. Besides the forensic anthropologists at CTI, there are approximately twenty working for the Institute of Legal Medicine in Bogotá and around fifteen at non-governmental organisations. This pales in comparison to current estimates of 120,000<sup>19</sup> forced disappeared in Colombia. Eduardo acknowledged, "The anthropologists that make this work, we are older, yeah? For each year is a plus and we need young people that want to work in this. In the government or

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<sup>18</sup>At the time of planning, the Western International Centre at Western University had cancelled all international learning opportunities until August 31, 2021, and advised not to make travel arrangements for Fall 2021.

<sup>19</sup>Reported by the *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas* (UBPD) (2021).

the *ONG*<sup>20</sup> groups. [...] We are few people, so we need more. We need more support for the coming years.” That is why, Eduardo said, they are appealing to the younger generation: “We are trying to motivate more people, young people.” Despite efforts by present-day forensic anthropologists to attract a younger demographic to this field, there remains a challenge in pursuing an education in forensic anthropology in Colombia, as noted by Eduardo. He stated:

In this moment, [one can] only [study forensic anthropology at] the University of Magdalena and Bogotá, Medellín, Caldas y Cauca. Five places in all the country that are trying to study forensic anthropology and maybe it’s not, *no son mas de cuarenta or cincuenta personas en todo el país*<sup>21</sup> that are interested in forensic anthropology.

At the time of writing, there are, according to my informants, three forensic anthropologists with a doctorate in Colombia: one at the National Institute of Legal Medicine in Bogotá, one at the Magdalena University in Santa Marta<sup>22</sup> and one working for the *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas*<sup>23</sup> (UBPD). There is a two-fold problem: Even if there were more graduates in forensic anthropology, job prospects in the country are limited, according to Eduardo.

The Colombian government, Eduardo told me, provides good working conditions for forensic anthropologists. That is why he decided to work for CTI and thus the government and not a non-governmental organisation. “Let me show you,” he said as he was getting off his chair. I was confused for a second. Show me what, I wondered. Eduardo flipped his phone camera so I could see his surroundings. “That’s my lab,” he panned the camera across parts of the laboratory, without showing me anything incriminating, of course. “Principally for this, we are working for the government,” he explained. The government, he noted, offers career possibilities, necessary equipment, buildings and infrastructure. He stepped towards a window and showed me their own

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<sup>20</sup> *Organización No Gubernamental/Non-Governmental Organisation*

<sup>21</sup> “There are no more than forty or fifty people in the whole country.” Translation by me.

<sup>22</sup> Later, in August 2022, I learned that the individual had left the university.

<sup>23</sup> English: Unit for the Search for Persons Presumed Disappeared

parking lot set in the backdrop of a grey Bogotá sky and palm trees. Eduardo also told me that they receive equipment and training, mainly from the Department of Justice of the United States. Later, I will learn that, despite these advantages, there are potential dangers associated with working in Colombia's sociopolitical environment, particularly for individuals in government positions.

*“Quiero visitar a su lab,”* I blurted out.

Eduardo, who had sat down again in the meantime, laughed, “You are welcome. Any time. When you come to Colombia you are welcome here.”

Initially, I confused his invitation as an example of the kind of politeness I encounter every day in Canada, and which has been a topic of conversation between us non-nationals as it confuses and frustrates us to no end. The kind of politeness that Michael Herzfeld ([2005, 1997] 2016, 12) describes as being rooted in “cookie-cutter social relations [that] are sustained by an impressive forest of symbols in the form of false indexicals in daily practice” – people asking you how you are doing without actually being interested in a response that goes beyond being ‘fine,’ or inviting you to a coffee date that never happens.

That is why I asked, “Would it honestly be a possibility to visit your lab?”

He reassured me, “You can visit us. You can come and know we are the lab and know the people, other people that work with me. And the things that we [do] here.” Apparently, this still did not convince me because I added that I would keep his word for it. Eduardo laughed heartily, “I’m waiting. I’m waiting for you.”

Until this point, I had tried to convince myself that I was alright with solely doing remote interviews. Deeply buried in the back of my mind, however, was a spark kept alive by reading about Colombia and listening to Colombian forensic anthropologists speaking with passion about their country and devotion to their jobs. I am grateful to Eduardo for turning the smouldering ember into a burning flame. Four months later, with travel restrictions lifted, and four COVID-19 vaccines (as well as one against Yellow Fever for good measure) in my arm, I was on my way to Bogotá. I stayed in the city for six weeks during which I met up with several informants for interviews and made beneficial first-

hand observations on the sociopolitical climate of the city. Many ethnographic moments from my stay in Bogotá are incorporated throughout the dissertation.

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### 1.3.1 Interview Process

Most Western-based institutions mandate a formal ethics review for anthropological research involving living human individuals. I obtained initial approval from Western University's Research Ethics Board (REB) on June 29, 2021, and continuing REB approvals were issued on June 28, 2022, and June 23, 2023. Relevant research protocols that were submitted to the REB and the approval letters can be found in Appendix A through Appendix C. I had planned to divide the interviews into two stages. The aim was to create trust and rapport during the first interview in which general and broad topics were addressed, followed by directing attention to more sensitive topics during the second interview. In the end, this approach was neither necessary nor feasible. First, informants spoke candidly about their work experience including potential safety issues and emotional implications, oftentimes without the need for a prompt. Furthermore, many of my informants were very busy and frequently spent just a brief period 'at home' before heading back into the field. Therefore, scheduling two interviews would have been too time-consuming.

For recruitment, I relied on snowball sampling<sup>24</sup>, a method where informants identify potential participants through interpersonal referrals (Bernhard 2017). As there are not many forensic anthropologists investigating cases of political violence in Latin America, they "know one another very well" (Fondebrider 2016, 73). This was beneficial as my interviewees recommended and put me in contact with other informants. Following ethics guidelines, before the interviews, I explicitly communicated that these would cover sensitive topics. I obtained either written or verbal consent. In addition to an information

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<sup>24</sup> This included contacting forensic anthropologists listed publicly who then put me in contact with other forensic scientists.

letter, I inquired at the start of the interview if they were comfortable with being recorded. The interviewees were assured that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Further, they could choose to remain anonymous or to be disclosed. I anonymised all my informants, and all names that appear in this dissertation are pseudonyms.<sup>25</sup> Where I found it essential to provide additional anonymity, I created two individuals from one single interviewee. Following a semi-structured approach, questions and prompts were imposed focusing on the potential repercussions and risks the informants may face, including potential experiences of trauma or suffering. In addition to interviews, as previously outlined, I used textual and digital evidence such as newspaper and magazine articles about the current political situation in Colombia and Peru, the memoirs of forensic anthropologists, existing interviews, webinars and further publications such as (scientific) articles about their work. These provided initial textual evidence about the potential repercussions they face and important additional background information for gaining a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical contexts and history of forensic anthropology in Latin America. Further, they offered another point of evidence about how forensic practitioners think about their experience and profession.

I transcribed and coded data upon my return to Canada. I employed *grounded theory coding*, which entails a two-stage process. During initial coding, I kept myself receptive to all potential theoretical paths suggested by my analysis of the data (Charmaz 2006). Following that, I employed “focused coding to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data” (Ibid., 46). As my research progressed, I found *situational mapping* most helpful, whereby I drew maps to get a visual overview of emerging topics. It helped me formulate initial relations between issues and incorporate theoretical handles that seemed fitting. Furthermore, I adjusted subsequent interview questions based on the specific topics that emerged and that I wished to explore further.

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<sup>25</sup> Except for anthropologist Orin Starn.

### 1.3.2 Positionality

Of special note regarding my suitability for conducting this research is my Master of Science Degree in Forensic Anthropology and Forensic Archaeology. I aided in the identification and excavation of WWII soldiers' remains and worked as an archaeological excavation assistant. I therefore possess the technical expertise for the identification of human remains and the analysis of skeletal trauma, as well as in locating and excavating clandestine graves. This 'insider' knowledge and being considered as someone 'in the know' helped to build mutual trust and rapport with my informants. The primary language used in my project was English. Some of my informants had educational backgrounds from English-speaking countries and considered the interviews a good way of practicing. At the same time, many of my informants expressed apologies and concerns about their English proficiency. Sharing with my informants that English is not my native language either, noticeably put them at ease. During my research, I acquired some proficiency in Spanish. To build rapport I asked questions in Spanish and encouraged my informants to speak Spanish when they hesitated to explain something in English.

Further, I included parallels to life in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) – a socialist dictatorship where I was born. While I was too young to remember many details of life in the socialist state before the Wall came down, I consider myself, however, as part of a postmemorial generation. Postmemory is a notion initially applied in Holocaust studies. It refers to “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. [...] It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present” (Hirsch 2012, 5). Postmemory therefore affects my lived experience and identity. Many Latin American countries and the former German Democratic Republic share “historical injur[ies],” whereby harm accumulated over centuries (Castillejo-Cuellar 2013, 19). East Germans are no strangers to forced disappearances, especially those of children born to alleged *Staatsfeinde* and who were

taken away from their parents right after birth. Often claimed to have died but instead taken and adopted by West citizens. In March 1985, Ramona Dewitz's twin daughters were taken from her right after birth and disappeared by the GDR state. She notes, "As we carried these urns to the grave, I had no emotions. I could not imagine that my children were inside. [...] I was never allowed to see my twins and this, for me, is the absolute worst that I do not have an image of them before my eyes. I cannot imagine them" (Jacob 2021<sup>26</sup>). To this day, the fate of these two girls and many other children is still unknown. The psychological impact of living under a dictatorship continues to affect East Germans. Due to the 'Stasi' (short for *Ministerium for Staatssicherheit*, Ministry for State Security) – the Stalinistic secret police, intelligence service and instrument of control in the former German Democratic Republic – people lived with a deep mistrust towards even the closest individuals in their life. Germany, it is often argued, is only unified on paper. East Germans (or *Ossis*) are still stigmatised – for instance, for the way we speak or tell the time<sup>27</sup>. It needs to be mentioned, however, that East Germans also share fond memories about the GDR, called *Ostalgie* – reflecting nostalgia for some aspects of life in Communist East Germany.

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## 1.4 Thesis Overview

**Chapter 2** – *Forensic Anthropology in Different Contexts* – serves as an introduction into forensic anthropology in the Western medicolegal context. There, encountering the families and their grief appears to be considered a threat to objectivity and unbiasedness. This differs significantly from the approach to forensic anthropology in Latin America, where practitioners in Colombia and Peru navigate both the scientific realm and the realm of tragedy. There, as will be shown, the families of the missing and their stories play a pivotal part in the investigative process. This involves several challenges, which will be

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<sup>26</sup> Translated from German by me.

<sup>27</sup> For instance: 10:45 am. West Germans would say *Viertel vor Elf* – literally 'quarter before eleven,' while East Germans would say *Dreiviertel Elf* – 'three-quarter eleven.'

highlighted throughout the dissertation. This chapter also introduces the notion of trust as a prerequisite for a relationship with the families of the missing. The building of trust, in the sociopolitical contexts of Colombia and Peru is a complex matter. Chapters 3 and 4 will explore trust-building in environments of ongoing violence, uncertainty and distrust. In this regard, several questions are addressed such as *How do forensic anthropologists build relationships based on mutual trust with the families? What aspects are crucial in this respect? How should families get approached and what role do emotions and motivation play in this regard?*

**Chapter 3** focuses on how pioneering forensic anthropologists in Peru approached forensic anthropological investigations with Indigenous Quechua-speaking communities. It is the first part of two parts which will look at the *Complexities of Trust and Trustworthiness* in Peru (Chapter 3), and in Colombia (Chapter 4). The chapter starts by introducing the notion of trust in more detail. It will be argued that a power imbalance exists between the families of the missing as laypersons and forensic anthropologists as experts. This power imbalance exists irrespectively of a country-specific context. In the case of Colombia and Peru, however, many, if not most, victims experience a kind of vulnerability that goes beyond the layperson-expert power imbalance as it existed before encountering the forensic anthropologist. It is a vulnerability stemming from systemic marginalisation, dehumanisation, and state agents being perpetrators, which ultimately affects the perceived trustworthiness and integrity of forensic anthropologists. Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss these themes in more detail.

**Chapter 4** – part two of *Encountering Complexities of Trust and Trustworthiness* – turns to the complexities of building relationships with families of the missing in Colombia. The atrocities committed by state authorities, such as members of the police force and military, underscore the significance and complexity of fostering trust between state-employed forensic anthropologists and the families of the missing. Individuals employed by state institutions are considered representatives of the state, such is the case with forensic anthropologists working for state institutions like the Attorney General's Office. It is then not just a matter of trustworthiness towards families (whose family members might have been victims of police or military) but, as will be shown in Chapter 5, it



becomes a matter of safety when forensic anthropologists are also seen as state representatives by members of guerrilla and paramilitary groups. This fact gets exacerbated by the knowledge and skills forensic anthropologists possess. Giving insight into the complex reconciliation process in Colombia, Chapter 4 addresses philosophical questions such as *What does justice mean in Colombia's transitional peace scenario? What do truth and forgiveness mean in Colombia's scenario?* It will further explore various aspects that potentially aid in fostering trust such as listening, mutuality, the display of emotions and the motivation behind doing this kind of work.

**Chapter 5 – *Encountering Violence*** – foregrounds how forensic scientists encounter violence directly in their professional lives. Forensic anthropologists in Latin America operate within a sociopolitical environment where they may encounter individuals involved in the political violence cases they investigate, including guerrilla and paramilitary group members. Further, the chapter addresses the risks inherent in the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce and being associated with the state.

**Chapter 6 – *Encountering the Unwanted and Moral Witnesses*** – explores the questions: *How do forensic anthropologists navigate the various kinds of encounters? And ultimately, what do these encounters do to their selves?* The preceding chapters show that forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru are unwanted witnesses. The aspects through which they witness include, the dangers and risks to their lives they encounter in the sociopolitical contexts they work in, navigating themes of racism against marginalised communities and distrust when interacting with the families of the missing, listening to stories of pain and suffering, and working with the human remains of a modern context of extreme violence. The chapter elaborates on the aspects of interaction with the families, the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce, the expectations that come with this profession being considered a vocation, and how they make sense of what they witness. The chapter concludes that forensic anthropologists in the contexts of Colombia and Peru are not only *unwanted witnesses* but may also be framed as *moral witnesses*. I close the dissertation with a discussion on scientific detachment and the management of emotions as well as a summary of my research project's contributions.

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## Chapter 2

A scientific man ought to have no wishes, no affections – a mere heart of stone.

– Charles Darwin<sup>28</sup>

...in the context of human rights violations [...] the relationship between anthropologists and the victims' relatives [...] is perhaps the most difficult area for those forensic anthropologists who conceive their task as strictly technical and objective in the name of an idealized clinical distance.

– Argentine forensic anthropologist Luis Fondebrider,  
*Forensic Anthropology and the Investigation of Political Violence*

## 2 Forensic Anthropology in Different Contexts

I had my first encounter with real-life forensic anthropology when accompanying a forensic anthropologist on a re-opened cold case of a missing woman in Northern Germany. I remember a detective at the scene that day telling me he would be very good at reading people. He thought me a quiet person, and that I harboured an inner peace. I nearly snorted into my water glass. That outing, part of an internship at a biomechanics laboratory at a renowned German University Hospital, was my first step back into the world after two excruciating years of surgeries and rehabilitation measures following a car accident. I was diagnosed with what in Western psychology is referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). My inner world was far from peaceful. While this diagnosis informs my research question and concern for the experiences of forensic anthropologists, I do not assert that forensic practitioners experiencing potentially traumatic stressors have this disorder. Not all individuals who encounter a traumatic event will develop PTSD. Nor do I claim to know what forensic practitioners dealing

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<sup>28</sup> Darwin Correspondence Project

with this condition are going through. The symptoms are experienced uniquely by each person.

After completing the internship, I pursued a Master of Science Degree in Forensic Archaeology and Forensic Anthropology at the Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification (CAHID) in Scotland. During this program, I had a realisation that shaped my doctoral research project: I was surprised that the potential emotional impacts of this kind of work were not discussed. I remember that my cohort wanted answers to pragmatic questions such as ‘What do you do when you are at a crime scene, you have a runny nose, but you cannot take off your mask so as to not compromise the crime scene’s integrity?’

“*You suck it up,*” we were told.

As I looked more into the emotional impacts of this profession, I learned that in some situations *sucking it up* does not only apply to bodily excretions. In Western forensic anthropology, the role of the scientist is intrinsically linked to objectivity, scientific detachment, and unbiasedness. Emotions need to be navigated carefully – they are to be separated, expressed privately in spaces outside of the professional contexts of forensic anthropological work like the field site or the laboratory. Indeed, there appears to be a prevailing credo that speaks of *if you must cry, you do so at night*.

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## 2.1 Encountering the ‘Western’ Context

Distinguished British anatomist and forensic anthropologist Professor Dame Sue Black was about to meet the father of a deceased woman. He wished to express his gratitude to Black for her role in revealing the truth about his daughter’s murder. Despite her extensive work experience across the world, Black suddenly felt nervous and uneasy. She

had met family members when working overseas, but never in the United Kingdom<sup>29</sup> (2018, Chapter 9: The Body Mutilated<sup>30</sup>). Would she find the right words; was there even anything you could say in situations like this? “In *our* world,” Black (2018) explains, “we strive to maintain a clinical detachment while engaged in our work and are largely removed from the immediacy of the grief and distress of family and friends” (Ibid., emphasis added). There is, according to Black (2007, n.p.), “a very good reason” for not getting involved with the families: “You can’t afford to be influenced by their emotion and their situation. So, the majority of our work is in clinical isolation.” In North America and the United Kingdom, the practice of forensic anthropology is rooted “in a tradition of criminal investigation, with close links to the police and local medical examiners” (Crossland 2015, 104). In this context, forensic anthropologists operate as scientists and expert witnesses. A “forensic scientist is first a scientist,” the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS, 1996-2014, 3) states. In fact, the “primacy of scientific identity,” it has been argued, “is woven into the structures by which forensic scientists are trained and interact with one another” (Rosenblatt 2015, 18). In parallel, Black (2019, 61:00 mins<sup>31</sup>) explains:

There is no such thing as forensic science. All there is, is science. The forensic bit comes from the Latin pertaining to the forum, that’s where the *forensis* bit comes in. The *forum* was, of course, the courts of Rome. So forensic science is just science in the courtroom. If you want to be a forensic scientist, *be a real scientist first*. Be a biologist, a chemist, a physicist, a mathematician and then once you understand your science apply it in the way that the courts request your need you to do.

Whereas today the word *forensic* pertains to the application of the scientific method to the legal context, its origins lay in Ancient Rome as pointed out by Black (2019;

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<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that while Black had met family members overseas, she had not met a family member in the United Kingdom until the scene she describes. In this sense, the idea of meeting the families is doubly distanced – something that if it happens, happens ‘over there.’

<sup>30</sup> As older e-reader versions do not have page numbers, the chapter of the publication will be included as reference.

<sup>31</sup> As the quotation is taken from a video interview, minutes are given instead of page numbers.

Crossland 2015). The Latin term *forensis* means *in open court, public, or of the forum*, where legal hearings were held in ancient Rome (Ibid.). In today's "public forum of the court of law," forensic anthropologists appear as expert witnesses (Crossland 2015, 104). Striving for admissibility of evidence in court, the main objective of forensic anthropologists, it is argued, is to obtain "the most accurate and objective investigative results possible" (Ferllini 2013, 5). Therefore, in their role as scientists and expert witnesses, forensic anthropologists are expected to be unbiased and accurate (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, n.d.; The Law Commission 2011; Michell and Mandhane 2005). Objectivity is often regarded as the epitome of scientific investigations, and the foundation of "the authority of science in society" (Reiss and Sprenger 2020, n.p.). It seems to be closely associated with clinical detachment. The latter is a cultivated disposition according to which scientists are to set aside their personalities and focus solely on the characteristics of the object being studied (Antonovski and Barash 2020). In other words, scientists should prioritise an objective analysis without letting their personal traits or biases influence their study.<sup>32</sup>

Today's forensic scientists, Sue Black and Niamh Nic Daeid (2015, 2) point out, see themselves confronted with "punishing demands to be consistently and unerringly accurate, precise, informed, impartial, definitive and right." It comes as no surprise then that the need for practising objectivity in forensic anthropology, which involves clinical detachment, has been a long-standing conversation in the Western context. Statements by forensic anthropologists emphasise the necessity of clinical detachment due to the legal context they work in and the expectation to be objective and unbiased. Distinguished forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow (2009, n.p.) stresses that as a forensic anthropologist "when you're working you can't become too emotionally involved [as it] affects our objectivity – we have to conduct our investigation in such a way that it should be accepted not only by whichever side you are testifying for, but the other side too." Sue Black explains (2007, n.p., emphasis added):

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<sup>32</sup> For a classic discussion of value-neutral science, see Max Weber's *Science as a Vocation* (1958; 1919).

... to work in forensics, you need to have a clinical detachment, because you're there to retrieve evidence, you're not there to give an opinion; you're not there to be affected by it. *And if you do become affected by it you become inefficient in your objectivity.* So there is an element that... you actually close down. *You close down emotionally.*

Although Black states that certain elements might need to be shut down emotionally, in another statement she (2017, n.p.) notes that clinical detachment does not render her cold or uncaring. She frames detachment within the notion of pragmatism, emphasising that the latter is anticipated from scientists:

However much we may desperately want to help somebody, the truth is that we're there to assist the law [...]. Our job is to recover the evidence, to analyse the evidence and to report on it. It's a very clinical detachment [...]. It doesn't make me cold, clinical or uncaring, I don't think. It makes me pragmatic – which is what scientists should be.

Similarly to Black, forensic anthropologist William R. Maples (in Maples and Browning 1994, 121) holds that emotions need to be 'put aside,' or compartmentalised, during investigations:

It costs me an effort, in my professional capacity, to put aside the outrage any human being must experience when brought into contact with these depravities. Yet put it aside I must, if I am to reach clear and dispassionate conclusions in my investigations.

A further reason for the importance of clinical detachment is that emotional involvement can impact the forensic practitioner's mental health. Black (2015, 26-27) notes that maintaining objectivity is beneficial for effectively performing your job:

It's an incredibly powerful self-protection shield, yes. We're there to do a specific job and be impartial scientists, which means you have to collect and report on evidence objectively, and you cannot take sides – those are the rules of science. If you let emotion and personal involvement in, you've strayed from the rules of being a scientist, and that's when you get into trouble. Your training as a scientist is your best friend.

Emotional involvement and clinical detachment are repeatedly framed as binary. In the forensic anthropologist's role as scientist and expert witness, clinical detachment is, according to these voices, of utmost importance. Emotional involvement is perceived to

interfere with the scientist's striving for objectivity. The distinction between clinical detachment and emotional involvement appears to get destabilised, however, when forensic anthropologists of the Western medicolegal oriented context encounter an element about which Black (2018) states they would be largely removed from. That is, the families of the victims.

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## 2.2 Unravelling the Illusion of Sterility and Separation

We did not have much contact with either the interviewers or the survivors, for which I was grateful.

– Courtney Angela Brkic in Bosnia-Herzegovina,  
*The Stone Fields: An Epitaph for the Living*

The local judge was out there. And his secretaries, a couple of male lawyers. And the relatives of the deceased. That shocked me. We don't let relations within five miles of an exhumation in the States.

– Clyde Snow in Argentina (in Joyce and Stover 1991, 245)

Luis Fondebrider (2016, 65), founding member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology team, notes that “there is still a lack of understanding about the nature of the work and the contribution made by organizations and individual anthropologists outside the Anglo-Saxon world.” Literature on the practice of forensic anthropology outside the Anglosphere, Fondebrider holds, mainly focuses on the activities of Anglo-Saxon forensic anthropologists in the Balkans (Ibid.). The Balkans saw widespread violations of human rights, including instances of mass killings and torture. They are described as the only region where most forensic anthropologists from a Western background have conducted their work. Since the early 1990s, according to Fondebrider, numerous forensic anthropologists have spent several months working in the Balkans, while some only made short visits to Bosnia, Croatia, or Kosovo. In what follows, insights will be given on the experiences of forensic anthropologist Clea Koff. Inspired by the work of

Clyde Snow and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF<sup>33</sup>), Koff travelled to Rwanda and Kosovo to exhume victims of human rights violations when she was just a young anthropology graduate student. During her work there, she saw the notion of scientific stoicism compromised by the stark reality of her own humanity and by witnessing up close the suffering of the relatives of the deceased.

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Clea Koff (2004, 186) describes Clyde Snow as one of her “professional heroes.” Her memoir *The Bone Woman* makes multiple references to the book *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell* by Christopher Joyce and Eric Stover (1991), which chronicles Snow’s career and his founding of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. The memoir discusses Snow’s work and that of the EAAF in the context of forensic anthropology and investigations of political violence. As previously mentioned, Snow argued that forensic anthropologists need to exercise emotional restraint as otherwise objectivity would be affected. In 1984, Snow imparted this belief to his young students from Argentina, whom he trained in excavating and identifying the disappeared of the military junta ruling between 1976 to 1983. Snow (2004, n.p.<sup>34</sup>, emphasis added) states the following about his credo:

I developed a philosophy quite early. When the members of the [Argentine] team were very young, they saw horrible things that shocked them a lot. But we have to function as scientists. If we let our emotions get involved, the work is not objective. We have to provide the evidence and at that moment we almost have to have a cold look. A forensic dentist who also joined that first mission in 1984 created a kind of slogan. Recognizing that you can’t be a scientist all the time, he said head-on: “*If you have to cry, you’ll cry at night.*” *When you are in the morgue or doing the scientific work you have to maintain your objectivity.*

Once more, a contrast between emotion and clinical detachment can be observed with the latter being considered inherently connected to the forensic scientist’s role of conducting

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<sup>33</sup> *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*

<sup>34</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.



objective investigations. Most compellingly, this binary is associated with a separation between the public and private realms. Whereas detached conduct is expected in public, in the private sphere, the forensic anthropologist is allowed to let emotions manifest. The spatial separations between private and public spheres, work and personal time (“you can’t be a scientist all the time”) underscore the importance of maintaining a professional disposition, and the ability to separate emotions from professional duties.

“Emotions,” Jane Fajans (2006, 118) suggests, “are a part of social activity” and as such should not be seen as a solely isolated physiological occurrence. Rather, they are “mediating phenomena” negotiating between the domains of “inside and outside, individual and collective, public and private” (104). As such, they are, according to Fajans, neither an entirely social nor an entirely intrinsic, biological phenomena. “Physiological responses to stimuli,” the author argues, “are modulated by social patterns, cultural expectations and individual experience” (Ibid.). As emotions manifest in cultural and social contexts, the “individual learns to associate such contexts with appropriate responses” (105). In the context of British death rites, for example, it is argued that British individuals suppress their emotions when confronted with death (Hepburn 2002). This can be attributed to the British stereotype of having a ‘stiff upper lip.’ They grieve in what is considered the appropriate place, which is to say, in private (Ibid.). Similarly, for Snow, forensic anthropologists are expected to exercise emotional self-restraint when working in the morgue or at the exhumation site. The display of emotion is only deemed appropriate at a particular place; that is, ‘at night,’ in private. This raises the questions: Does allowing for emotions in private have no effect on objectivity in the workplace? Under the assumption that emotions can be separated from the public and private sphere, where do those feelings go when stepping from the private realm into the public? For all the importance being placed upon objectivity and emotional restraint, Hepburn (2002, 247) reminds us that we need to “distinguish between what people are doing and what they may actually be feeling.” While forensic anthropologists emphasise and publicly perform the importance of emotional restraint, it does not mean that they are devoid of feelings towards human remains or the atrocities committed. As Black (2016, n.p.) acknowledges, it “can be absolutely horrendous and you’d be almost inhuman not to be affected, but you can’t let personal distress get in the way of the job

you have to do.” In a later interview, Snow (2009, n.p.) notes that his credo – *If you have to cry, you can cry at night* – “became almost a mantra” for the Argentine team. In fact, it resonated within the field of forensic anthropology and continues to be cited in various scholarly works.<sup>35</sup> Koff seems to have embraced Snow’s philosophy but saw it challenged in the context of investigations of political violence. In her autobiography, she reflects on the struggle of upholding the expected ‘stiff upper lip’ while experiencing emotional responses to what they as forensic anthropologists encounter and witness.

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Forensic anthropologist Roxanna Ferllini (2013, 1) considers places of on-going investigations of human rights violations “emotionally charged environments.” The author argues that surviving family members at the site of mass grave excavations add a “specific element that is capable of vectoring a strong element of emotional charge” (5). In Rwanda, a journalist asks Koff (2004) and her teammates how they cope with the dead and the presence of the victims’ relatives. They respond noting that “the place for emotion is away from the site” (46), thereby echoing Snow’s credo. The explanation too mirrors that of Snow: “we were scientists, there to do a job” (Ibid.). Again, emotional restraint and the role of the scientist are considered to be intrinsically intertwined. In the public domain, the forensic anthropologist is expected to maintain emotional control. Interestingly, a separation is not only made between the public and private sphere. Koff physically separates herself from the ‘emotional element’ of the grieving families, which she acknowledges towards the end of her book. She describes how, in Arizona, she and her mentor would deliberately avoid encountering the relatives of the deceased while collecting human remains from the medical examiner’s office. She and her colleague “left by a back door that was well separated from the front door, where relatives of the dead might enter” (260). She presumed the same to be possible in Rwanda:

I had expected that we would always have a “back door”, separated from families and “living people with interest” by crime scene tape or soldiers or the simple

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<sup>35</sup> Perhaps most recently in Alexa Hagerty (2023).

existence of rules concerning medico-legal evidence that has yet to be presented at trial. I had seen myself as a part of a crew of forensic scientists traveling to Rwanda to gather evidence, interpret it, hand it over to the Tribunal, and leave. *All sterility, all separation.* But it hadn't been like that. [...] we were always among "people with an interest." You would have to be a particular sort of person not to be affected by the entangled nature of that set up. (Ibid., emphasis added)

Initially, Koff anticipated a clear separation between the forensic scientist team and the emotional involvement of those affected by the crimes, symbolised by the idea of a "back door" and "crime scene tape," and sterile, professional detachment. However, the reality turned out differently as they found themselves immersed among people directly impacted by the events, blurring the lines between objectivity and emotional engagement. Further, the essence of Koff's statement, "You would have to be a particular sort of person not to be affected by the entangled nature of that set up," delves beyond emotions and science to encompass the kind of person who does this work (and what the work does to the person). These aspects will be explored in detail throughout the dissertation.

Witnessing the emotions of the families is seen as something that must be avoided as their display of emotion is potentially disruptive to the forensic anthropologist's emotional restraint. In this respect, British forensic pathologist Richard Shepherd (2018, 140) notes:

I had come to regard myself as a five-star, fully competent controller of emotions. Until I met relatives of the deceased. Relatives, with their burden of shock, horror, grief. Relatives, looking at me for answers to the often unanswerable ('Did he suffer, Doctor?').

Shepherd appears to see himself as highly skilled at managing his emotions through the practice of detachment. However, this self-assurance in emotion management is challenged by the depth of human emotion encountered in the relatives of the deceased.

My informant Mike, a North American forensic anthropologist who has worked in Latin America, explained that Western forensic anthropologists seek to maintain scientific detachment by physically distancing themselves from individuals who may introduce an emotional element. He put it this way:

We put up the yellow tape and it's a physical barrier, meant to keep people out. But it also serves as a sort of social and psychological barrier. And you're protecting the scene but you're protecting yourself.

Koff (2004, 260) expected such barrier or “back door” to exist in the contexts of Rwanda or Kosovo, but it simply did not. In Rwanda and Kosovo, forensic anthropologists experienced the “immediacy of the grief and distress of family and friends,” which they would normally be removed from as noted by Black (2018, Chapter 9: The Body Mutilated). And in Koff's case, *hoped* to be removed from. When interviewing a victim's family member as a witness for the tribunal, Koff encountered the raw emotions of grieving relatives. Her feelings at this moment mirrored those of Sue Black when encountering the father of a murdered woman (Recall: Before this instance, Black had met family members when working overseas, but never in the United Kingdom.) It spoke of unease and of being unsure of what to do. The witness being close to tears, Koff wanted to comfort her. However, she did not know how: “I couldn't think of anything that was good enough” (71). In another instance, in Kosovo, the grandfather of a deceased man was present when his body was lifted from the ground. Koff wanted to reach out to the grandfather but chose not to as there were too many people around. She wanted him to know that they “weren't emotionless scientists who just exhumed bodies by rote” (219). While Koff publicly performed her role as a scientist, a “controller of emotions” as Shepherd called it, here in this emotionally intimate moment, she yearned for the relative to know that forensic anthropologists are not like the stoic personas they appear to be.

Ferlini (2013) calls emotional restraint at the exhumation site a forensic anthropologist's duty. It could be argued that this introduces moral weight as it suggests that detachment is an obligation. When encountering families on site, it is “the *duty* of the forensic anthropologists,” the author notes, “to concentrate upon the matter at hand and complete their work without introducing an emotional element into the situation” (5-6, emphasis added). Koff and other forensic practitioners appear to have internalised this conviction, which mirror's Snow's philosophy. Although Black (2018, Chapter 10: Kosovo) allows that having “chinks in your armour isn't always a sign of weakness. It is often a sign of humanity,” Koff felt repulsed when momentarily losing her scientific distance and

instead feeling empathy for the victims. “I felt sick,” Koff (2004, 154) explains, “sick that I had had this happen – that while I was working, something slipped through whatever it is that allows me to work with dead bodies without feeling tragedy *as I work.*” Koff observes that her vivid imagination enables her to envision the sights and sounds of events she did not witness firsthand. However, she must not allow herself, Koff notes, to project a life onto the human remains. Throughout her book, Koff details her challenge of balancing empathy with a clinical, detached stance.

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When asked by a journalist what she is thinking whilst working in the grave, Koff responded, “I’m thinking: ‘We’re coming. We’re coming to take you out.’” (46). In front of the journalists, Koff’s teammates expressed agreement, but in private, they would mock her by claiming that she would hear voices. Koff explains, “For me, the conundrum was that I was capable *both of scientific detachment and human empathy*, but when I revealed the latter, I was made to feel I had revealed too much (47, emphasis added). Koff calls this “double vision” (155); feelings such as empathy or imagining the dead as living breathing person that intruded into her thoughts while she worked. It appears she sees objectivity as a rigid phenomenon. Clinical detachment needs to be upheld without there being room for feelings such as empathy. That both can exist at the same time without jeopardising the investigation seems to be difficult to fathom for Koff and others. Rosenblatt (2015) offers an explanation as to why Koff saw herself in a conundrum. According to Rosenblatt, Koff’s remark about her thoughts towards the dead “trespassed in [various] sensitive areas” (169). One of these areas addresses emotions in a field that strives to sustain objectivity and clinical detachment. By expressing empathy for the victims, Koff, Rosenblatt argues, “injected raw emotion into a fragile system where scientific detachment is the norm” (Ibid.).

‘Trespassing’ is an interesting word choice. It suggests that it was a serious faux pas by Koff to openly address the possibility of feeling and showing empathy in the first place. It is as if the author is saying that the invisible line, the psychological barrier of the figurative yellow crime scene tape, should never have been crossed. An open expression

of emotion towards the dead or of one's own feelings seems to be perceived as a threat to this carefully crafted system. This is exemplified by an incident in Kosovo whereby an 'outside element' threatened Koff's 'armour,' as Black calls it, of clinical detachment. Koff (2004, 233) notes, "I was keeping myself together admirably until my composure was thwarted by the living." A display of emotions by one of her anthropologist colleagues was almost her "downfall":

I was angry with her – so angry. [...] Why was she there if she was going to force me to contemplate – during the working day – the bleak and harsh reality of these dead? [...] I was thinking, 'Don't do this to me. Don't start me crying, because I might never stop.' I didn't have casework to insulate myself; I'd be like that line from Paul Simon's 'Graceland,' with a window to my heart so that everyone would see it blown apart. (233-234)

Koff notes that her composure had already hung by a thread; only being maintained by the insulating "demands of casework," which kept her from continuously crying, thinking and feeling (232). In connection to Koff's above statement, Rosenblatt briefly relays the narrative of 23-year-old forensic anthropologist and archaeologist Courtney Angela Brkic when she was in Bosnia-Herzegovina. After Brkic's had an emotional breakdown, a colleague said, "'You're too close to it,' he told me almost groaning, 'And it's hard on everyone because you are.'" (Brkic in Rosenblatt 2015, 195). Rosenblatt frames these incidences as an act of care:

The often-silent rules of conduct at the mass grave or forensic lab are not merely protective 'poses' each expert dons for his own sanity or protection. They are, in fact, an important part of the social life of the forensic team. As both Koff and [Brkic's colleague] make clear, managing your own stress – and knowing to step back when you cannot – can be a way of caring for your teammates, respecting the boundaries that others around you need to continue with their work. (195-196)

Rosenblatt states that the rules of conduct, which involve exercising emotional restraint, are rooted in care for one's colleagues. However, to engage in an act of care the forensic scientist must restrain their own emotions. Rosenblatt points out that Koff had grown reliant on the principles of conduct and professionalism. Being exposed to her colleague's display of emotion poses a threat to Koff's emotional restraint – 'if you cry, I cry.' This is also implied by Brkic's colleague when he responds to her emotional

outburst with ‘it’s hard on everyone because you’re too close to it.’ Initially, controlling one’s emotions, or compartmentalising, may serve as a beneficial way to protect oneself from potentially traumatising stimuli. However, in the long term, suppressing emotions can lead to detrimental self-destructive behaviours (see Chapter 6). Framing the suppression of one’s *own* emotions as an act of care as it allows one’s colleagues to be able to restrain *their* emotions does not seem a satisfactory proposition to the practice of clinical detachment. Rather, it seems to lead to the act of care being used as a kind of ‘ethical scaffolding’ in defence of clinical detachment, thereby reproducing the phenomena in a different language. Ethical scaffolding is a notion used by Paul Brodwin (2013, 134) which describes “the means by which people preserve the felt legitimacy of their daily work.”

Koff, as Rosenblatt notes, does not find a solution to her conundrum of juggling the co-existence of clinical detachment and empathy. In the concluding sentences of her book, Koff distinguishes between her forensic anthropology persona and her personal self. The forensic scientist persona she describes as having the “duty” of aiding in having the voices of the dead heard; a duty that “required detachment and discipline.” Whereas the “*person*” she is “felt, thought, dreamed, cried, and connected” (2004, 266). Rosenblatt (2015, 196) points out that other forensic experts “might have alternative language of professionalism and duty, or be content, as Clyde Snow advised his Argentine students, to ‘work during the day and cry at night.’” As shown throughout the previous section, it may be argued that these contentions are two sides of the same coin, and it is more than just an “alternative language.” As outlined, the philosophy of *if you have to cry, you can cry at night* has echoed throughout the field of forensic anthropology in various forms. It is a credo that appears to be constantly reproduced. Rosenblatt speaks of “unspoken rules of comportment and professionalism” and “often-silent rules of conduct at the mass grave or forensic lab” (195). However, are these rules often silent as Rosenblatt suggests? Autobiographies by forensic practitioners, it has been noted, seem “to be an English-language phenomenon, concentrated primarily in the United States” (Crossland 2015, 105). Nevertheless, many forensic experts who have published or been interviewed are very open about the expected rules of conduct for forensic scientists in the laboratory, morgue, and at the grave site. These expectations are repeatedly stressed by various

forensic scientists not only in the field of forensic anthropology (see forensic pathologists Richard Shepherd, Klaus Püschel<sup>36</sup>). So much so, that one wonders if clinical detachment, as Rosenblatt suggests, is indeed the norm in this ‘system’ thereby implying that it is accepted as a standard way of conduct, then why is the contention of objectivity and clinical detachment constantly reiterated and thereby re-produced as if it was something exceptional?

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As the above suggests, the ideas of detachment and empathy/emotions are of central concern in the prevailing discourse about the self-conception of forensic anthropologists and their work. Koff’s belief that the forensic scientist persona, characterised by clinical detachment, contradicts the experience of grief and empathy, puts a central tension in that discourse. Why is there a distinction being made between what is deemed appropriate behaviour in the public and private realm? One possible explanation may lie in the context in which the aforementioned forensic scientists work and were educated. As previously outlined, in the Western context, forensic anthropologists mostly operate in the legal context of criminal investigations. As scientists, they exist in a world in which a certain claim to objectivity is regarded as the epitome of scientific investigations (Reiss and Sprenger 2020). In fact, they are required “to be consistently and unerringly accurate, precise, informed, impartial” (Black and Nic Daeid 2015, 2). Some forensic anthropologists, like Koff, Black and Snow, seem to associate this context with the appropriately deemed response; that is, emotional restraint. As outlined, clinical detachment or emotional restraint has been framed as pragmatism (Black 2017) or as an act of care (Rosenblatt 2015). For Brkic (2004, 253), it is more like a delusion: “I knew the illusion of controlled emotion that I had carefully cultivated over the past month had

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<sup>36</sup> German forensic pathologist Klaus Püschel (2015, 062, 064) notes: “One has to do one’s work, professional and cold to the core.” and “It is my job to unveil facts, as forensic medical specialist I cannot and must not develop hunting fever. For us, it is about objective findings and not about any feelings that one may have for the perpetrator or the victim.” (Translation from German by me.)



faded along with the bad weather.” In some instances, the context of investigations of political violence destabilises the carefully grafted distinction between emotional involvement and clinical detachment. In this context, both the *spatial* and *psychological* barrier between the forensic anthropologist and the grieving families, which is deemed necessary to uphold the system of clinical detachment, is missing. Of course, Koff’s and Brkic’s experiences regarding clinical detachment cannot be generalised to the entirety of the Western forensic anthropology community. However, their reflections on this, alongside the professional discourse of memoirs and other writings by leading figures like Clyde Snow or Sue Black, point to the discursive frames through which forensic anthropological work is understood (and taught, as the case of Snow shows). Taken in that context, Koff’s and Brkic’s meta-commentaries provide insight into the challenges forensic anthropologists might experience when removed from the context of individual homicide cases and the laboratory, or ‘clinical isolation,’ as Black calls it – that is, spaces where one is largely removed from emotional elements such as the relatives of the deceased.

For Western forensic anthropologists, the experience of working in the Balkans (and later in Rwanda) provided a challenge to the claim of scientific detachment. The political context of work in those cases and the presence of families of the victims was destabilising and provoked some, like Koff and Brkic, to question the separation of reason and emotion, or objectivity and empathy. Yet, that felt sense of disruption assumes a certain approach to forensic anthropological work itself – it assumes the dominant discourse as exemplified by figures like Black or Snow. For those who approached work in the Balkans from a different historical experience, the situation differed. As Fondebrider (2015a, 41-42) puts it:

the forensic studies on the Balkans were conducted mainly by English-speaking practitioners who lacked knowledge of the Latin American experiences, and did not have a comprehensive understanding of the unique humanitarian, judicial, and political dimensions of forensic work in postconflict societies. These professionals had until 1996 excavated only individual graves in their own countries, and had therefore little experience with the nuances and implications of investigations in contexts of political violence, which are alternatively designated as humanitarian,

human rights, war crimes, or genocide investigations, all of which are but partial and incomplete names that simplify the complexities of such forensic work.

In what follows, I seek a more nuanced exploration, one that does not “simplify the complexities of [...] forensic work.” In the subsequent section and chapters, this dissertation will turn to an in-depth exploration of forensic anthropological work in the Latin American countries of Colombia and Peru. In both countries, as in many other parts of Latin America, the families of the missing take on a central part in forensic anthropological investigations. The presence and place of the families in and alongside forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru, especially when considered in relation to the political and sociocultural context of forensic anthropological work in both countries, shapes how forensic anthropology is conducted and how forensic anthropologists think about their work and themselves. In this context, I will argue, we need to rethink the relationship between professional detachment, empathy, and trust.

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## 2.3 Interlude – “They Didn’t Get What Others in Latin America Knew All Along.”

My informant Mike, a forensic anthropologist with international work experience, noted:

“So, a British NGO<sup>37</sup> is supporting the development and implementation of the Cypress Missing Persons Commission. And they arrive at a burial site, and they say: ‘OK, this is how it’s gonna happen.’ They put up their tape and they are like: ‘OK, are you Cypriots? Like Cypriots who are members of the Commission of Missing Persons? You are new. You don’t know how this works. So, you wait over there, and you watch us do it.’ Right? And then of course this generates bitterness, and you know, there is a really top-down sort of conceptualisation and actualisation and really pretentious and colonial, and you could use all kinds of great terms to characterise this. Then the Argentine team is there. And they are like: ‘No, no, no, we’re working together.’ Cypriots and us were mentoring

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<sup>37</sup> non-governmental organisation

while at work, right? And that breaks this conception of the crime scene as sort of sacred. That somehow you are contaminating it. And it's very important to note that the Cypress Missing Persons Commission is extrajudicial. There are no criminal trials happening in Cyprus by mandate, by law. So, there is no need for concern about contamination of evidence. There is no [need] to exclude non-experts. I mean, to a degree, right? I mean journalists can't take photos of whatever [inaudible, of] the families, except that the families should be there. If they are walking across remains, then no obviously. But, you know, they ought to be there and there is no reason why they should not be there. *But this British team versus the Argentine team revealed these very contrasting models and of course today the Argentine team is very allied with the Cypriots.* And the British are not, right? Yeah, to me, colonial is the best characterisation that I could think of to describe it. And it's unproductive, it's counterproductive, it is exclusive and especially when your only mandate is humanitarian and not criminal, judicial. I mean, 'you got it all wrong,' I would say that to the Brits. And I know them [he laughed]. I know them all very well. But whoever was making the decisions in that particular instance was making the wrong decisions. They didn't get that. *They didn't get what others like in Latin America knew all along.*"

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## 2.4 Encountering the Latin American Approach

It's not a science isolated in a bubble. Is science active and in relation with the people.

– my informant Miguel

I always repeat, I always say that my job has no sense without families. My job is useless without families because [it] has no meaning [without them]. Is just a job. We try to transmit this to the families.

– my informant Maurice

South America, it has been noted, is “‘a continent made to undermine conventional truths,’ a region unto ourselves, unlike any other, where theories or doctrines fashioned elsewhere seldom have purchase” (Arana 2019, 6-7). One might argue that this assertion is also relevant to the field of forensic anthropology. The forensic anthropology approach predominant in the United States and Europe was redefined in the sociopolitical and historical context of Latin America (Rodríguez Cuenca 2004). A main reason for the difference between the two approaches can be found in the difference in the discipline's roots in the Southern Hemisphere. Forensic anthropologist Douglas H. Ubelaker holds (2016, 94) that whilst “the academic roots of forensic anthropology in the United States extend into Europe, they originate in North America with early anatomists and physicians who applied their knowledge to medico-legal issues.” By contrast, in Latin America, forensic anthropology did not emerge from within the academy but rather from civil society and specifically from a sociopolitical context of violence (Castellanos and Chapetón 2023). As Fondebrider (2015a, 44) states:

The birth of forensic anthropology in Latin America was not the result of an administrative decision or a desire by an anthropology department eager to fulfill its civic duty. On the contrary, the academic community was not interested, and turned its back on the urgent demands of social sectors hit hardest by political violence. This origin is one of the most striking differences between the development of forensic anthropology in Latin America and that in the United States and Europe.

In Latin America, the concerns the discipline needed to react to were manifold and rooted in sociopolitical circumstances. “There was a need,” Fondebrider (2016, 68) holds, “[...] to respond to issues associated with the political and legal contexts in the places where the work was being performed, to ensure the logistics and security required for each intervention, and, most especially, to establish a relationship with the victims’ relatives and their communities.”

While the sociopolitical context shaped how forensic anthropology developed in Latin America, it is the involvement of the families that perhaps most distinguishes forensic anthropology in Latin America from the approach practiced in the United States and Europe. As outlined previously, in the contexts of the United States and Europe, according to forensic anthropologists themselves, they are generally far removed from the grief, and the emotions, of family members. In other contexts, the presence of family members is acknowledged as a possibility, but there is an attempt to maintain the spatial and emotional separation between forensic practitioners and others. For example, based on her experience in Rwanda, Kosovo, Syria, and Spain, forensic anthropologist Roxana Ferllini (2013, 5) describes family members present at the site of “investigations of human rights abuses” as a “specific element that is capable of vectoring a strong element of emotional charge.” The author further notes that it “is not inferred here that such individuals should be prevented from being present while forensic personnel are processing the site; however, the fact remains that the said factor might present itself at any given juncture” (Ibid.). “Within normal circumstances,” Ferllini adds, “such scenarios dictate that relatives or acquaintances of the families stand behind the cordon and observe the work at hand in a state of anxiety and consternation, but typically in a patient manner. It is the duty of the forensic anthropologists to concentrate upon the matter at hand and complete their work without introducing an emotional element into the situation” (5-6). In the scenario that Ferllini describes the families of the missing are introduced as a disruptive element, believed to threaten the scientific detachment of the forensic scientist. By contrast, in Latin America, forensic anthropological investigations are characterised by an integrative process that prioritises the involvement of families over other parties such as judges or forensic anthropologists. There, families are “the true

protagonists” who play a central role in the investigations (Fondebrider 2016, 68; 2015a; 2015b). My informant Mike explained:

[The Latin Americans] allied with families from the start because families were betrayed by the state. So, they’ve always had that. But I’m North American and I trust my state, it’s a strong state and it fulfils obligations, and it generally protects people and so *I had a very sterile version of how forensic investigation ought to be.* And that sterile version is ‘everybody outside the scene, the expert is here.’

Mike highlights that families were “betrayed” by the state. In Latin America, many killings, and human rights violations – in some nations the majority – were conducted by state agents, such as the police and the armed forces. How this impacts the work of forensic anthropologists will be outlined in subsequent chapters. Furthermore, according to informants, the governments show a lack of concern about the missing and their families. My Colombian informant Ana, who had just finished her Master’s degree in forensic anthropology when I interviewed her, noted: “The government doesn’t care, doesn’t support. And the reason why, I think, [is that] [...] to find the missing and to recognise we have the problem means that they have failed. They have [done] something wrong.” Another Colombian informant, Santiago, who worked for various Colombian government institutions and the International Committee of the Red Cross, also pointed out that the Colombian government does not care: “They don’t care. This is a political decision. [...] They worry about other things. Not about finding or looking for the missing. It depends on the political decision.” On August 7, 2022, Gustavo Petro was inaugurated as the 34<sup>th</sup> President of Colombia. Many people have considered his election a source of hope for the country.

“Do you think the lack of concern will change with the new elections,” I asked Santiago.

“Maybe. Maybe. I’m not sure, maybe,” he laughed.

I met with Latin American forensic anthropologist Miguel in a charming restaurant in downtown Bogotá for dinner. Since he was a young student, he has been working as a forensic anthropologist in various parts of the world. Miguel stressed the importance of working closely with the families:

I always have been involved with the families. Always have been talking with families. [...] *The way we try to do science is to incorporate [the family] to the process, to the investigation. If I don't know the family, the family is not going to trust me.* If I don't understand the context – and the only way to do it is to visit the families, talk with them, to understand them – I am not going to have a hypothesis of identification. So, to work with the families is critical for us and for many people. That's why the approach we have here, we're promoting in several parts of the world, is totally different. Is not the police, [on] one side, then the lawyer, then the forensic [...]. To talk with the families is normal.

Miguel likened this relationship to that between a doctor and a patient:

I mean it's like a hospital, when you go to the hospital. You receive a doctor who talk to you, or you have an operation you want to talk with the doctor who operate your family. Is the same.

Interestingly, forensic anthropologist Mercedes Doretti, founding member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology team, also draws on the analogy of the doctor-patient relationship to describe her work with the families. She (2010, n.p.) points out that she is sometimes asked, ““Why are you giving [the families] talks on forensics? You know, these are not forensic people. They're not going to be able to understand.”” She disagrees:

Of course, people understand. I mean, people in general understand much more than one would think, and there are ways in which you can explain a genetic test. There are ways in which you can explain what a fracture does in a bone and how it heals and why we're seeing that old fracture now in this particular bone. And I think as in any case, I mean, when a daughter or son or a very close relative of yours died in normal circumstances, you will ask the doctor involved to explain [...] as much as he can about what happened. The same thing is in these cases, but with the extra that these people have been denied knowing this for years, sometimes for decades.

In this framing, the analogy of the doctor and patient highlights the emotional relationship between the forensic anthropologist and the families of victims. Further, it emphasises the fact that the knowledge produced through forensic anthropological investigations is in some sense knowledge that is meant for them, for the families (rather than specifically for a court). Doretti even includes the extra sense of obligation for forensic anthropologists, as the families have ““been denied knowing this for years.”” This sense of obligation to the families was also highlighted by the director and founding

member of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, Fredy Peccerelli (2022), who states about working with the families:

You got to remember, these families, they are the heroes in this. Not us. Our role is minuscule, it's almost non-existent. Without the families pushing, without these brave women that have led the search for the disappeared in Argentina, in Chile, in Guatemala, without these women we wouldn't be doing what we do. Because what we are doing is at their service. What the prosecution is doing is at their service.

Here, forensic anthropological work itself is tied to the families, especially women, who have advocated for investigations, protested against violence, and long searched for answers. They are the “heroes” and forensic anthropology teams work “at their service.”

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In Latin America, forensic anthropology had to move beyond its traditional bioanthropological and exhumation focus (Fondebrider 2015a, 44). As such, the discipline was redefined. Prominent Colombian physical (and forensic) anthropologist José Vicente Rodríguez Cuenca (2004, 15) explains:

In Latin America, [...] forensic anthropology cannot be limited only to its bioanthropological aspect – the analysis of skeletal remains –, nor to archaeology – the exhumation –, but the forensic expert must know the social context in which the violent deaths occur in order to obtain more comprehensive information about the circumstances of the disappearance of the victims, their somatic characteristics and the legal procedures to proceed to the search, excavation and analysis of their remains. That is, it expands its performance with the legal, sociological, political, technical-procedural and morphological context as practiced by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Teams (EAAF) [...], the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG), the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF) and others.<sup>38</sup>

Here, we see Rodríguez Cuenca suggest that the sociopolitical context of the work changed the work itself – not only where it is done, but also how. As he puts it, the context required an expansion of the traditional modes of forensic anthropological

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<sup>38</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.



investigations. In Latin American contexts, gathering information about the circumstances of the disappearance has been a crucial part of the preliminary research phase, in which the information from primary sources, such as family members of the disappeared, or perpetrators, is considered of utmost importance (Cardoza 2017). In this stage, antemortem data is collected by interviewing family members and friends of the disappeared (Ibid.). The term *antemortem* refers to events or conditions that occurred before death, encompassing everything that impacted the biological and social aspects of an individual during their lifetime (Ibid.). Antemortem data can normally include medical records (preferably radiographs, scans), a photograph to compare dental and skeletal traits (Burns 2013), records or stories of any (potential) physical trauma and surgical appliances, pathological conditions, body modifications (e.g. implants, tattoos), antemortem stature, and DNA samples (Langley and Tersigni-Tarrant 2017). When working with Indigenous communities in Latin America the process of collecting antemortem data needs to be adjusted to the specific circumstances. My informant Miguel pointed out to me that Indigenous communities in rural areas do not typically have access to medical services such as a dentist and can therefore not provide dental X-ray charts which would help in identifying human remains through means of comparison. Therefore, he noted, “the identification process is more complex” than, for instance, would be the case with a mass fatality accident in Norway, in which case forensic anthropologists would have access to the dental records of the deceased. Similarly, in the case of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Western countries could identify their citizens through dental charts, as having dental records “is normal in those countries.” However, “in this part of the world,” including Colombia and Peru, Miguel noted, it “is more complex.”<sup>39</sup>

Carmen Rosa Cardoza (2017, 75), founding member of the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF<sup>40</sup>), considers the stage of collecting antemortem information “one of the most sensitive in the process” as a trusting relationship – “*una relación de*

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<sup>39</sup> Also see María Inés Barreto Romero (2007).

<sup>40</sup> Spanish: *Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense*

*confianza*,” she calls it – needs to be established with the relatives, so that the latter feel inclined to induce memories of what their loved one was like when they were alive. It has been noted that “establishing ties with the victims’ relatives, a task that goes well beyond collecting antemortem data, is a long, slow process that requires a relationship built on *mutual trust*” (Fonderbrider 2016, 68, emphasis added). In turn, establishing an “atmosphere of trust,” as Fondebrider (2016) points out “is, of course, not a smooth or simple process for the teams involved” (Ibid.). They had to “learn how to interact with relatives, to understand their doubts, uncertainties, to respect their need for time” (Ibid., 68-69). Fonderbrider (2015a, 41) further states that they were “[s]ensitized to the complex circumstances, ethics, and politics of forensic work in postauthoritarian societies.” In the early years in Argentina, for instance, Fondebrider (2015a) points out, some relatives feared political consequences and thus did not agree to an investigation. In other instances, he states, “the perpetrators were still living in the same community, and asking a relative or a witness to point out the gravesite might place the person in danger” (45). Therefore, the sensitisation to the circumstances and concerns of the relatives is especially crucial when looking at violence not only in relation to physical aspects (massacres, torture, forced disappearance etc.) but also in relation to “historical injury” whereby harm accumulates over centuries (Castillejo-Cuellar 2013, 19). The more acute political violence of recent decades cannot be fully separated from this deeper historical context, as many groups in Latin America, especially *campesinos* (rural cultivators or peasants) and Indigenous communities throughout Latin America have suffered from social inequality, oppression, racism and displacement. Wade Davis (2020, 165) notes that in Colombian “cities, the violence was random, anonymous. In the small towns, [...] it was intimate and personal. Everyone knew everyone.” This dynamic of violence can be found in most if not all Latin American countries and influences how forensic anthropologists approach their investigations with the bereaved. Miguel noted:

In the case of Latin America, the main change was the incorporation of the families and communities. Is not just family. Most of the families in Latin America affected by violence are rural families, not urban families. And the way you consider family in a rural area is totally different than in the city. Families [means] the whole village is affected not just one specific family. And that changes a lot the way you interview, you talk with the family, you deal with the family. [...] Very often when

you identify someone in a village, a specific family, the whole village participates in the mourning process, or everybody knew about the incident. If I kidnap you and you live in a village here, not only your family will know, your neighbours and the whole village will know about that. In a city, you can [inaudible] one here, maybe the people here will know and nobody else. So, the rural area is totally different than the urban areas. And that affects also a lot how you investigate. Especially in local places like here [in Colombia], in Peru. The case of Peru is worse because [it] is like Guatemala. The affected population was the Indigenous population which [has faced] strong discrimination so it's more complicated to investigate.

Miguel highlighted the significant differences in how the family as a concept is perceived and how families were impacted in rural areas compared to urban areas in Latin America. In rural settings, families extend beyond individual households to encompass entire communities, where events affecting one family reverberate throughout the village. Unlike urban areas, in rural settings, information spreads rapidly among neighbours and the community at large. Moreover, the statement notes that rural families, particularly Indigenous populations in Peru and Guatemala, were disproportionately affected by violence compared to urban families. These facts underscore the need for specialised approaches by forensic anthropologists when interacting with Quechua-speaking communities in the Peruvian highlands. Chapter 3 explores this aspect in more detail.

In an interview about her work with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, forensic anthropologist Mercedes Doretti (2010, n.p.) summarises the complexity of trust in the contexts they work in:

A good relationship and the trust of the families of the victims with the forensic team is as important as the science that you are applying. If people don't trust you, if they don't believe in what you're doing, they're not going to believe in your results, or they will doubt them and they won't be able to, in a way, heal and close that story, particularly in human rights cases. And this is something we always try to transmit to other forensic people that have not worked in this field. It is very important to build up our relationship with the families of the victims. I think also that they have the rights of this.

I mean, I think that forensic people should always take into account that they are serving other people and that their investigation should be transparent and open. But in human rights cases, this is particularly important because the families of victims have, for the most part, been denied the right to know, the right to know what happened with their loved ones, where are they, what happened to them. And

often they've been told, 'You're lying,' or 'Your loved ones are lying. They didn't disappear. They are somewhere else. They are traveling around. They are with their comrades,' or things of that sort. So there's a lot of mistrust from the side of the families of victims towards forensic people that in our countries mostly work under the judiciary or the government or police.

Doretti highlights the critical importance of transparency and openness in forensic investigations, especially in human rights cases where families have been prevented from knowing the truth. This lack of information leads to mistrust towards forensic professionals, who, she notes, typically operate under government or judicial authorities.

In the next chapter, I turn to a deeper exploration of the phenomena of trust, trustworthiness and vulnerability in the context of forensic anthropology in Colombia and Peru. It will first illustrate the experiences of pioneering Peruvian forensic anthropologists and the complex historical and sociopolitical circumstances they had to navigate, before focusing on Colombia. Neighbouring Colombia and Peru have been called “*sociedad binacional*” and “*países hermanos*” – sister countries (Popolizio Bardales 2019, 15). Both nations have origins in a colonial social structure, share a predominantly Catholic population, and a historical background (Neira Samanez 2019). Moreover, both countries are highly polarised; their societies, especially the Indigenous communities and *campesinos*, having suffered immense losses during internal conflicts. While some argue that the Civil War in Peru has ended, significant social inequalities and the marginalisation of Indigenous communities persist (Yezer 2008). Colombia, although it has accomplished a peace deal with the guerrilla group FARC-EP<sup>41</sup> is marked by numerous on-going conflicts and social inequalities. The building of trust, in this sociopolitical context is, therefore, a complex matter. In the paper titled *Trust: A Concept Too Many*, Timothy W. Guinnane (2005, 1) puts forward the notion that “the idea of trust has been used so widely and loosely that it risks creating more confusion than clarity.” For the author, in relation to economics at least, the concept has become redundant as it does not offer any new or useful insights. I put forward the argument that in the social

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<sup>41</sup> *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, English: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army

sciences, more specifically, in the context of forensic anthropology in Colombia and Peru, trust is a crucial phenomenon which offers insights into the complex and, sometimes challenging, relationship between families of the missing and forensic anthropologists.

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## Chapter 3

We cannot choose to trust, it is not a decision.

– Trudy Govier, *Social Trust and Human Communities*

### 3 Encountering Complexities of Trust and Trustworthiness: Part 1 – Peru

Trust is part of our everyday life. German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1968) argues that trust is what makes our *Dasein* manageable – it is what gets us out of bed in the morning.<sup>42</sup> Without it, we would be frozen in fear and dread. For Luhmann, our general trust towards others, including strangers, is necessary to reduce life’s complexities. If we believe that human beings possess agency, or the freedom to act, there are numerous possibilities for how the future can play out. Can I, for instance, trust that the car, which has stopped for me to cross the street, stays put? We put trust in people every day, often subconsciously. In other contexts, trust is something that must be actively cultivated and produced.

In Colombia and Peru, the notion of trust adds a layer of complexity to the relationship between families of the missing and forensic anthropologists. The *Vertrauensfrage* – the question of trust – becomes a focal point. First, there is the matter of trusting an expert when they tell you that the organic material you see before you are the remains of your loved one. “One of the clearest and most important areas in which social trust exists,” Trudy Govier (1997, 52) argues, “is that of knowledge and belief. If we did not trust in the word of other people, we would not have beliefs beyond our own immediate

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<sup>42</sup> It has been noted that the field of trust research lacks consensus on the definition of trust (Ystanes 2016). Due to the phenomenon’s plasticity, there are numerous different concepts of trust. It has been defined, for instance, as a mechanism reducing social complexity and as social capital (Luhman 1968), as a precarious treasure (Govier 1997), or encapsulated interests (Hardin 2002).

experience.” Trusting in the words and knowledge of others becomes especially significant concerning expert knowledge in the context of forensic anthropological investigations. “To recognize a missing person in a bone,” Alexa Hagerty (2023, 157) states, “is a difficult act of imagination.” Imagine for a moment that one of your loved ones disappeared one day. Then after months, years, perhaps decades of searching, a forensic anthropologist plops a small box with human bones into your hands, telling you that this is your husband, your son, or your daughter. Oftentimes this might even only pertain to a handful of bones or less. Perhaps you feel relief that your missing relative has been found; that you can finally bring them home. Perhaps you feel anguish because the tiny bit of hope you clung to of them still being alive gets crushed at that very moment. Making the psychological switch between the image you have of your loved one when they were still alive, and what it is now presented to you is incredibly difficult. More so, how can you trust that those bones are your loved one when there is no resemblance to the person you knew? Forensic anthropologists know that one’s life history can indeed be “etched into [your] bones and teeth” (Soler et al. 2019, 196), an important variable in the identification process. You as a layperson may not know this. In this instance, you need to believe what the scientist tells you. And to believe, you need to trust.

Govier (1997, 59) notes that to “believe someone is to trust that person to tell the truth, to regard him or her as someone who is in a position to know, who does know, and who is sincerely communicating knowledge.” In other words, you must trust the forensic anthropologists and their skills, which allow them to make an identification, for you to believe that those remains are your family member. Under isolated circumstances, the task of believing the scientist when he tells you that those bones are your loved one is in itself difficult. After all, as we established, you are a layperson, not an expert. “We must assume,” Govier (1997, 81) states, “that the professionally qualified person has the competence to do what is needed and the integrity and motivation to act on behalf of the client. We are vulnerable; we submit to another’s judgement and technique; we know there is a risk; and yet we go ahead. In short, we trust.” Put differently, you are dependent on the scientists’ knowledge because, as professionals, they have the knowledge and skills that you do not possess. Applying this notion to forensic anthropological investigations in Latin America means that families of the missing are dependent on the

knowledge and skills of forensic anthropologists. The families need to trust them to have the abilities and integrity to find their loved one, identify their family member and present them with remains that are indeed their relatives. This dependency makes families vulnerable. Whilst the dependency on expert knowledge might generally be the case, Miguel highlighted the agency families possess in terms of acquiring scientific knowledge:

Very often the families in Latin America became like scientists because [...] they need to understand. ‘You are telling me DNA. Well, nobody explain[ed] me DNA, I start reading for myself [about] DNA.’ Or they receive training by some of us, for example [about] DNA.

Parallels might be drawn to Cheryl Mattingly’s (2014) ethnographic portrait of Dotty, the mother of a chronically ill child, Betsy. As a single mother to a gravely sick child, Dotty’s role resembles that of a “critical care clinician” (108). She had to become proficient in medical knowledge to not only manage her daughter’s disease but also to navigate her encounters with a range of doctors whom she did not always trust.

As pointed out, trust is linked to vulnerabilities. Govier (1997, 95) holds that “scientists are paradigm examples of ‘experts,’ professionals whose knowledge and power affect everyone.” When applied to the context of Latin America, a power imbalance emerges between forensic anthropologists, who are experts, and bereaved family members, who are laypersons. The power imbalance between layperson and expert, it may be argued, exists irrespectively of a country-specific context. Yet, in the case of Colombia and Peru, this issue is made more complicated by the history of violence in those countries. This is because many, if not most, victims of political violence in Colombia and Peru experience a kind of vulnerability that goes beyond the layperson-expert power imbalance, and which has existed before encountering forensic anthropologists. As pointed out by Mercedes Doretta (2010), transparency and openness are vital in forensic anthropological investigations, particularly in cases of human rights violations where families are denied access to the truth. The absence of information fosters distrust towards forensic experts, who commonly work under governmental or judicial institutions. As noted previously, establishing a relationship built on trust with the families of victims is not “a smooth or simple process” (Fondebrider 2016, 68). What contributes to the complexity of trust



towards forensic anthropologists in the Latin American context are far-reaching historical and sociopolitical factors. That is, the historical injury many victims are enduring, which speaks of systemic racism, oppression, the disinterest of the state, and atrocities committed by the very people and institutions we should be able to trust every day. The atrocities committed by state authorities, such as members of the police force and military, underscore the significance and complexity of fostering trust between state-employed forensic anthropologists and the families of the missing. In Colombia, forensic anthropologists working for state institutions are considered the state by association. As such, state-employed scientists need to demonstrate their trustworthiness.<sup>43</sup> Chapter 4 will delve into this matter, thereby outlining how forensic anthropologists demonstrate trustworthiness. First, however, this chapter will turn to Peru. There, the dehumanisation of Quechua-speaking communities rendered them more vulnerable to being perceived as “more killable” than other groups (Rojas-Perez 2017, 8). That history of violence, marginalisation, and dehumanisation has consequences for how forensic anthropological investigations take place, especially if forensic anthropologists were affiliated with, or perceived to be affiliated with, the Peruvian state. How can families of victims trust forensic scientists if they work for the same state that has contributed to that violent legacy? In Peru, this has meant two things. First, pioneering forensic anthropologists looking for the disappeared needed to work with or be affiliated with non-governmental teams. Second, the approach of the forensic anthropological investigations, specifically in terms of the collection of antemortem data, had to be adjusted to take into account the historical injury Indigenous communities of the Andean highlands have been enduring for hundreds of years, their cosmological understanding, and Native language.

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<sup>43</sup> For Hardin (2002, 32), trustworthiness often prompts trust. He notes, “if something conceptually entails or causes trustworthiness, then indirectly it might entail or cause trust.”

### 3.1 Forensic Anthropology in the Peruvian Andean Highlands

I conducted my first interview for my research project with Elena, a Peruvian social activist and former member of the non-governmental Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF). Liliana, also a former team member, had joined the interview and helped translate Spanish into English. EPAF, Elena noted, initially consisted of archaeologists since there is no academic training in forensic anthropology or forensic archaeology in Peru. That is why, she noted, in Peru, it is archaeologists who work with human remains and conduct excavations. In parallel, José Pablo Baraybar and Franco Mora (2015, 463), also former members of EPAF, point out that the “concept of forensic archaeology as an academic specialty does not exist in Peru and, as elsewhere in Latin America, the recovery of human remains from mass graves is performed primarily by archaeologists with a bioarchaeology or physical anthropology background, based on their investigations of skeletonised human remains from pre-Columbian or historical contexts.” The founding members of EPAF, Elena continued, were “part of a study group that was directed by Luis Guillermo Lumbreras [who] is one of the most important Peruvian archaeologists.”<sup>44</sup> When he was in Argentina in 1989, he learned about the work of the non-governmental Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF<sup>45</sup>) (Cardoza 2020). Upon his return to Peru, Lumbreras told his students about EAAF using archaeological excavation and recovery methods in the search for the missing. This insight initiated the creation of the first forensic anthropology team in Peru. Baraybar and Mora (2015, 463) note that in Peru, “forensic archaeological work began in 1997 with the creation of the so-called Technical Group within the National Coordinator of Human Rights Organisations (*Grupo Técnico de la Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos*), which later became the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (*Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense* – EPAF). Most of the members of EPAF came from

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<sup>44</sup> Translation from Spanish by Juliana.

<sup>45</sup> Spanish: *Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*

the ranks of human rights activism and professional training in archaeology and physical anthropology.” EPAF was legally formalised in 2001 (Cardoza 2020).

Carmen Rosa Cardoza (2020<sup>46</sup>, 151), a founding member of EPAF, highlights the team’s dedication to the integration of both: the “academy” (archaeology as a social science) and “activism” (protection of human rights). She adds that the team “introduced international standards and good practice in forensic anthropological investigation in the search for missing persons” (Ibid.). Following Peru’s Civil War (1980-2000), EPAF, together with governmental bodies like the Prosecutor’s and Ombudsman’s Office, was involved in the development of preparatory work for the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR<sup>47</sup>) (Ibid.). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created in 2001. My Peruvian informant Sara, who worked for EPAF, noted: “After the problems here in Peru, they established the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation. [...] [The director of EPAF] and his team was one of the few people in this country who had experience in forensic [investigations] because they worked in Balkans, Kosovo, and other countries. So, they came to Peru, they established the team, they worked for this commission.” The “problems” in Peru that resulted in the creation of a Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission were comprised of the aforementioned twenty-year Civil War, which will be briefly outlined in the next section.

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<sup>46</sup> See Cardoza (2020) for more detailed information on the creation of EPAF and the team’s work.

<sup>47</sup> Spanish: *Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación*

### 3.2 *Chaqwa* – “Suffering and Chaos”<sup>48</sup> in the Highlands

Only in two nations of Latin America – Guatemala and Peru – have the indigenous peoples been so completely and so systematically degraded.

– Dirk Kruijt,  
*Exercises in State Terrorism:  
The Counter-Insurgency Campaigns in Guatemala and Peru*

Lima is the centre of the power of Peru. [...] I have to say not only people of Lima, [also] people who live [on] the coast. People who live [on] the coast, they don't recognise people who live in the highlands [...] as equals.

– my Peruvian informant Maurice

On May 17, 1980, after twelve years of military dictatorship, Peru held its first democratic general elections (Rénique and Lerner 2019; Rojas-Perez 2017; La Serna 2012; Flindell Kláren 2000). The ballot boxes and registry were stored in Chuschi, a town in the Southern department of Ayacucho (Ibid.; Gorriti Ellenbogen 1999). The Maoist guerrilla insurgency *Sendero Luminoso*, or the Shining Path, seized the opportunity to commit the symbolic act of burning the ballots denoting the “rejection of the notion that the transition to civilian rule would liberate the Peruvian masses” (La Serna 2012, 142). The seeds for the group's mobilisation, with Abimael Guzmán as their founder and leader, had been planted centuries ago. Timothy James Bowyer (2019, 35) describes the environment that generated the Shining Path as a “disconnected, impoverished region [where] the majority indigenous population remained subject to an antiquated socio-economic structure, making them vulnerable to criminal and insurgent influence.” Hundreds of years of oppression, a sudden upsurge of schools and universities in the impoverished, illiterate, and exploited Andean region of Ayacucho in the 1960s and 1970s bearing a young, educated, entirely Indigenous community as well as a preceding military dictatorship created the perfect breeding ground for Guzmán's fanatic Maoist

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<sup>48</sup> Orin Starn (in Gavilán Sánchez 2015, xiv).

ideology (Arana 2019). Initially a professor at Ayacucho's Huamanga University, Guzmán was inspired by Mao's successful Chinese communist revolution. According to most versions of Marxist political thought, it is the urban proletariat who is thought to be the class that will give rise to a revolution. By contrast, Mao believed it was the peasantry who needed to be awakened (Arana 2019; La Serna 2012). Following Mao's political philosophy and strategy of a rural movement as a blueprint, Guzmán infiltrated the minds of susceptible students with his ideology. He strived for an egalitarian society absent of capitalism's inequalities (Starn in Gavilán Sánchez 2015); that is, "justice for the disenfranchised, bread for the hungry, respect for the downtrodden" (Gorriti Ellenbogen 1999, xiv). Goals that in the Shining Path's logic justified their use of extreme violence.

The rebellion would hurl Peru into an "increasing spiral of violence and cruelty" (Ibid., 241) that within two decades saw over 69,000<sup>49</sup> people killed (Rojas-Perez 2017; Fondebrider 2015a; La Serna 2012). Peru's Civil War differed from those of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala because in Peru most atrocities were committed by guerrillas rather than by members of state forces (Fondebrider 2015a; Yezer 2008). That being said, the Peruvian military cannot be absolved of responsibility for any war crimes. It has been argued that the regime of Fernando Belaúnde (1980-1985) did not address the upsurging violence strategically (Cardoza 2020). Proclaiming a state of emergency, the government gave "emergency or 'red'" zones, which were considered 'communist,' to the National Police of Peru and then to the military services (Ibid., 143; Rénique and Lerner 2019). Launching into "a brutal counterinsurgency campaign [... the state] granted the military unrestrained powers to confront the Maoists" (Rojas-Perez 2017, 30). Anthropologist Orin Starn<sup>50</sup>, who has done extensive research in Peru, neatly summed it up by stating: "The Shining Path viewed violence as justifiable means to the promised land of a Communist utopia. The army saw terror as the only way to stop a Communist takeover. The result was a bloodbath." He further noted: "Unlike, say, Argentina, the military did

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<sup>49</sup> An estimated 69,280 individuals were killed according to the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2003).

<sup>50</sup> Orin Starn answered the interview questions I sent him in writing.

not normally hold suspected guerrilla prisoners for long periods of time. They would usually kill them right away and bury their bodies in mass graves like the one below the army barracks of *Los Cabitos* in Ayacucho.” Anthropologist Isaias Rojas-Perez (2017, 13) compares the heinous acts of the Peruvian state to those conducted by the German dictatorial regime (1933-1945):

... some practices of state terror resulted in something resembling what Hannah Arendt called the “fabrication of corpses,” referring to the factory-like production of mass death in Nazi concentration camps. [...] the primary resemblance lies in the kind of death [...] not only were individuals’ lives taken away anonymously, but their deaths and the memory of their deaths were also eliminated. The victims were subjected to forms of asocial death – death without mourning, rituals of remembrance, and even grief.

In Peru, the majority of victims were Quechua-speaking peasants (*campesinos*) who lived in the Andean highlands (Cardoza 2020; Rojas-Perez 2017; La Serna 2012; CVR 2003<sup>51</sup>). The most affected region was the impoverished, illiterate and exploited department of Ayacucho (Rojas-Perez 2017; Kruijt 1999). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and investigations that followed the publication of its report in 2003, more than fifteen thousand people (were) forcibly disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s (Cardoza 2020). The Peruvian Legal Medicine Institute estimates that by “mid-2015, more than eighteen thousand Peruvians remained ‘disappeared’” (Rojas-Perez 2017, 12).

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Whereas one should be mindful not to attribute a homogenous vulnerability to Indigenous communities that pertains to all aspects of life, it has been argued that Quechua-speaking Peruvian highland communities (especially women) belong to the “most historically marginalized populations in the Andes” (Moulton and Carey 2023, 1; Távora and Lykes 2022). For the Native communities of Peru, oppression had been a reality long before the Spanish conquest. Natives of the *altiplano*, a high plateau in the Southeast Peruvian

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<sup>51</sup> *Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación*

highlands, “were conquered and forced into labor by the Incas and then reconquered and enslaved by Spanish conquistadors” (Arana 2019, 3). “The problem with this country,” my Peruvian informant Sara noted, is “we have a lot of racism, we have a lot of classism. [...] The capital has all the economic power, all the political decisions, and if you come one day to Peru you will realise: Lima, the capital of Peru, is like another country. [...] The people from the rural area for the government is like no people at all.” Similarly, my Peruvian informant Valentina pointed out, “Peru is a very divided country. I hate to say the word but racially, ok? There is like the *limeños*<sup>52</sup> or the white *mestizos*<sup>53</sup> versus the Andean *mestizos*. Now we are all *mestizos*, but we see each other as different countries inside a country.”

Peru is divided into three geographical areas: the *costa* (coastal lowland), the *sierra* (the highlands), and the Amazon basin, jungle or forest (Bowyer 2019; Werlich 1978; Descola 1968). This geographical division between the coastal area and the highlands corresponds to a division in Peruvian society – separating “the indigenous people located in the Andean highlands from the Spanish-speaking, mixed-blood *mestizos* and *criollos*<sup>54</sup> located along the coast” (Bowyer 2019, 24-25; Werlich 1978). This division was established with the Spanish conquistadores in 1532, who formed a “wealthy coastal elite”<sup>55</sup> (Bowyer 2019, 25). The spatial division did not only correspond with ‘rich versus impoverished’ communities and ‘Spanish versus Indigenous culture,’ but in the mind of the coastal colonists, with a racist one. Ruled by the Incas, Native Americans in Peru were no strangers to oppression. The Spaniards, however, “collapsed an intricate hierarchy into one powerless underclass” (Arana 2019, 98). After overthrowing the Inca Empire and seizing its treasures, the Indigenous population was forced into labour wherever the colonists desired, but especially into mines for extracting precious metals

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<sup>52</sup> A habitant of Lima, Peru.

<sup>53</sup> Generally used throughout Latin America, an individual of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry.

<sup>54</sup> Individual of full Spanish descent born in ‘Spanish’ America.

<sup>55</sup> The Spanish settled at the Peruvian coast for economic and strategic reasons such as trade. Additionally, the arid climate was advantageous for agriculture (Werlich 1978).

(Arana 2019). Although dangers, such as earthquakes, attempted raids by English and Dutch pirates, and rebellions by Native Americans, were imminent, it “took only a few decades,” Jean Descola (1968, 23) notes, “for Peru to assert herself as the most brilliant jewel of the Spanish overseas empire.” Under Spanish colonisation, Native Americans of Peru not only found their spiritual and physical lives disrupted. They were also relegated to an inferior position (Descola 1968). The Spanish conquerors considered the Indigenous peoples as “*gente sin razón*, ‘irrational people,’” and spoke of “Peru’s ‘Indian problem’” (Werlich 1978, 49 and 12). This “anti-Indianism” led to a social split that aligned with a geographical divide: the Native population in the rural highlands, and the white, *mestizo* upper-class in the coastal urban areas (Llamajha Mitma and Heilman 2016, 3; Bowyer 2019). It comes as no surprise then that in 1613 a Peruvian nobleman noted that the Indigenous peoples “have become distrustful as a result of their experiences and the losses they have suffered” (Felipe Guaman Pima de Ayala, in Simpson 1993, 101). Three hundred years later, Peru’s Indigenous peoples continued to endure exploitation and oppression. It was only the elite power structure that had changed; Republicans had succeeded the Spanish colonists (Werlich 1978). By 1845, the jewel of Spain’s former colonies had become an “object of international ridicule” and the “nation lost faith in itself” (Ibid., 75). Peru suffered from political instability and, according to its liberator Simón Bolívar, was not prepared for democracy (Arana 2019). Political instability has been a recurring theme in Peru’s modern history, which at the time of writing, saw the Peruvian government close to collapse and caused a journalist to conclude that “Peru is spiraling towards ungovernability” (Banda 2023, n.p.).

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Anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar (2013, 18) states, “The *definitions* of violence – mostly dealing with bodily mistreatment (disappearances, killings, rape and torture) and around a relatively recent past – as is usually the case in the context of transitional justice initiatives, render long-term continuities of structural forms of violence difficult to grasp.” After the Civil War, the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission acknowledged the country’s societal situation, thus situating violence not only in physical terms but also in structures of inequality. The Commission’s report



concluded that “in a broad historical context, the worst episode of violence in modern Peru had to be understood not *just* as the result of the political will of terrorist groups, but ultimately as a product of persisting unjust structural conditions in Peruvian society *as a whole*” (Rojas-Perez 2017, 8). These conditions led to a spiral of lethal violence situated within a “biopolitics of neglect” (Ibid.). The Peruvian state can be considered what Daniel M. Goldstein (2012) termed a ‘phantom state.’ The Peruvian state was absent and present at the same time. It was absent by failing to protect its citizens and by neglecting marginalised communities. One survivor of the Civil War notes: “We villagers do not trust the state; it didn’t protect us during the political violence and since returning to the village no one has helped us. The community is very bitter because there is no state support: my people are saying that only in the elections do we see the state and then it disappears along with all the promises they made; they forget us” (Bowyer<sup>56</sup> 2019, 147). Another survivor states that due to her experiences, “I no longer trust people; I only trust in God” (Ibid.). At the same time, it could be contended that the state existed as a phantom, allowing its agents – members of the police and armed forces – to murder those whom they are supposed to protect.

“By what mechanisms, precisely,” Paul Farmer (2003, 30) asks in relation to suffering Haitians, “do social forces ranging from poverty to racism become *embodied* as individual experience?” The answer, with regards to Peru, is given by Isaias Rojas-Perez (2017, 8) drawing on the conclusion of the Commission: “The racism, economic inequality, and social and cultural discrimination that continue to structure Peru’s social order made some Peruvians more “killable” than others.” Orin Starn stated a similar contention. He noted that the communities in the “mountains suffered by far the greatest level of violence from both the Shining Path and the military. Both, the general racist contempt for mountain peasants and the isolation of the countryside, made it easier to get away with. The life of a peasant simply did not count as much as that of white Liman in the eyes of society.” In this sense, in its absence, the state was indirectly present through

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<sup>56</sup> Bowyer carried out fieldwork between 2008-2011 in the Andean highlands.

the dehumanisation of vulnerable individuals. The state allowed acts of discrimination, violence, killings and forced disappearances through its extension, the Peruvian Army, and the police. In other words, members of both institutions committed atrocities under the protection of the state. In Tocache, for example, a region in Northern Peru, the Army took on a special position. British foreign correspondent John Simpson (1993, 189) states, it was “judge, jury and if necessary executioner in every case.” Members of the Shining Path were protected by the Army granting them impunity. In payment for several thousand dollars, captured guerrillas would get released. However, to “maintain a powerful presence in the area, it had to demonstrate that the threat of terrorism was a serious one; therefore it was not in the Army’s interest to defeat terrorism there” (Ibid., 188). Many disappearances were not associated with the war on terrorism but were related to outstanding debts to drug traffickers. Essentially, soldiers would act as hitmen, killing those who owed money to drug dealers and in turn taking their share of the outstanding debt (Simpson 1993). To disguise their atrocities, they would stage the killings as Shining Path’s doing. Even when the Army allowed the killings to be recognised as their doing, they did not have to face any consequences as “no one came from Lima to investigate” (Ibid., 189). The state denied the occurrence of massacres and disappearances by the Peruvian military, thereby “setting the script of denial and silencing that later governments would follow” (Rojaz-Perez 2017, 31).

Indigenous communities were in a constant state of insecurity and uncertainty because of the betrayal and deceit by the Shining Path as well as the Peruvian state. Concerning the arrival of investigators of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) in Ayacucho villages, Orin Starn noted: “I know some families were suspicious by then of so many outsiders coming – and wondering what good would come of it.” He pointed me to an article by Caroline Yezer (2008) about the reception of CVR investigators in an Ayacucho village. Although, she notes, “many of the Commission investigators were themselves survivors of the war, or victims who suffered directly from war atrocities,” (68) they were met with suspicion and distrust by the community. Yezer describes how some “insisted that it was part of a foreign plot to harm the peasants or was a disastrous deception by the Peruvian state” (273). In one example of deception, guerrillas disguised themselves as army officers to get revenge for the village joining the counter-insurgency.

Although many individuals fled as they feared the Shining Path *and* the Army, some fell victim to the fake soldiers' ploy. Under the belief that they were amongst allies, villagers told them how they fought off rebels. At this confession, the 'soldiers' revealed their true identities and started to shoot. While supporters of the Shining Path deceived by concealing their identity, the armed forces employed alternative means of deception. It has been stated that special counterinsurgency police attempted to bribe school children. In exchange for sweets, children were supposed to tell officers which of their teachers were "terrorists" (Yezer 2008, 286). This tactic reminds me of methods employed by members of the 'Stasi' (short for *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, Ministry for State Security) – the Stalinistic secret police, intelligence service and instrument of control in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). My mother told me that kindergarten children were asked to describe what the clock on the evening news looks like. Individuals associated with the Stasi would further enquire about the popular children's show 'Sandmännchen' (little sandman). As both, the clocks on the news, and the look and theme music of the 'sandman,' would differ between East and West television, members of the Communist dictatorship used children to discern whether their families would watch the forbidden West television. In doing so, they hoped to expose potential public enemies.

"We never watched West television. The doors were closed, I can tell you!"<sup>57</sup> my mother told me in a telephone conversation.<sup>58</sup>

I laughed, "So you *did* watch West TV! You just told me you didn't."

She clarified, "Well, officially we didn't. There was only one Western channel. And sometimes there even was a blockade on the TV set so you could not adjust the channel. Or they looked at the direction the antenna was pointing to. We had antennas on the roof."

I chuckled, "The antenna that was directed towards the West. The Stasi neighbours checked."

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<sup>57</sup> German: *Da wurden aber die Türen zu gemacht!*

<sup>58</sup> Personal conversation, February 7, 2023.

My mother explained, “That is why some took it underneath their roofs. Back then, you did not know who belonged to the Stasi. You could only speculate.”

“So, there was mistrust there,” I stated simply.

My mother agreed, “Of course! Most of the time, it was people, who you never would have thought capable [of working for the Stasi], even in your own family. We never looked at our Stasi records<sup>59</sup> – what do you want to know that for?”

The Communist dictatorship of the GDR created a finely spun web of mistrust, control, suspicion, and fear, similar to the one spun by the Peruvian state. As Yezer (2008, 275) notes, “By obscuring identity and meaning in their acts, both rebels and the state created a state of insecurity, in which no one knew who the enemy was or on what grounds the war was being fought.” About one of her earliest memories growing up, my Peruvian informant Sara noted:

You couldn’t talk about some topics. You couldn’t express yourself. Even my sister and me were like: ‘you cannot talk outside of the house about what we talk about inside of the house.’ The intelligence group from the government [were observant]. If someone asked me, ‘Well my mother is my mum, my father is my father, and we are a happy family.’ [she chuckled] Nothing more to answer. Because you could find your dead body [...]. That’s how we live.

Fondebrider (2015a) notes that families might be scared to talk to forensic anthropologists because they fear political consequences, or because perpetrators might live in the community, and they fear speaking would cause retaliation. The phenomenon of *intimate enemies* as proposed by Kimberly Theidon (2013) contributes to the fostering of mistrust and suspicion. “One particularity of civil wars,” Theidon (2013, xiii) notes, “is that foreign armies do not wage the attacks. Frequently the enemy is a son-in-law, a godfather, an old schoolmate, or the community that lies just across the valley.” For Peruvians this meant that “former enemies would be left living side by side,” creating a “volatile social world” (Ibid., xii and xiii). Consequently, the war did not only exacerbate the already strained relationship with the state, but it also destroyed social fabrics, or

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<sup>59</sup> Individuals of the former GDR have the right to view the documents the Stasi created about them.

‘thick relations’<sup>60</sup> as they have been called. One survivor notes: “The military came and took people away, they lied and people disappeared. Many families don’t know what happened to their missing. After that people began to hate each other, accusing each other of being terrorists and others were saying that they were in the military and killed innocent people” (Bowyer 2019, 58). In the GDR, the Communist dictatorship created suspicion and mistrust, causing people to be wary of everyone. This ultimately led to the destruction of social ties or kept people from establishing them in the first place. My mother does not want to read her Stasi file for fear of finding out that someone she trusted might have been a Stasi spy. In the case of Peru, however, there was not only suspicion at work, or the *fear* of what people close to you might be capable of. Instead, Peruvians witnessed first-hand the atrocities committed by their relatives, friends, and neighbours (Theidon 2013).

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During Peru’s internal conflict, individuals of Indigenous communities were brutally murdered, disappeared, confined, tortured, sexually assaulted, and hunted down. They were forced out of their homes to seek shelter in the mountains, sleeping on rocks and in caves, oftentimes escaping to the city. They were deprived of basic human rights, of food, shelter, sanitation, adequate health care and clean drinking water. Indigenous communities experienced the loss of social and communal ties, of former values and beliefs. As one survivor notes: “Before the violence we were closely united [...] but after the military arrived people turned rebellious; the military worked people to death, both men and women. Then the military left and there was no more unity among us and we did not want anything more to do with the community” (Bowyer 2019, 104). People lived in constant uncertainty with the threat of death by guerrillas and the military alike looming over them. “We slept with our shoes on,” one survivor recalls, “in case we had to escape in a hurry. We lived on the run going from hill to hill; we fled because the Shining Path

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<sup>60</sup> “Thick relations,” for Avishai Margalit (2002, 7) “are grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman.”

could have arrived at any moment” (Ibid., 68). Another survivor tells of members of the military forcing her family into the hills under the threat that if they did not leave, the soldiers would kill them. Another survivor holds: “The police were the same as the terrorists as they too were responsible for people’s disappearance. The police took my brothers away and I have never seen them since and this is why I hate them” (Ibid., 161). Circumstances like these, Bowyer (Ibid., 65) argues, lead to the “need for prolonged vigilance [...] and feelings of fear, mistrust and isolation” as well as a sense of “losing trust in the world” becoming inevitable.

While the Civil War is officially over, the voices collected by Bowyer demonstrate that the victims’ suffering continues.<sup>61</sup> Due to the “psychic wounds of political violence,” many survivors, Bowyer argues, experience “nervousness, fearfulness and panic, especially when faced by reminders of the political violence, such as the arrival of strangers in their community” (93 and 110). One individual notes: “People here do not feel safe, we are very anxious about anyone who enters the community; we know all about the (current) attacks in nearby villages. There is a climate of insecurity...” (110). It is in this “climate of insecurity” that forensic anthropologists began their work. After enduring decades of oppression, racism, and governmental neglect that have echoed through the centuries to modern-day Peru, along with twenty years of massacres, disappearances, sexual violence, and forced displacement by guerrillas and supposed protective institutions, Indigenous communities are now being approached by forensic experts from the coast, who claim to want to offer assistance – even if this “now” comes twenty years after the fact. My Peruvian informant Sara explained:

When we talk about rural areas, we are talking about people who speak their Native language. We are talking about people, most of [whom] didn’t get more than [a] primary or secondary level [education]. We are talking about people who are living without electricity or maybe electricity by hours, without internet, with few communication access. We are talking about people who even if they are Peruvian, as me, their cosmo[logical] vision, how they conceive the world around

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<sup>61</sup> Further, Yezer (2008, 284) found that “terror now operates in the less visible contexts of low-intensity policing in the Andes.”

them, is not mine. *So maybe the first question [we should ask] before [asking] if they saw us as a scientist, [is] if they saw us, I mean, the Peruvian forensic team, as them. And the answer for sure is 'no.'* They were the others. They were the others who came after twenty years<sup>62</sup> from the disappearance of some of your relatives to [ask] you questions, to say that they want to help, they want to support, they want to find the body of the disappeared people, I mean, ... using a translator.

Sara expressed a differentiation between Indigenous people from the Andean highlands and forensic scientists by referring to the latter as *the others*. In anthropological terms, this speaks to *orientalism*. Initially coined by Edward Saïd (1978) to describe a power relation whereby European/Western identity is seen as superior to that of Eastern cultures (the 'Orient'), the concept of 'orientalism' has become a synonym for 'othering' – a binary relation between an 'Us-and-Them.' As previously outlined, the notion of the 'other' has been built and reinforced in Peru since the Spanish conquest. Several centuries later, and after a devastating Civil War, finding your loved ones necessitates that you open up to 'the other,' that you tell them about the tragedy you experienced (and still are experiencing), and about the loved ones you lost. In short, you need to trust. My Peruvian informant Valentina told me: "Even if we are Latino-Americans, many people that, not all the people, but the people that I have worked with are *limeños*, are from Lima. So Lima is an island in Peru, is more occidental way of thinking. And when we go to the Andean communities, we are really, really different. So, we have to deal also with this cultural clash, when we are working with them. Even though we are all Peruvians, but we are different cultures." Liliana translated what Elena said as follows: "The most important [thing] is the trust of the forensic [anthropologist] with the relatives of the disappeared people. If you have that link of connection that will help you a lot in your work. So, the Peruvian forensic team takes it very carefully this relationship with the relatives of the disappeared people."

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<sup>62</sup> EPAF carried out the first forensic anthropological investigation in the Sillaccasa case in the District of Chuschi, for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the search of disappeared persons of the internal conflict. During this investigation, they exhumed and identified eight missing persons (Cardoza 2020). It is noteworthy that this was in 2002; sixteen years after the forced disappearance.

How did pioneering forensic anthropologists gain the trust of Indigenous communities in a climate marked by centuries of suffering and distrust? Fortunately, as pointed out by Govier (1997, 48), “Acting as trustworthy persons is something we can do.” For Peruvian forensic anthropologists demonstrating trustworthiness involved positioning themselves as experts who were notably *not* state agents (because they worked as non-governmental teams). It also involved meeting the Indigenous communities with respect and treating them as human beings with their own stories, and not treating them merely as victims or as statistics. Respect nurtures trust. Respect was not only given by considering Indigenous individuals as humans but also by considering their cultural needs. “When a *limeño* goes to the highlands,” Valentina noted, “they don’t see you as a friend. You have to gain their respect to work with them. The psychology branch of the team [has] to work with them first and then prepare them to [work with] the forensic intervention.” Valentina continued, “if they saw me, even though I am not like white white [...], I’m white for them. So, I’m a *gringa* for them. So, we have to be careful to not do something that they think that we are doing [...] unrespectfully.”

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### 3.3 Humanising Encounters with the Non-Governmental Team

My informant Sara noted that “the first important topic [is that] they were not part of the government.” As Delhey and colleagues (2023, 1) suggest, “In many [...] situations it is easier to be trusting from a position of security.” In the case of Peru, “existential security” (Ibid., 2), or the generalised trust towards our *Mitmenschen* we engage in every day, was undermined during the Civil War when anyone could have been an enemy; friends, neighbours, guerrillas dressed as military, members of the military themselves. Montgomery and colleagues (2008, 623) speak of an “imposed vulnerability,” which they describe as “an objective state of exposure to events that are difficult or impossible to ignore, over which an individual has little or no control, and which can lead to serious, even life-threatening, harm to an individual.” Although they speak of events such as natural disasters or terrorism, I would like to expand this concept to on-going phenomena. Disasters trace the social structures, or “social fault lines,” of inequality and



vulnerability (Farmer 2011, 170; Oliver-Smith 2002). Systemic racism and dehumanisation had already been in place before the Civil War. It imposed a vulnerability on Quechua-speaking highlanders that rendered them perceived as more killable than others during the country's internal conflict. The Peruvian government continues to neglect its Indigenous peoples. "When we trust in institutions," Delhey and colleagues (2023, 3) hold, "we believe that they will 'deliver' [...] and do so with benevolence and integrity." Hannah Arendt speaks of "islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty" (Arendt 1958, 244). In the case of Peru, the government and its agents could not be considered "islands of certainty" in times of conflict as they were part of the problem. What should have been "islands of certainty" for the Indigenous communities perhaps never have been if we consider the systemic racism, neglect by the government and atrocities committed by agents of the state. Killings and forced disappearances carried out by the state itself may change the perception and role of the forensic scientist investigating the deaths. Luis Fondebrider (2015b, 32) differentiates between "traditional" forensic cases and investigations of cases of political violence. He notes that regarding the former, the person responsible for the death is usually an individual acting independently, without the backing of the state, "perhaps killing somebody as a result of a robbery or accident," or even an individual taking their own life (Ibid.). Put differently, the death is usually not attributed to political, ethnic, or religious motives. However, where the reasons behind the death are of political, ethnic, or religious nature, "the majority of murders are usually committed by the state, or in collusion with it, as part of a documented, organized, and often systematic plan" (Ibid.). In both scenarios, forensic anthropologists may work for the state – but their roles are perceived differently. While, according to Fondebrider, in "traditional" cases the forensic scientist "is not associated with the person who has committed the murder but is regarded as an ally who helps the investigation," in cases of political violence often "no distinction is made between the state apparatus that committed the crimes and the state that, years later, has to investigate them" (Ibid.). It comes as no surprise then that it was important for Quechua-speaking highland communities that the first forensic anthropologists were of a non-governmental team.

The dehumanisation and neglect by the Peruvian state make humanising encounters of utmost importance. The first article of the German constitution (Basic Law) of the German Federal Republic reads: *Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar. Sie zu achten und zu schützen ist Verpflichtung aller staatlichen Gewalt.* – ‘The dignity of man is inviolable. It is the duty of all State powers to respect and protect it.’ It is an imperative first article; a reminder not to repeat the incomprehensible atrocities committed by the National Socialist regime. I shy away from comparing the systematic extermination of peoples committed by the National Socialist state to other human rights abuses, as Hannah Arendt (1958, 1951, 444) points out: “There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death.” There are, however, aspects that both, the systemic racism of the Nazi regime and the Peruvian government share, and which lead to so much suffering: the state committing human rights violations, and the dehumanisation and absolute disregard of the lives of specific groups of people. I asked Sara if the communities in the countryside feel forgotten by the Peruvian government. “Completely,” she responded and stressed, “It’s not *feel*, they *were*,” thereby highlighting that it is not a subjective assessment but indeed a fact.

Sara lived in a rural area in Peru for two years where she led a governmental project. Alluding to repatriation attempts, she noted that for the government it “didn’t matter what happened there, they only want to present results like reports to say, ‘We give you the money, I did this, photo please,’ and that’s it.” I asked her why the government does not care about the rural communities. “Because,” she responded, “it’s very hard to say, but the people from the rural area for the government is like no people at all.” What Sara referred to is an experience marginalised peoples have been subjected to across the world for centuries. It can be framed under many concepts, but which essentially point to the same phenomenon. What the Peruvian Indigenous peoples are experiencing can be described, for instance, as dehumanisation. “Dehumanized people,” David Livingstone Smith (2011, 264) explains, “are imagined as subhuman animals, because they are conceived as having a subhuman essence. [...] They are imagined [...] as] creatures that elicit negative responses, such as disgust, fear, hatred, and contempt, and are usually thought of as predators, unclean animals or prey.” Dehumanisation, simply put, can act as

a justification to kill. In this sense, it provides “ethical scaffolding”<sup>63</sup> (Brodwin 2013, 134) as it aids the perpetrator from seeing the act of killing a ‘subhuman’ as immoral. In biopolitics, drawing from Ancient Greece, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben speaks of the difference between *zoë* (bare/animal life or life in the simplest sense) and *bios* (political life, a life worth living, human as citizen with rights) (Agamben 2000). In this sense, Peruvian Indigenous people were made *zoë*, thereby reduced to bare life. However, even the right to bare life was taken away from them by considering them as ‘killable.’<sup>64</sup>

To gain the Indigenous peoples’ trust, Sara said, it was important to acknowledge them as what they truly are; that is, as human beings with their own distinct culture:

... give them the space to talk, to express, they treat them as people, as person. They were not numbers, they were people. And you can feel it, I mean, you can feel when someone come[s] to you just to ask you for information and then you are just a number, another statistic, which is not the same when someone [comes] to you and say[s], ‘I want to hear your history.’ It’s important.

To foster a connection based on trustworthiness, the forensic experts needed to adjust to the communities’ pace “because they have their own schedule, so you will have to adapt your work and your time to them,” Liliana translated what my informant Elena said. Elena emphasised the importance of not treating the families and their stories as mere

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<sup>63</sup> A notion used by Paul Brodwin (2013, 134) which describes “the means by which people preserve the felt legitimacy of their daily work.”

<sup>64</sup> Examples of dehumanisation can be found throughout history. During the Vietnam War, dehumanisation allowed Vietnamese peoples – combatants and civilians alike – to be “hunted down like ‘rabbits’ or ‘squirrels’ without moral scruples” (Greiner 2009, 128). Apparent ‘subhumans’ (a term used by the Nazi regime) are reduced to mere numbers on a piece of paper, or goals to achieve on a drawing board in exchange for money or vacation as was the case in the U.S. military. In another instance, in the Third Reich, human beings were demoted to “living corpses” (Arendt 1958, 1951, 447). In German concentration and extermination camps, Arendt (Ibid., 443) holds, “murder [was] as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat.” The status of individuals, it might be argued, even got extended and reduced beyond Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ because it has been noted that it was as though the captured individuals “had never been born” (Ibid., 444). Humans, Arendt argues, were “treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead and some evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death before admitting them to eternal peace” (445).

cases to be processed. Instead, she stressed the need to approach them as equals on a human level. Martin Buber (1995) teaches us that if we encounter our fellow human beings as ‘It’ – as it happens when dehumanising people – we alienate ourselves from the individual and as such from our *Mitmenschen*. In this regard Roland Neyerlin (n.d., 5) states, “*Bliebe es bei dieser Entfremdung, wir würden unser Menschsein verfehlen.*” – ‘If this alienation remained, we would miss our humanity.’ Lilitiana translated what Elena said as follows: “The relatives of the disappeared people, the people who were disappeared, feel very sad about the treatment that they received from the government, because of the ways and the forms that they operate and the relation with them. When a judge goes to those places, the way that they speak with the relatives is like doing like a checklist, doing like a police [check]. This is not the way to establish connection with the relatives of those people. You need to take your time, you need to look for an isolated space where you can talk with the people.” Honesty and transparency about the limitations of forensic anthropological investigations were also important: “The Peruvian forensic team was very close with the relatives and always remarked to them the limitations of the forensic work, because you cannot do all the analyses that you wish [you could] and you have limitations so they always were clear with relatives: we are going to do this but this is our limitations.”

My informant Valentina noted that at the beginning, Andean highland communities did not “trust governmental institutions because they think that they could not work well and try to hide things because the main perpetrators in some cases was the state.” However, with time, she noted, “and the Public Ministry working many many cases, I think that way of thinking is no longer valid. So, people trust, I think, the governmental teams. But they feel more comfortable working with people that speak Quechua, people that speak Quechua are not *limeños* usually. [...] If they saw you speaking Quechua, they know that they are one of them. So, they will be open to you.”

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### 3.4 Speaking Quechua and Collecting Information

According to the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the majority of victims of the internal conflict were from rural areas and spoke a Native language as their mother tongue (La Serna 2012). Sara explained, “The Peruvian team has the experience to try to find a person in the community to let them speak their language. That’s very important.” In parallel, my Peruvian informant Maurice, a former EPAF member, stated, “Yeah, for sure, we have this language barrier. And sometimes this was the reason that we are [accompanied by] a person who speaks Quechua. For translation.” Valentina noted, “Because we [did] many cases with Quechua speakers and I don’t speak Quechua, I only watched from far to other people that speak Quechua. So, it was moving but not that much for me because I was not directly involved with the conversation.” Quechua is described as “una lengua viva” – a living language – and is spoken by around eight million people in Latin America (Mujica Bermúdez 2019, 139). In Peru, there are currently around 3,799,780 Quechua speakers, according to the national 2017 INEI<sup>65</sup> census (Ibid.). This is an increase of around thirteen percent from individuals that identified as Quechua speakers ten years earlier (Ibid.). This growing trend, it has been stated, relates to an increase in writings and publications in Quechua (Ibid.). Finding someone who speaks the Native tongue opened a door into the Indigenous communities for members of EPAF, but it was also important in terms of gathering information. Although they could use a translator, this is not the ideal approach. Liliana translated what Elena said in this regard as follows:

[Elena] said something very important. [...] [It is] always [...] recommended to do the interview in the mother tongue. Don’t use a translator. Because using a translator, like us for example in this moment, we are losing information [...] We can lose part of the information in this translation. In this interview, it is not a big deal because we work and answer, work and answer. However, if you are taking information for a justice case you need to recover as much as you can especially focus in perimortem or antemortem lesions or injuries. And the best way to do it is

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<sup>65</sup> Spanish: *Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática*, English: National Institute of Statistics and Informatics

in the language of those people and also, if you are going to use a translator prefer to use a local translator of that community.

Antemortem data collection can always be a challenging process that requires the adaptation of standard procedures to the given context. In this sense, the work with Indigenous communities did not create a unique challenge. This is exemplified, for instance, by the Tsunami mass casualty incident of 2004, which was mentioned previously by Miguel. Whilst many victims were identified through Interpol's international standard Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) procedures, that is, through "personal, medical, dental, DNA and fingerprints – forwarded by the governments of [mostly Western] countries with missing citizens" (De Valck 2006, S16), procedures for the collection of antemortem data needed to be adjusted for "non-Asian victims" (Ibid., S17). Antemortem fingerprints, for instance, could only be used for comparison for victims from countries that have ID identification through fingerprints. Moreover, in the case of unregistered Burmese migrants who lived in "marginalized and impoverished migrant communities" (De Valck 2006, S17), special care needed to be exercised when collecting antemortem data from relatives and friends of the victims due to fear, and real possibility, of arrest or deportation. Therefore, the collection process and produced records needed to be kept confidential (De Valck 2006). In parallel, in the Peruvian context, the procedures for antemortem data collection were adjusted to the situation of Indigenous communities. Liliana noted in her translation of Elena's account:

To work in the rural area of Latin America has a lot of challenges, you cannot use a photo for example. Most of those people, they will not have a photo. You will [not] find a dental register either because they don't go to the dentist as frequently as us. So definitely to work in the rural areas of Latin America confront you with a big challenge. However, they try to adapt protocols and also register format and adapt [that] information to the needs of each population. For example, [to] describe the type of clothes that the people wore during the disappearance. [...] Sometimes you don't have the same language of the relative of the people so even if you use a translator you need to establish a graphic form to be clear what is the other person trying to explain and if you understand the same. So, they adapt everything, protocols, register, graphic register and others.

Parra and colleagues (2020) note that in Peru, an *emic* approach is used to collect data, whereby attention is paid to the perspectives and worldview of the particular culture,

rather than trying to understand matters through an *etic* or external framework. As Elena explained, the description of clothes (and colours) can differ between Quechua-speaking highlanders and experts from the coast, therefore methods of data collection were adapted. Clothes of the victims would be laid out for family members to identify. It has been found that at these presentations, family members create meaningful spaces to remember their missing relatives. These gatherings serve as important opportunities for relatives to feel connected to the individuals they have lost, and for both “individual and collective memories” to be strongly evoked (Ibid., 644.). Social anthropologists take advantage of these occasions to gather additional information using “emic categories,” without disrupting the moments of remembrance (Ibid.). This data is then utilised as a valuable resource in the process of identification.

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### 3.5 Encountering Various Levels of Trust

My informant Sara hails from a rural area in Peru and not the city, so I wondered if, in comparison, it would be more difficult for me as a *gringa* to establish trust with locals than for her. “I would say no,” she said, “because you are a *gringa* which means you came with the truth and with the most developed methods, and with the neutral aspect, and you came from a developed country. So maybe your work would be more trustful, more reliable, you know. And the people will prefer to see what a *gringa* has to say about something more than what a Peruvian has to say about something.” I am perplexed. “Really?!” I exclaimed. I feared that a foreigner might be considered as having a white hero complex when aiding Indigenous communities in Latin America. Sara noted that, depending on the context, being a *gringa* could be of advantage:

That plays to your favour here in Latin America. Remember, in Latin America most of the people feel less than the *gringa* people. [...] I will give an example. One time they developed an advertisement [...], you know, marketing about odontologist. They put people with nice smile because they want to sell a dental tooth [paste]. And the people [from the marketing company] say: ‘No, we are going to this country, so we have to use local models, you know, with the colour of the skin, the typical face.’ Makes sense, right? The people didn’t want to buy the tooth cream. And you ask, why? And when they ask to the local people they said,

‘well, if the white people use the other [cream], it’s because the other should be better than the other cream.’ Remember that we were for a long time a Spanish colony. So, [to] be *gringa* could be something negative, yes, could be, but also if you [have] other times of priority, [it could be] other advantage.

Sara differentiated between various contexts in which a foreign scientist may be considered more trustworthy in comparison to Peruvian experts, and vice versa. She stated, “If you came here even with zero experience, the people will hear you because you are from the developed country so you must know things that we don’t know. But you will say: ‘But I don’t have experience you could teach me.’ ‘No, please, you receive classes, you have a PhD, you write in English so, you are better than us.’ Not all of them but a lot of people could think that way.” As a white, educated *gringa* I might be perceived as “better” than them – what Sara seemed to describe is the internalisation of what rural Indigenous communities have been told for decades; first by Spanish colonialists then by urban Peruvian governments. The assimilation of negative opinions about one’s community seems similar to Hondurans internalising opinions rooted in U.S. imperialism. Adrienne Pine (2008, 4) notes, “Hondurans form their ideas of themselves largely in opposition to what they are not – their Other [...and...] what most Hondurans are primarily aware of *not* being is from the United States.” As a result, they describe their “imagined community” as one overshadowed by negative associations; that is, violence, poverty, (economic) instability and generally lacking in advancement as compared to the United States (Ibid., 27). In other words, they seem to have internalised the characteristics of what is now, especially by Western contexts, understood under the term ‘third-world country.’ Concerning Peru, for Sara, some Peruvians might see themselves in the opposition of ‘not being *gringos*.’ *Gringo* is slang, generally denoting a foreigner, but depending on the Latin American country it can describe specifically a fair-skinned (foreigner and) US-American. I told her that I assumed people from rural areas would trust her because she is Peruvian rather than me as a *gringa*. Sara held that it depends on the “kind of level of trust.” She explained:

If you want someone to open the door of the house, to their history, to be more close, more open to you, yes, definitely, that kind of trust, yes. Especially if you are a woman because as a woman you will have [to] enter and [make] contact with another woman, I mean. If I were a local man who want[s] to approach to receive



information from a local woman they would be reserved because of the gender issues. I'm not going to talk about the LGTBQ, nothing of that, just the basic level. That's one level of trust but that's not the only trust that you will realise. The other level is ok you finish the case, you finish analys[ing] the bones, and when that happened who could have more trust? The *gringa* or the local people?

Govier (1997, 5) points out that “Trust on the whole does not mean trust in every context.” Similarly, Russell Hardin (2002, 89) notes, “Like trust, distrust is also a matter of degree.” While I may trust my roommate to pick me up from a doctor’s appointment, I would not trust them to look after my cat. In parallel, Sara proposed that who is more trustworthy to the Indigenous families – a local or a *gringa* – depends on the social context in which trust is required. Regarding getting access to the community, a Peruvian might be considered more trustworthy. Being a female scientist can be of advantage when talking to women of the community because of the “gender issues,” according to Sara. While Sara did not go into more detail as to what these issues pertain, it has been noted that women from highland communities have faced racialised gendered marginalisation, exacerbated by patriarchal systems and the Civil War (Távora and Lykes 2022). Rojas-Perez (2017, 148 and 149), however, found that the state terror against Indigenous communities led to the release of a “female political agency,” and Quechua-speaking women “started to walk in search of their missing relatives.” Some mothers felt their husbands failed as fathers “and betrayed their sons by not responding as expected when the lives of those sons were at stake,” for instance when they did not act in the process of a son being kidnapped by members of the military (Ibid., 159).

Returning to the matter of different levels of trust, *gringos*, according to Sara, might be perceived as more trustworthy in comparison to Peruvians from the coast when it comes to the scientific, technical aspects such as doing analysis and writing reports. For Sara, when it comes to the scientific aspects of the work, *gringos* might even be considered more trustworthy than members of a Peruvian non-governmental team. “It’s like a mix,” Sara explained. “If you want to play with the ‘how the people think here in Peru,’ at least, you will create a team with that characteristic. Local people prefer [individuals] who speak their native language with the same colour of their skin, could be better even more if they came from the same area than the people who are studying because they will be

more inside of the reality but for to give the result, the proper analysis, and all that DNA etc. etc. yes, a *gringa* could [inaudible] feel better.”

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### 3.6 Addendum – “EPAF Was a Beautiful Illusion.”<sup>66</sup>

In 2002, the relationship between EPAF and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission officially broke off and EPAF as a technical forensic anthropology team started to disappear. My informant Miguel explained:

Peru basically started investigating in 2001 when created Truth Commission. They produced a report. There was a fight and then the Truth Commission called [the Argentine] and the Guatemalan team. [...] Then EPAF continued working, but also the Medico-legal Institute of Peru in Lima create[d] a forensic team to deal with these cases. They are based in Ayacucho. And they have been recovering bodies. EPAF slowly goes down down down down. [...] Today, they are not doing anything in terms of exhumations and the work is in the hands of the Medico-legal Institute. And the forensic team of the Minister of Justice. There are two teams now in Peru. They are working together in cases. But EPAF was in the late 90s, early 2000, and the EPAF almost disappeared.

My informants highlight positive aspects of EPAF such as the team’s interactions with organisations in foreign countries providing valuable international exposure and learning opportunities, and the team being like family. The challenges for EPAF were manyfold, however, according to my informants, including interpersonal issues within the team, problems with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and financial support. One informant noted: “The team functioned with their problems, but they functioned as a family. [...] They helped each other, they supported each other. But the ego inside of that team was something that [was] very difficult to support.”

According to Parra et al. (2020, 638), with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ending their work with the publication of their final report in late August of 2003, “a new phase of development in the history of forensic anthropology and the search for missing

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<sup>66</sup> Quotation by my informant César.

persons began in Peru.” The Andean Center for Forensic Anthropological Investigations (CENIA<sup>67</sup>) and the Specialised Forensic Team (EFE<sup>68</sup>) were created (Ibid.). Julia told me that “from 2002, there were [...] two or three teams. One formal team, there was EPAF [...]. And then maybe in 2004 or 5 it was from CENIA. That was another team. In 2003, the state actor, the Truth Commission ended their labour. The Public Ministry<sup>69</sup> decided to form a governmental forensic team, and it is EFE, *Equipo Forense Especializado*<sup>70</sup>. [...] So, there were three teams, only three. [...] By 2009, Julia stated, CENIA was not working anymore and there was only EFE (of the Public Ministry) and EPAF. My Peruvian informant César noted that when EPAF ended its relationship with the Commission, the EFE took over: “From that moment, all the international financial support was direct[ed] to the public organisation, to the EFE. The civil organisation cannot build an approach to the problem because the EFE was always in every step of the process. If you see the law in this moment, you see the EFE stayed in the process. Always.”

In 2016, the Peruvian government instituted Ley n° 30470 – *Ley de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas en el Contexto Violencia 1980-2000 Peru* (Law on the Search for Disappeared Persons). This law mandated the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights<sup>71</sup> to implement a National Search Plan with a humanitarian focus, along with managing the National Registry of Disappeared Persons and Burial Sites (Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos, n.d.). Under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, this law also saw the implementation of the General Office for the Search of Missing Persons (DGBPD<sup>72</sup>) which investigates the fate of missing and deceased individuals within a humanitarian framework (Parra et al. 2020). Julia noted that “with

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<sup>67</sup> Spanish: *Centro Andino de Investigaciones Antropológico Forenses*

<sup>68</sup> Spanish: *Equipo Forense Especializado*

<sup>69</sup> Spanish: *Ministerio Público Fiscalía de la Nación*, English: Public Ministry – Public Prosecutor’s Office

<sup>70</sup> English: Specialised Forensic Team

<sup>71</sup> Spanish: *Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos (MINJUSDH)*

<sup>72</sup> Spanish: *Dirección General de Búsqueda de Personas Desaparecidas*

this law, you don't have the need to have the official governmental investigation going on to look for your family. You can search for them only because they are missing. Because in the legal part of the Public Ministry you need to have *denuncia*." *Denuncia* translates to 'complaint' or 'accusation,' 'to file a report against someone.' If you file a report to the Public Ministry, or Public Prosecutor's Office, looking for the missing person is not their priority, Julia noted. They do not need to look for the missing person, she explained, it is "enough to look for the person that did this." However, with this new law, it was not necessary anymore to file a report with the Prosecutor's Office, which might not look for the missing, as under the National Search Plan a humanitarian, non-judicial approach to finding the disappeared was introduced.

In their 2015 article, Baraybar and Mora note that EPAF's work "focuses in three main areas: forensic expertise, historical memory, and training and human development [...and] EPAF comprises 12 staff including four archaeologists/anthropologists, one forensic doctor, one geneticist, one historian, one outreach worker, two project designers and one administrator" (464). Although new members joined EPAF over the years, they would soon leave for other institutions. Consequently, EPAF as a technical forensic anthropological team does not exist anymore, according to my informants. My informant Mike noted, "I don't know who works for EPAF. If you ask me who *works* for EPAF, I have no idea. Who *used to work* for EPAF? I could name 5, 6, 7, 8 people but now they work for the ICRC." He continued, "It's weird, but I think it's pragmatism. I think that's part of the problem of the survivability of NGOs. When the government assumes some degree of responsibility then suddenly people are tempted to, you know, to go to the other side. [...] You know, they want a reliable job. I think with NGOs there's uncertainty. [...] 'Am I gonna have a contract the next year?' I think that's true for forensic anthropologists more than anything. Forensic pathologists work for the state, you know, almost exclusively. Anthropologists tend to be consultants. And when you are a consultant, you're worried about your job security. So, you tend to, you know, shift."

Valentina highlighted problems with acquiring the necessary funding to continue their work, which resulted in members leaving the team for job opportunities with other institutions: "Because EPAF is an NGO, they have problem with funding. In some

occasions, the Ministry of Justice pay EPAF to work with them in some cases. But the problem now is EPAF no longer exist[s] because [...] their experts have migrate[d] to the Ministry of Justice or to the Red Cross. [...] Because of the funding.” Valentina told me that EPAF was always in need of external funding, and when funds were not available, they were not able to pay team members, so people left to find other places to work. My Peruvian informant Óscar explained that at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Peru and its NGOs received international financial support, but this funding stopped once Peru started growing economically. He explained, “that’s why many NGOs were falling apart, were closed, but EPAF was one of the NGOs that survived.” He told me that “EPAF is not closed today but they are working at the minimum. With a minimum team.” Valentina noted that as a result of people leaving, due to financial instability, “there is no forensic people in EPAF.” Thus, for her, while EPAF may technically still exist, she said that “EPAF is not working now.” Miguel too stated that EPAF is “almost non-existent.”

While some informants spoke of the financial insecurity one might experience working for EPAF an NGO, Óscar highlighted that there were not enough cases to work on. When I asked him about his experience working for a government institution compared to EPAF, he laughed. “Well, it’s curious,” he noted, “because my perspective was not the financial stress [...] but my first thought could be that there were no cases to work in EPAF. Because EPAF perform as *perito de parte*, I mean the cases that EPAF work on are more related as a second opinion of the analysis of the work that maybe other institutions do before. [...] It’s few cases where EPAF was the main *perito*, the main team, the first and the main team.”

“The main investigator, kind of?” I asked.

“Yeah, exactly. So that in the daily life,” Óscar chuckled softly, “there were not the same amount of activity compared with the activity of the Public Ministry. [...] So, in that part, yes, that’s true – it’s a non-governmental organisation. And those activities to complement or to fulfil the objective [were] more related to activism in human rights.” He explained that EPAF’s work was divided between working “some cases,” and

“making activities to remember some special days in Peru related to human rights, related to activists in human rights.”

In 2021, at the *Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú*, a new team formed called *Grupo de Investigación en Bioarqueología y Antropología Forense*<sup>73</sup> (GIBAF). An informant told me that the group plans to become an actor in the search for the missing, following a humanitarian approach. They also hope to drive the work forward on the “standards for identification,” supporting the Public Ministry and the Justice Ministry, and creating a Master’s program in forensic anthropology.

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What was it like for Peruvian forensic anthropologists to work with the Indigenous communities, I wondered when I started my research project. As outlined, this question revealed a complexity of circumstances, which not only showed human suffering of tragic proportions. It showed that encounters between forensic anthropologists and survivors of the internal conflict carry with them the legacy of past encounters defined by racism and distrust – like an echo reverberating through history. After having looked at the encounters between forensic anthropologists and survivors of the Peruvian internal conflict, Chapter 4 outlines the encounters of forensic anthropologists in Colombia.

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<sup>73</sup> English: Research Group in Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology

## Chapter 4

Where [do] the families [go] first? To the police station, to the army section, to the state institution? At some point they decide to go to other institution because the state [doesn't] give an answer to them. That's how it works. Sometimes they are afraid to go to the state.

– my informant Miguel

### 4 Encountering Complexities of Trust and Trustworthiness: Part 2 – Colombia

Establishing a relationship built on trust with the families of victims of political violence is a complex process. What contributes to the complexity of trust in the Latin American context are far-reaching sociopolitical factors. As discussed in Chapter 3, in Peru the complexities of building trust are shaped by the long history of social exclusion and violence against Indigenous communities. In Colombia, the question of trust is shaped above all by the pervasive experience of violence and insecurity. César Niño and Irma Vásquez Merchán (2023, 213) describe Colombia as an “anxious nation.”<sup>74</sup> The nation’s anxiety, they argue, stems from the state’s neglect to address its citizens’ ontological security, which has been threatened by decades of armed conflict, socioeconomic inequalities, displacement, structural violence, and uncertainty which ultimately, they note, led to distrust and insecurity.<sup>75</sup> The concept of ontological security or *Seinsgewissheit* describes an existential condition marked by the certainty of the continuity of one’s *Dahinleben*. When living in ontological security, the individual lives life within a certain continuity, trusting that the world continues revolving in its habitual

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<sup>74</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

<sup>75</sup> For an in-depth discussion on how civil war creates a state of emergency, which in turn produces an everyday condition of anxiety in individuals, of always having to be prepared for violence, refer to Michael Taussig’s *The Nervous System* (1992).

pattern. Conversely, ontological *insecurity*, according to Anthony Giddens (1991, 53), is characterised by failure to achieve “an enduring conception of [...] aliveness” and by being overwhelmed by “anxiety about obliteration.” It has been argued that this condition not only pertains to the individual itself “but also involves a public concern for the deterioration of social networks and relations that could threaten collective identity and undermine the very foundation of mutual trust” (Valente and Pertegas 2018, 162). In the case of Colombia, Tom Feiling (2012, 263) notes that “after years of widespread insecurity, it should come as no surprise that as well as being among the happiest people on the planet, Colombians are also of the least trusting. Outside the circles of family and friends, most people are not to be trusted.” The issues of trust (or lack of trust) and insecurity combine to make Colombia the “anxious nation” (Niño and Vásquez Merchán 2023; cf. Taussig 1992). Consider, for example, how Martín Nova Estrada (2020, 2019, 390) summarises his experience of growing up in Colombia:

We are a society that grew up in the midst of an armed conflict. There is not a living Colombian who has not lived his entire life in the midst of anxiety and violence that is always just around the corner, in a country where [...] a tragedy is only surpassed by another tragedy. [...] we grow up with fear, and what is worse, we grow up with mistrust.<sup>76</sup>

Decades of armed conflicts have sown uncertainty and distrust across Colombia. Through rapid attacks in public spaces, the sense of safety within these areas was replaced by “the perception that isolation and confinement are the only survival strategies”<sup>77</sup> (Suárez 2022, 95). Uncertainty and distrust also bled into interpersonal ties. In instances where perpetrators were hooded or recognised during killings, Andrés Fernando Suárez (2022, 91-92) notes, “victims were told that their destruction came from their own community or from people close to them. With this, social distrust deepened to break the morale and will of the victims and instil in them a feeling of guilt and mutual recrimination for the violence inflicted.” As in the case of the historical legacies of marginalisation and

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<sup>76</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.

<sup>77</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.



dehumanisation in Peru, political violence in Colombia has raised suspicions amongst survivors towards their friends and neighbours; the latter becoming *enemigos íntimos* – intimate enemies (Suárez 2022; Theidon 2013). Additionally, the erosion of societal ties extends past death as a result of the stigmatisation faced by both victims and their bereaved families. In this regard, Tom Feiling (2012, 194) points out:

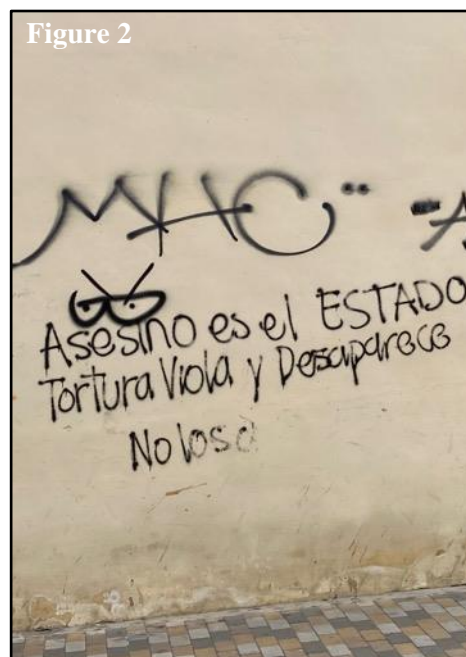
The families of the disappeared are deeply stigmatized in Colombia. The bereaved are often threatened or forced to leave by people who regard their relative's death as proof that they had some involvement with the guerillas, and therefore deserved their fate. This is in marked contrast to attitudes towards the families of those who have been kidnapped by the guerillas. In a country as polarized as Colombia, it should come as little surprise to learn that the victims' associations too are split between 'them' and 'us', depending on who fell victim to whom.

Furthermore, similar to Peru, in Colombia, the state and its institutions, such as the police and armed forces, should have been “islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty” (Arendt 1958, 244), but fell short. Members of these institutions have been involved in committing numerous human rights violations. If the phenomenon of what has been termed *general trust* (Luhmann 1968) has ever existed in Colombian society, it seems to have been eroded by years of armed conflict, and ontological insecurity.

It is in this context of distrust, uncertainty, and insecurity that Colombian forensic anthropologists operate. The previous chapter focused on Peru and the encounter between forensic anthropologists and Indigenous victims of the country's civil war. In the Peruvian context, the historical relationship between the state and Indigenous communities meant that forensic anthropologists had to cultivate trust with the communities that they worked with. As I have shown in the previous chapter, this meant it was important for forensic anthropology teams, especially the first team which began to search for the missing, to not be associated with the Peruvian state. In this chapter, I explore the encounter between state-employed forensic anthropologists and victims of Colombia's conflicts. In Colombia, forensic anthropologists who work for state institutions like the Attorney General's Office are considered the state by association. This perception affects state-employed forensic anthropologists in two ways. First, due to state institutions not being considered trustworthy as a result of the atrocities committed

by members of the state, such as police and military, state-employed scientists need to demonstrate trustworthiness. How forensic anthropologists do this will be explored in greater detail below. Second, members of guerrilla and paramilitary groups consider state-employed scientists as representatives of the Colombian state. This association with the state by other armed actors poses risks for forensic anthropologists and adds additional complexities to how they conduct their work. For example, it not only makes forensic investigations riskier because of the potential for violence, but it also means that the knowledge produced by forensic anthropologists through their investigations may implicate both guerrilla groups and state agents and thus there are a variety of actors who may wish to prevent the production or circulation of evidence of their crimes. I will return to the question of forensic anthropological knowledge in Chapter 5.

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**Figure 1 and Figure 2: The Colombian State branded a terrorist and a murderer.**

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## 4.1 State Agents as Perpetrators

Police represent the state more so than any other political institution; a citizen is more likely to engage with a police officer than a congressperson on any given day.

– Branton et al. (2023, 2)

Nicolás was a fifteen-year-old boy [...]. He had something very special: his critical sense and his vision of the country. [...] Now I don't want death for anyone. [...] Suddenly the pain purifies one. And I want people to think a little bit about that. In that we must continue to fight for our rights and not allow revenge to take over each of us.

– father of Nicolás<sup>78</sup>

Colombian forensic anthropologist Eduardo works for the *Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación* (CTI), the Technical Investigation Unit. It is one of two permanent judicial police bodies in Colombia, and a division of the Attorney General's Office (Castellanos and Chapetón 2023; notes from my informant Hugo). Eduardo explained the main challenge in their work:

One of the most principal conflicts is about the fact that we are working for a state unit. I am working for the government and maybe [...] in different [instances], the victims are the victims of the state's agents. Maybe army, maybe policemen, maybe, I don't know, agents of the state. So, the families don't trust in us because we are the state, too. And the *victimarios* [attacker, perpetrators] are the state, too, so ...

To put into context why families might consider state agents untrustworthy, the next sections will give insight into the atrocities committed by members of Colombia's National Police and the Army. Many determinants can affect an institution's public image and ultimately the trust put in it. As an in-depth exploration is beyond the scope of

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<sup>78</sup> From the report of the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición* (2022, 490), translated from Spanish by me.

this dissertation, only a brief introduction to the atrocities committed by the Colombian National Police and the Army will be given.

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Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

**Figure 3 and Figure 4: Graffiti that speaks of police violence and hatred towards Colombia's Police Force can be found all over Bogotá.**

**Figure 5: Memorial plaques for Nicolás David Neira Álvarez.**

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#### 4.1.1 State Agents as Perpetrators I – *La Policía Nacional de Colombia*

**25 August 2022.** I pause to take a picture of graffiti on Carrera 7. Now, after nightfall, the streets are clear of vendors, and I can take a proper photograph. “Also take a picture of Nicolás,” Ana, who accompanies me on my stroll, urges me. According to a memorial plaque, Nicolás David Neira Álvarez was fifteen years old when he was killed by police officers during the May protests in Bogotá in 2005. Reports on how he received the fatal

head injuries from the police's special unit ESMAD<sup>79</sup> diverge: blows to the head or hit by a police projectile (El Tiempo 2021). Nicolás, a message displayed on the wall states, was “a victim of the innumerable crimes committed by the state,” crimes that are “still in impunity.”<sup>80</sup>

Since its formation in 1891, the public image of Colombia's National Police has been fluctuating (Ruiz Vásquez 2013; 2012; Llorente 2006). In Bogotá, I saw indications in the form of graffiti that speak of a strained relationship between the police and Colombians. “Colombians have no respect for the police,” a fellow graduate student from Bogotá tells me one day during lunch at my university's grad club. Another Bogotano I met in Colombia notes that as a woman she would not feel safe around the Colombian police and that in one incident, police officers reportedly raped women on Colombia's National University campus. Yet another Colombian I met scoffed when I asked him if there was corruption in the police force as if I had asked a question with an obvious answer. The history of Colombia's police force is described as filled with years of “disdain, fear and apprehension” for Colombians (Ruiz Vásquez 2012, 43). Highlighted are its manipulation by the Liberal and Conservative political parties during *La Violencia*, incidences of sexual violence and links to drug cartels (Branton et al. 2023; Ruiz Vásquez 2012). In Colombia, perhaps the most infamous cartel was the Medellín cartel led by drug lord Pablo Escobar. In the hit Netflix series *Narcos* (2016<sup>81</sup>), the character Colonel Hugo Martínez<sup>82</sup>, leader of the Search Bloc<sup>83</sup>, proclaims: “The man standing over Escobar when this is over *needs* to be a Colombian police officer.” While it is unclear who fired the precise shot that killed Pablo Escobar on a Medellín rooftop on December 2, 1993 – members of the Colombian Search Bloc or a member of the US-American Delta Force

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<sup>79</sup> Spanish: *Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios*, English: Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron

<sup>80</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

<sup>81</sup> Season 2, Episode 8

<sup>82</sup> Hugo Rafael Martínez Poveda was an actual Colombian General. He died in 2020. In the television series, he is played by Colombian actor Juan Pablo Shuk.

<sup>83</sup> Special unit of the Colombian National Police.

(Bowden 2001) – it has been noted that in 1993, following the killing of Escobar and the dismantling of major drug cartels, the public image of the police force “improved notably” (Ruiz Vásquez 2012, 44). However, despite its achievements, the favourable public image of the National Police did not persist.

Colombia has been in the grasp of internal conflicts for over six decades. The presence of civil wars alone, it has been noted, negatively affects public trust in state institutions for an extended period (Branton et al. 2023). Especially, it might be argued, when members of state institutions committed serious crimes during those conflicts. The newspaper *The Guardian* (Parkin Daniels 2021, n.p.) reports: “Colombia’s militarized police fought for decades on the frontlines of the country’s war against leftist rebel groups and has long been accused of human rights violations.” In parallel, Juan Carlos Ruiz Vásquez (2013, 408) states, “The police record for human right abuses is [...] a long one.” According to official reports, the author notes, “Since the promulgation of the Constitution of 1991, the Colombian police has been the agency in Colombia most frequently accused of being involved in forced disappearances, tortures, beatings, and arbitrary detentions,” in addition to massacres and cases of sexual violence (Ibid.). At the time of this writing, the Colombian *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica y Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto*<sup>84</sup> (2020) list 266 cases of sexual violence and 1997 cases of forced disappearance where the persecutors are presumed to be state agents<sup>85</sup>.

In the 1990s, members of the Colombian police “were conspicuously involved in so-called ‘social cleansing’ whereby local retailers and businessman hired policemen to kill street urchins and vagrants in an attempt to violently expel ‘obnoxious’ people from their neighborhoods” (Ruiz Vásquez 2013, 408). Concerning forced disappearances and acts of social cleansing, Ana, a Colombian forensic anthropologist, told me of police practices in the 1980s. She was “completely sure” that the government “was involved [in forced disappearances] because at the beginning, in the ‘80s, the first missing people

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<sup>84</sup> English: National Centre for Historical Memory and Observatory of Memory and Conflict

<sup>85</sup> ‘State agents’ include: state agents, state agents paramilitary, state agents – post-demobilisation.

disappeared because of the government.” She told me about F-2, a former division of the Colombian National Police. “They used to investigate crimes,” Ana said, “but also people that don’t agree with the government and the politics.” People allegedly showing indications of having communist mindsets, thus seen as opponents of the government, would disappear. The first to disappear were university students. Ana described F-2’s approach as “systematic but not that obvious.” She continued, “It was just a few students that someday just went home [from] university and disappear.” Members of F-2 would “just take them away and disappear them. And [that] was the beginning. Then [...] the violence between government and the guerillas [started to increase]. And it was a little bit more complicated, but some organisations [...], civil organisations, and families, they made investigations and they found out that guerrilla and that kind of [...] armed groups, they don’t kill or disappear so many people as the government and other armed groups that working together with the government like *paramilitares*. They have a huge responsibility.” That is why, she believes, the government does not aid in finding *los desaparecidos* – the disappeared. “They don’t care about it,” she said, “they don’t support, with money, with anything. And thanks to the peace agreements, they have to support and create organisations around this topic.”

The F-2 – nicknamed *los feos*, which loosely translates to ‘the ugly’ or ‘nasty ones’ – was a secret intelligence service, judicial police and “repression apparatus”<sup>86</sup> associated with various human rights violations such as forced disappearances and acts of social cleansing (Carrillo and Kucharz 2006, 216; Rojas 1996). In June 2023, Attorney General of the Nation, Francisco Barbosa, proclaimed that “F2 practices [...] have returned to Colombia” (Semana.com 2023a, n.p.<sup>87</sup>). He made this comparison in connection to a scandal which involved Chief of Staff of the Presidency Laura Sarabia and her nanny. The latter was accused of having stolen money from her employer. According to reports,

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<sup>86</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.

she was subjected to a polygraph test without a court order in the presidential palace, and her phone got illegally intercepted by the police under the excuse that she allegedly had links to the paramilitary group and drug cartel, the Gulf Clan (Semana.com 2023b). This scandal, it has been reported, “has damaged the Petro administration’s credibility among voters, and weakened its standing in Colombia’s congress” (Rueda 2023, n.p.).



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

**Figure 6 and Figure 7: “Let’s remember” the massacres: Art installation depicting dismembered bodies.**

**Figure 8: “Where are the 120,000 disappeared?” a poster asks on the International Day of the Disappeared, August 30, 2022.**

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In Colombia’s armed conflicts, state agents at times committed more massacres than guerrillas. From 1981 to 2021, a total of 3,933 massacres were documented within the context of the armed conflict, resulting in 22,309 fatalities (Suárez 2022). The perpetrator accused of the crime is known in 3,272 massacres, accounting for 83.2 percent of all the incidents (Ibid.). In total, approximately 8.7 percent of known massacres are linked to state agents, while 1.1 percent are associated with collaborative efforts between state



agents and paramilitary groups (Ibid.). While this number stands in stark contrast to known cases in Peru, where 27.8 percent of massacres are attributed to state agents (Ibid.), there is no question that every statistic, every single number, stands for a tragedy. It is not difficult to fathom that the aforementioned human rights violations left their mark on the psyche of Colombians and affected the perceived trustworthiness of state agents. In addition to human rights violations committed throughout the last decades, there have been recent incidents which did not benefit the police's public image.

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## The Perfect Storm

In Colombia in 2021, a mix of pre-existing inequalities, pandemic sanctions, tax reforms, and police violence erupted in violent protests. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic and countries across the globe went into lockdown (WHO 2020). In the same year, the Colombian government imposed a six-month lockdown for its citizens which worsened pre-existing vulnerabilities experienced by “the poorest and informal workers who live hand-to-mouth” (Martínez and Young 2022, 373). Disasters, Anthony Oliver-Smith (2002) notes, trace and interact with pre-existing vulnerabilities or inequalities that individuals experience. Before the pandemic, Colombia had already been a deeply divided and unequal country. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2022, 1) notes in a recent report: “Labour informality remains a critical challenge for Colombia with over 60% of workers in informal jobs with no access to social security benefits, except health.” For instance, a survey conducted between March and May 2021 of 750 Cali<sup>88</sup> street vendors noted that the majority of interviewed individuals were incapable of working for more than three months (Martínez and Young 2022). It further revealed that street vendors faced a significant decrease in sales and income when they were able to work. The newspaper *The Guardian* reports: “Amid one of the longest lockdowns in the

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<sup>88</sup> city in West Colombia

world, the number of Colombians living in extreme poverty grew by 2.8 million people last year. Red rags were hung outside homes, in a desperate signal that those inside were hungry” (Parkin Daniels 2021, n.p.). Elizabeth Dickinson, a researcher with the non-governmental organisation International Crisis Group (ICG), states in the same article that the economic suffering for Colombia is immense, “Like the rest of Latin America, Colombia has been hit hard by the pandemic and as a result we have had to live with a year of on-and-off lockdowns.” She continues, asking, “and who was the face of implementing those lockdowns? It was the police” (Ibid.). The Colombian police, *The Guardian* reports, charged Colombians with large fines when encountering them wearing masks incorrectly or when consuming alcohol in public (Ibid.).



**Figure 9: Martínez and Young (2022, 379) report that “street vendors are a highly vulnerable group.”**

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In addition to financial struggles and pre-existing inequalities amid the pandemic, in April 2021, the Colombian government, under then-president Iván Duque, proposed a tax increase for individuals and businesses (Bocanegra 2021). Many Colombians are said to

have believed that the tax reform would further exacerbate the challenges of navigating an economy strained by the pandemic. The resultant protests rapidly transformed into a widespread manifestation of frustration regarding poverty and inequality, exacerbated by the escalating spread of the virus, as well as the aggressive tactics employed by the police in response to the movement (Turkewitz 2021). Pre-existing inequalities, poverty, and a proposed tax overhaul in addition to the pandemic-related lockdowns created the perfect storm, which eventually erupted in a National Strike on April 28, 2021. Throughout the protests, Colombia's Mobile Anti-Riot Squad ESMAD<sup>89</sup> was deployed. "Colombia's Police Force, Built for War, Finds a New One," a *New York Times* headline reads in May 2021, alluding to the excessive force used by squad members on protestors (Turkewitz and Villamil 2021). Over a hundred protestors suffered eye injuries from police projectiles in targeted assaults, according to Amnesty International (2021). As of June 6, 2021, a minimum of 46 individuals had died, but *Human Rights Watch* and other organisations suggested that the actual death count may have been higher (Turkewitz 2021). The violent police response to the nationwide strike exacerbated the frustrations felt by many Colombians, causing a demonstration against police brutality (Turkewitz and Villamil 2021). In response to an alleged<sup>90</sup> increase in violent crime after COVID lockdowns, hundreds of uniformed military police were deployed (Semana.com 2022a; Alsema 2021). Although the government announced a military intervention in key areas of the city, Claudia López, Mayor of Bogotá, assured Bogotanos in January 2022 that additional security measures would remain at 300 military police personnel stationed at specific checkpoints and that there would be no militarisation of the city (Semana.com 2022a; Semana.com 2022b). The ambiguity is striking: While the residents of Bogotá are informed that the city is not militarised, my observation of individuals in military attire either marching in formation or riding on the back of a truck gave me a contrasting impression.

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<sup>89</sup> The Colombian news magazine *Semana* (August 2022) reports that President Petro plans to get rid of the infamous ESMAD. Previously, he had "accused the institution of leaving young people 'without eyes'" (Ibid., 10).

<sup>90</sup> There have been conflicting media reports.

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## The Other Side

*No hay buenos ni malos. Todos somos víctimas. Paz para Colombia.*<sup>91 92</sup>

– a note in Bogotá’s police museum

Trudy Govier (1997, 209) reminds us, “It is all too easy and – and apparently all too natural – to infer fallaciously that all members of the group have the same attitude, which is timelessly fixed, [...] and that is just it. Attitudes within groups are variable and changeable. [...] groups are not monoliths; as reductionists reminds us, they are ultimately composed of individuals.” In other words, not every Colombian views the police negatively or behaves disrespectfully towards them. Although trust in the Colombia Armed Forces and National Police exhibited a declining trend from 2004 to 2018, a notable 42.4 percent of survey respondents<sup>93</sup> in 2018 still indicated trust in the police” (Rivera et al. 2019).

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**16 August 2022.** Today I am visiting the *Casa de Nariño* (Colombia’s presidential palace) and the *Plaza de Armas* in the historical centre of *La Candelaria*. Since there is no direct access to the palace and plaza, I am seated on a curb next to a small patch of grass at the *Plaza de Núñez*. I recognise the *Plaza de Armas* from the inauguration ceremony of Gustavo Petro a few days earlier; it is the square where he received high ranking officers of the military and police force. The four column pairs of the presidential residence still bear Colombian flags. The sun means well today, and I can feel it burning the top of my head. I take my rain jacket from my backpack and pile it ungraciously on

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<sup>91</sup> English: There are no good or bad [people]. We are all victims. Peace for Colombia.

<sup>92</sup> Police officers in Colombia (have) become victims, too: from Escobar in the 1990s offering 300 US-Dollars in exchange for every police man killed (Ruiz Vásquez 2013) to the recent “matanza sistemática” – a systematic massacre of police officers (Semana, July 2022, 42). As of July 2022, the news magazine *Semana* (July 2022) reported 32 uniformed dead officers and 68 wounded in that year alone.

<sup>93</sup> *Barómetro de las Américas Colombia*, 2018

my head to protect myself. I am still not used to the ever-changing weather in Bogotá; blistering sunshine in one moment, torrential downpour the next, followed by more scorching sunshine. Of course, I had forgotten my baseball hat in my apartment. With my jacket on my head, I face-time my mother. As I am telling her about my day, a police officer to my right catches my eye. I watch him more intently than I probably should, but I convince myself that it is in the service of ethnographic observation. He fascinates me because he has a content smile on his face as if he cannot imagine being in a better place. I tell my mother that he is now taking a picture of a tourist in front of the palace. “Imagine a German police officer taking a picture for a tourist,” I exclaim. “They would show you the bird,” she responds, which in German means thinking that someone has lost it. A few moments later, a small dog enters the plaza to my left and happily sniffs its way across. It roams freely without a leash, and the male owner is crouching down taking pictures of his fluffy model. From the right, the police officer approaches. I am giving my mum a running commentary of what is happening, expecting a showdown any second. However, unhurried, the police officer weaves his way through the crowd towards the dog owner. The officer is holding his hands in front of him, but I cannot see if he is playing with his fingers or the whistle, he had used earlier to gently direct some tourists from a patch of grass. All in all, he comes across as unthreatening, which is the entire point of his nonchalant demeanour, I assume. He stops and waits patiently near the dog owner to finish his photoshoot. Only then, does the police officer approach him. I cannot hear what is being said but I assume he tells him that he needs to put the dog on a leash; the owner complies. They talk for a while and from the dog owner turning and pointing to the presidential palace at one stage, I gather they are not talking about leashes anymore. The dog owner then holds out his fist initiating a fist bump which the police officer returns. I am flabbergasted and wonder if they know each other. A civilian fist-bumping a police officer?! Unfathomable to me. In Germany, we have the beautiful bureaucratic term *Beamtenbeleidigung*, which means an insult to a public servant. Solely addressing a police officer informally (*duzen*), for instance, is an offence, which,

depending on the judge, can cost you several hundred Euro. I can only assume what I witnessed between the civilian and the police officer. Perhaps what I interpreted as ‘informal’ behaviour by the police officer comes down to his *Wesen*<sup>94</sup>. Perhaps it was an example of the community policing initiatives introduced that put focus on casual interactions between police officers and civilians (Arias et al. 2021; Ruiz Vásquez 2012; Llorente 2006). Perhaps, it was a mix of both.

‘*La policía es mi familia*’ – it sounds out in a catchy tune from a television set of the Department of Social Welfare in Bogotá’s police museum. This is accompanied by a video of scenes that I believe are supposed to denote ‘family and cohesion’ and that the Colombian police, as an institution, takes care of their employees (suggested by images of police officers playing with their children and hugging their spouses). It seemed to be really on the nose, but the melody remained stuck in my head for days. In the museum, I also find examples of members of the force being characterised as heroes, expressed in handwritten notes and pinned to a wall. Colombia’s police force has been working on a positive image. *¿Quién soy?* – Who am I? – a recent advertisement for the police force posted on their official YouTube channel asks (Policía Nacional de Colombia. Dios y Patria 2022). It shows for instance a young man dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt applying yellow paint to mark the borders of a path in a park. He receives a friendly pat on the shoulder from a male youth. The scene cuts and now we see the same man in uniform, fist-bumping his colleagues. ‘I am the neighbour on the block and also the station companion,’ the voiceover says in Spanish<sup>95</sup>. At the end, the advertisement states, ‘I am [a] police [officer], and I am also part of the community.’ The advertisement depicts a force that is close to the people without *Berührungssängste*. It reminds me of a scene from a news report about the annual May riots in the German city of Hamburg that stuck with me. “You are of one the good ones,”<sup>96</sup> a civilian tells a police officer walking alongside him. “I am just a father whose children want him to come home at the end of

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<sup>94</sup> English: his being or nature

<sup>95</sup> Translation by me.

<sup>96</sup> Translation from German by me.

the day,” the officer replies. The police officer then points directly to the camera, “this,” he stresses, “you should broadcast.”



Figure 10

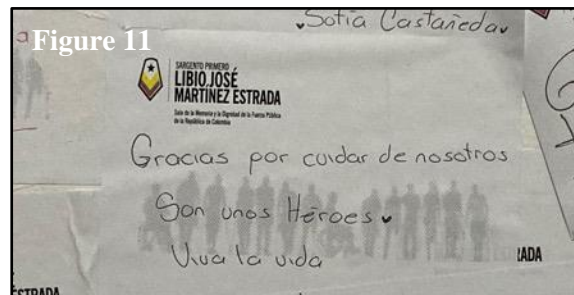


Figure 11

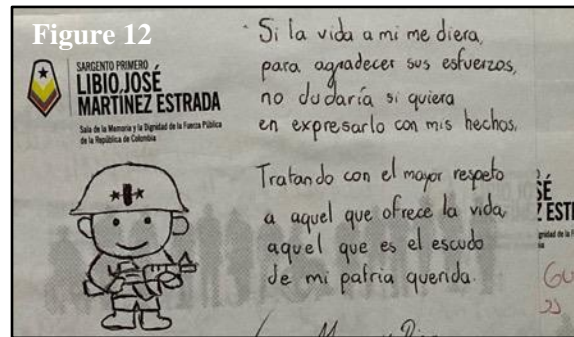


Figure 12

**Figure 10:** There are numerous shops close to the police museum, where military and police equipment and memorabilia can be bought.

**Figure 11 and Figure 12:** Notes thanking the Colombian Public Forces.

© by Franziska Albrecht

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#### 4.1.2 State Agents as Perpetrators II – The Colombian Military

We murdered innocent people, *campesinos*. [...] They trusted us, and we deceived them. We lied to them, and we murdered their families. God forgive me. [...] Today, I want the world to know they were *campesinos* that I, as a member of the Public Force cowardly murdered. Took away the hope of their children. Their mothers' hearts were torn. Because of pressure for results. For false results. To keep a government happy.

– Néstor Guillermo Gutiérrez, former corporal in the Colombian military, 2022, JEP hearing<sup>97</sup>

After outlining the complex relationship between the police force and Colombia's citizens, the next section will give insight into the largest scandal committed by the Colombian military. In this process, an introduction to the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (JEP) will be given. "In recent decades," Fernanda Espinosa Moreno (2021, 30) notes, "testimonial voices have moved from marginal spaces of society to the centre of the scene." The voices of victims and perpetrators in this section will aid in demonstrating not only the atrocities committed and the suffering caused by state agents but also the complex transitional peace process in Colombia.

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#### Investigating the *falsos positivos*, and the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz*

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Márquez' famous magical realist novel, José Arcadio Buendía spends almost two years travelling in search of a new home, dreaming of "a noisy city with houses having mirror walls rose up. He asked what city it was and [the voices] answered him with a name that he had never heard, that had no meaning at all, but that had a supernatural echo in his dream: Macondo" (García Márquez 2006, 24). In its early years, Macondo resembled a social utopia. It was so peaceful that

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<sup>97</sup> JEP Colombia (2022). Translation from Spanish by me.



none of its citizens “had died even of a natural death” (Ibid., 56), therefore they did not need police or military forces to establish social order. Such a utopian vision is, of course, only a dream, but as David Harvey (2000, 156 and 157) notes: “the figures of the ‘city’ and of ‘Utopia,’ have long been intertwined” and associated with “emotions and beliefs about the good life.”



Figure 13



Figure 14

**Figure 13: JEP’s Headquarters in Bogotá, Colombia.**

**Figure 14: Remains of graffiti depicting the faces of seven high-level military commanders, close to the José María Córdova Military School in the North-West of Bogotá.**

© by Franziska Albrecht

Wrapping around the corner of *Av. Alberto Lleras Camargo y Calle 64* in the bustling city of Bogotá and with the gleaming sun and cloudless sky reflecting off its glass façade, the modern high rise that houses the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (Special Jurisdiction for Peace) could be situated in the utopian city Gabriel García Márquez (2006) describes in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. One might say, however, that for many, Colombia does not resemble a utopian society. JEP is one of two

institutional bodies that operate under Colombia's transitional justice model *Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición* (SIVJRNR, Integral System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition). One of JEP's judges, Alejandro Ramelli Arteaga (2023), noted in his presentation at the Centre for Criminology & Sociolegal Studies at the University of Toronto: "Colombia has suffered the longest armed conflict in the Western hemisphere." It thus comes as no surprise that due to continuing civil unrest, Colombia's modern history has seen more than one Truth Commission (Espinosa Moreno 2021). In 1985, members of the leftist M-19 guerrilla group, a movement current President Gustavo Petro was a member of, entrenched themselves in Colombia's Palace of Justice (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Carrigan 1993). The handling of the takeover of the building by the Colombian government was disastrous. With the government standing back, the army went for an "all out military assault involving tanks, armored cars and over two thousand troops" (Carrigan 1993, 13). It ended in tragedy with more than a hundred individuals killed, and with an unknown number of survivors getting disappeared (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Leech 2011; Carrigan 1993). It was only in 2005, twenty years after the tragedy unfolded, that a truth commission was created to investigate the catastrophic event. Moreover, the report *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de Guerra y Dignidad*<sup>98</sup> (2013) by the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH)*<sup>99</sup> is described as having "characteristics of a truth commission" (Espinosa Moreno 2021, 19). Additionally, the website of the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica y Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto*<sup>100</sup> unifies a wealth of statistical and geographical information, including outlining the armed conflict in figures with data boards, map visualisations, databases and commemorative boards. In 2017, the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition<sup>101</sup> was incorporated into Colombia's political constitution as part of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian

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<sup>98</sup> English: Enough Already! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity

<sup>99</sup> English: Colombian National Centre for Historical Memory

<sup>100</sup> English: National Centre for Historical Memory and Observatory of Memory and Conflict

<sup>101</sup> Spanish: *Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición (SIVJRNR)*

government and the guerrilla group FARC-EP<sup>102</sup> (Comisión de la Verdad, JEP, UBPD n.d.). It consists of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition Commission; the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP); and the Unit for the Search for Persons Presumed Disappeared (UBPD<sup>103</sup>). The Special Jurisdiction for Peace, or JEP, operates outside the standard criminal law system and thus has its own jurisdiction. As Santiago, a Colombian forensic anthropologist, explained it to me: “the JEP is like the Attorney General but special for the peace.”

In his opening statement at the Nuremberg tribunal on November 21, 1945, Chief of Counsel for the United States, Robert H. Jackson (1945, 150) stressed: “the idea that a state, any more than a corporation, commits crimes, is a fiction. Crimes always are committed only by persons. While it is quite proper to employ the fiction of responsibility of a state or corporation for the purpose of imposing a collective liability, it is quite intolerable to let such a legalism become the basis of personal immunity.” With the intention of serving as a model for the future, Ruti Teitel (2006, 1616) states, the Nuremberg trials “were aimed at teaching individual responsibility for crimes of aggressive war and crimes against humanity, so as to deter their re-occurrence.” In a similar vein, JEP’s fifteen-year mandate states that it is obligated to investigate and prosecute individuals who participated directly or indirectly in the armed conflict, including: “ex-combatants of the FARC and members of the Public Forces who have been prosecuted or linked to crimes related to the armed conflict,” “other non-military State agents and third-party civilians who appear voluntarily” (Comisión de la Verdad, JEP, UBPD n.d., n.p.). Judge Ramelli Arteaga noted in his presentation that in the JEP, “we focus our investigations [on] the most responsible. So, we don’t investigate the soldiers, [...] we investigate just the high level in the rank, in the chain of command [...]. So, we investigate the [greatest], or the most serious crimes and the most responsible for the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.” Whereas the traditional

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<sup>102</sup> Spanish: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*

<sup>103</sup> Spanish: *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas*

Colombian justice system investigates on a case-by-case basis, in the country's transitional peace scenario, investigating individual crimes case by case, however, is not deemed feasible. According to Judge Ramelli Arteaga, JEP is a "complex jurisdiction." It holds its autonomous jurisdiction "over 9,000 FARC members," "over 3,600 members of Colombia's security forces," it "investigated 71 civilians who participated in the Colombian armed conflict," investigated over 300,000 victims and over 200,000 crimes." He concluded that there are "a lot of offenders, a lot of victims, a lot of damages, and a lot of crimes." Therefore, the crimes are combined into eleven macro cases, which are subdivided into three territorial cases and eight thematic cases. Case 03 combines "killings and forced disappearances presented as combat casualties by state agents" – commonly known as *los falsos positivos*.

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Why? Why had my brother been killed? Why did they select him [...]? There was never a response. Never an accurate answer. They only told me how he could have been anyone and I just realised, no! That there was a pattern of cruelty. That there was a pattern of cruelty against difference.

– Margarita Arteaga, sister, JEP hearing<sup>104</sup>

I didn't do it out of my own volition. It was because some commanders demanded it of me. But I did make the decision.

– Wilson Burgos Jiménez, Colombian sergeant, JEP hearing<sup>105</sup>

On March 28, 2007, "recruiter" second sergeant Burgos Jiménez and his soldiers, all dressed in civilian clothes, headed to a local nightclub. Earlier his commander had told him that they needed to present three deaths. Why three, the sergeant did not know, because "they weighed more," according to his testimonial at the JEP hearing (JEP Colombia 2023). Why a nightclub? Because there, people would be "more vulnerable."

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<sup>104</sup> JEP Colombia 2023; All quotations from this hearing translated by me.

<sup>105</sup> JEP Colombia 2023

At the club, Burgos Jiménez got into a conversation with two men, whom he invited to drinks. When they asked him about marijuana, he saw what he was looking for – “a vulnerable person.” Under false pretences, he got them into a van, where his soldiers were waiting. After driving to another location, Burgos Jiménez gave the order to kill them, their belongings were burned. Signs of torture are brushed off by Burgos Jiménez. He asserts that there was no torture; instead, he attributes the sustained injuries to the impact of the bullets.

Andrés Fabián Garzón Lozano and Kemel Mauricio Arteaga Cuartas did not fall as soldiers in battle that day. They were civilians at a party deviously lured to their deaths under false pretences by disguised soldiers. “How can a person like you murder some defenceless boys?” – boys he had beers with, had started a conversation with, thereby a brief relationship – JEP Judge Catalina Díaz Gómez asks (Ibid.). Burgos Jiménez responds, “I did not think about that. I only thought about my benefit, and my benefit was to obtain results” (Ibid.). This testimonial describes the fate of only two victims. JEP reports that between 2002 and 2008, 6,402 individuals were killed and presented as guerrillas killed in combat (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz 2022b). *¿Quién dio la orden?* – Who gave the order? – a graffiti close to the José María Córdova Military School in Bogotá asked. It showed the faces of seven high-level military commanders. Under their command, over 6,000 extrajudicial executions were committed between 2000 and 2010. The Army hurried to paint it over.

*¿Quién dio la orden?* – a big poster behind the victims in one of JEP’s courtrooms insists again. Like in forensic anthropological investigations, at JEP, the families and the victims are at the centre of the process. “We are a tribunal for the whole truth,” Judge Ramelli Arteaga explained, “This is our main responsibility.” He also acknowledged in his presentation, however, that:

... the problem is: What does it mean ‘the whole truth’? This is a philosophical [question], what does it mean ‘the truth’? Because when you are a victim, you are interested in having more information about a specific crime. ‘Who give the order to assassinate my father?’ But [...] we don’t have the possibilities to investigate all the crimes. We investigate macro cases in order to give a general explanation of the crimes. Even in some particular cases, we can identify who gave the order to

assassinate your father but is difficult to solve all the cases. That's why some victims said, 'No, they didn't give me all the information.'

While victims and the magistrate strive to obtain the truth through JEP's hearings, (former) members of the Colombian military question whether JEP is impartial. Juan Pablo Rodríguez Barragán, Colombian Army General from February 2014 until November 2017, states:

In some cases, for being in the military, one is already practically sentenced before being investigated, without taking into account their fundamental rights. The JEP must be completely impartial. What was wanted was that all actors in the armed conflict were represented in the JEP, to achieve a point of balance and a consensual acceptance of decisions made there. At present there is mistrust with the JEP regarding the symmetry and impartiality in the application of justice to State agents and members of the public force; hopefully, for the sake of achieving true reconciliation, the JEP understands that great responsibility it has. (in Nova Estrada 2020, 2019, 305<sup>106</sup>)

In 2014, the Gallup poll of national opinion reported that the Colombian Army, “the institution most loved and respected by Colombians, has had its biggest drop in opinion in decades” (Ibid., 50). Yet, for all human rights violations, they did not cause the Army's ultimate downfall. Martín Nova Estrada (2020, 2019, 50-51), who interviewed several Colombian generals serving over the last forty years approximately, notes: “In all these events, as with the False Positives, they are a few that manage to affect the name of a huge institution.” When confronted by Nova Estrada about some of the recent issues around Colombia's Army, General Rodríguez Barragán stresses: “These Armed Forces are vigorous, they are not going to succumb to anything, and they are going to continue fulfilling their constitutional task” (51). Rodríguez Barragán strongly believes that the Colombian Army is here to stay:

... the soldiers of land, sea and air and our police “are in the heart of Colombians and we will always stay there”. Even if they try to do whatever, to attack us, slander us, discredit us, the Colombian people are very clear about the sacrifice and

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<sup>106</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.

heroism of our men to guarantee security, and they will always look for a soldier for their protection. (313-314)

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Several camping tents are pitched near the entrance of JEP's headquarters, just a few steps away from the sidewalk. They are covered with a dark tarp. I believe this serves the dual purpose of enhancing privacy and providing protection from weather conditions. The weather in Bogotá, at its altitude, can change rapidly. There is a broom and dustpan set to the side. A woman is preparing some food. Avocados are offered for sale. A cardboard box is set up for donations. These are the living quarters of several displaced Colombians. It has been noted that "Colombia's forcibly displaced – los desplazados – make up one of the largest populations of internal refugees in the world" (Brodzinsky and Schoening 2023, 18). Walking by, the big Colombian flag cannot be missed. The national tricolours – gold, blue and red – represent the mineral wealth of the country (gold, emeralds), its lakes and seas, and the blood spilt during its wars for independence. On the Inauguration Day of Colombia's recent president Gustavo Petro in August 2022, the Colombian flags decorating the streets and houses of Bogotá were vibrant, symbolising national pride and hope for a brighter future for the country. Here, in this makeshift camp, the colours of Colombia are faded, the flag's edges look worn, the coat of arms is nearly unrecognisable. A disheartening scene that stands for the crude reality of Colombia having the second highest number of internally displaced individuals in the world<sup>107</sup>, according to the National Center for Historical Memory (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, 2015).

Next to the makeshift living quarters, police riot helmets and shields lean against a wall, as if lying in wait. Why this police presence at JEP's headquarters is deemed necessary, I am not sure. I asked informants about it, but they could not give me a definite answer. Are they there to keep the *displaced* 'in check'? Are they worried about attacks by

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<sup>107</sup> That is, 6,459,501 individuals, as of December 2014, according to the *Registro Único de Víctimas* (RUV) (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015). Displacement also drove some Indigenous groups to the brink of extinction (Ibid.).

guerrillas or families of the victims looking for retaliation? Judge Ramelli Arteaga mentioned the “challenge to guarantee the security of the people who participate in the process, the witnesses, the judges, and even the victims and the perpetrators.” He also drew attention to the problem of “the assassination of former members of the FARC. Until today, 400 ex-members of the FARC have been assassinated and [it] is a very complex situation because is impossible to make another peace process if you can’t ensure the security of the members of the armed group.” This would indeed explain the police presence. Since my arrival in Bogotá, I had been circling the perimeter of the JEP building but did not go inside. I know JEP has a *Grupo de Apoyo Técnico Forense* (Forensic Technical Support Group) as part of its *Unidad de Investigación y Acusación* (UIA, Investigation and Prosecution Unit). I thought since I was in Bogotá, rather than sending an enquiry for an interview to a general email address<sup>108</sup>, I might have more luck speaking to someone directly on-site. The police presence, however, deterred me from entering. What made the scene *unheimlich*<sup>109</sup> to me was that from the headquarters of the National Police I expected a certain degree of fortification but not from a judicial building committed to peace and reconciliation that stands in the glinting sunshine in a central part of the city. Its commitment to the notion of reconciliation provides starting points for various topics of discussion which the next section will briefly turn to.

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#### 4.1.3 The Complex Matter of Reconciliation – Additional Notes

Reconciliation begins with an apology. What is an apology and what can it do? Apologies are defined by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2000, 184) as “rituals in the strictly anthropological sense of a regulated, stylized, routinized and repetitive performance that tends to have both demonstrative and transformative aspects.” Their transformative character can be the first step in shifting a damaged relationship toward the positive. In 2020, FARC-EP issued a collective public apology to the tens of thousands of victims

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<sup>108</sup> I sent an email inquiry for an interview but received no response.

<sup>109</sup> *unheimlich* – denotes a feeling of unease and uncomfortableness



kidnapped by members of the guerrilla group (jc – afp, El Tiempo 2020). The apology has been described as an “unprecedented public declaration from a non-state armed group” (Roccatello 2020, n.p.) and “the most forceful message of forgiveness it has sent since signing the peace [agreement] in 2016”<sup>110</sup> (jc – afp, El Tiempo 2020, n.p.). With regards to the aforementioned *falsos positivos* scandal, in October 2023, the Colombian government issued a public collective apology in the context of President Petro’s total peace policy – twenty years after the extrajudicial killings were committed. “We ask you to forgive us for these crimes that embarrass us in front of the world,”<sup>111</sup> current Defense Minister Iván Velásquez said in his speech (AP News 2023, n.p.; Redacción Semana 2023).

FARC’s apology has been described as “unambiguous and [not including] any attempt to justify the practice,” and was thus hailed as demonstrating “political maturity, which can only develop when there is the space and willingness to engage in peaceful political dialogue rather than armed confrontation” (Roccatello 2020, n.p.). Trouillot (2000) regards collective apologies more pessimistically, calling them “abortive rituals” as the apology fails to do the transformative work. He stresses that collective apologies are performed under the belief and “acceptance that ‘the whole world is looking at me,’ a privilege once reserved for the most powerful, who even then retained the right to reject that gaze. That gaze, now virtual yet increasingly hard to escape, global in its pretensions yet parochial in its instrumentalities, frames all discussions of collective responsibility today” (181-182). We see the awareness of the apology being performed in front of a global gaze exemplified in Velásquez declaration that the committed crimes “embarrass us [the Colombian nation] in front of the world.” Ex-military Néstor Guillermo Gutiérrez makes a similar contention when referring to presenting innocent people as guerrillas and how this damaged Colombia’s image: “What were we doing, oh my God. The damage we caused [you]. The news to the world: ‘Colombia, a guerrilla, a guerilla.’ Here, today, I recognise these crimes” (JEP Colombia 2022). It has been reported that most of the

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<sup>110</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

<sup>111</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

victims present at Velásquez's speech "were not ready to forgive" and believed the apology should not have been issued by the current defence minister but by the defence minister who was in charge when the crimes were committed. Juan Manuel Santos was in office between 2006 and 2009. While he apologised during a closed-door hearing with Colombia's truth commission in 2021, he has yet to offer a public apology (AP News 2023).

The aforementioned former General Rodríguez Barragán spoke of "achieving true reconciliation." Here lies yet another philosophical question: What does reconciliation mean? First, it must be noted that, according to Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar (2013), "as has been seen in other transitional scenarios, the weight of 'reconciliation' lies on the shoulders of (forgiving) victims." Forgiveness is a complex interpersonal and psychological construct. Forgiving, it has been argued, requires deliberate effort and it can, to put it simply, be incredibly difficult. To forgive, Avishai Margalit (2002, 193, emphasis added) reminds us, not only means one has to make "a *conscious decision* to change one's attitude and to overcome anger and vengefulness." The decision to forgive leads us to either entirely forget the "past wrong" or to "[forget] that it mattered to you once greatly" by stopping ruminating about it and discussing it with other people (Ibid.). "Forgiveness, unlike ordinary gifts," Margalit (2002, 195-196) argues, "is not intended to form or strengthen a relationship but rather to restore it to its previous state." This contention raises the question: How can the relationship between Colombian state institutions and citizens in the Colombian peace scenario be restored to its previous state (whatever that might look like)? In its modern history, for over six decades, the Colombian state has failed its citizens. Innocent people were and continue to be murdered by individuals that in their function as members of the police and military are supposed to serve and protect. As previously outlined, uncertainty and distrust have been engrained in Colombians' collective psyche. Additionally, restorative sanctions applied by JEP are different from traditional penalties "because we are in a peace process with the FARC," as Judge Ramelli Arteaga noted, it "is impossible to sign a peace agreement with the FARC and say 'OK, all the FARC will be in prison.'" Regarding reparations for the victims, he stated, "we have nine million victims, even with this administrative [compensation] program [it is] impossible to [repay] nine million victims." JEP

acknowledges that it is a challenge to make society see that restorative sanctions “are not synonymous of impunity.” Judge Ramelli Arteaga stated that “this is a cultural challenge because everybody thinks ‘OK, the prison is the only solution.’” He stressed, however, that Colombia is in a peace process. Therefore, JEP strives to find a balance between punishment and restoration.

What about justice? What is justice in this scenario? How do we define it? It might be suggested that for the relatives of those who were forcibly disappeared and killed ‘justice’ is deeply relational. Families are told that sanctions as known in a traditional justice system (i.e. prison) are not possible in the transitional peace context as the state wants to achieve peace with remaining rebel groups as well (i.e. ‘if we put them in prison, we cannot sign peace deals’). Further, closure for the victims cannot take the form of vengeance as the loop of continuing violence on a national scale needs to be closed. Consider, for example, the situation of Dania Achagua Cecile, whose father was falsely portrayed as a guerrilla and killed when she was just two years old. “It breaks my heart,” she says, “to not even remember, not even to know what the tone of his voice was like.”<sup>112</sup> In her speech at a JEP hearing she addressed the military perpetrators, “Your blood and your heart are so cold and cruel that you continued to enjoy your lives and your rewards. Pushing out your chest, supposedly being the best, and let me tell you something: You are not and will never be the best.” She is grateful that her mother raised her without hate. In her response, JEP Judge Díaz Gómez notes, it “is to be admired that at your 18 years, you have that clarity, that tranquillity, that courage. Frankly, you are an example I think for many young persons who have had to suffer the horrors of war. Feel very proud of what you have done.” The judge admires that Dania speaks against hatred. Once more, reconciliation rests upon the forgiving victims. By folding the suffering of particular individuals into problems of the state such as prioritising ending the national cycle of violence and shifting towards a future focused on truth-seeking in return for reduced penalties, emphasising reconciliation over retaliation, and considering

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<sup>112</sup> JEP Colombia (2022). Translation from Spanish by me.

Colombia's image and reputation going forward, there might be the risk that the peace progress becomes a hollow endeavour for the individual victim for whom justice is deeply relational. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the spiral of violence, which still presents a stark reality in Colombia, must come to an end. The effect of decades of conflict and violence on the collective psyche of the nation and its image to the rest of the world cannot be underestimated and should not be cast aside. To repeat the quote by my Colombian cabify<sup>113</sup> driver: "*Es muy penoso. Es muy penoso porque la gente extranjera así como tú se da cuenta de todo.*"<sup>114</sup> Colombia and its conflicts are indeed a complex matter.

Within JEP, the process of reconciliation appears to be anchored in a system of restorative justice. This system involves acknowledging the suffering of victims, perpetrators revealing the complete truth to clear the names of their victims and Colombia as a nation, perpetrators admitting to their crimes and offering sincere apologies "without any excuse," according to JEP Judge Ramelli Arteaga, and engaging in both individual and communal reparations. Even in design choices the commitment to reconciliation is reflected. Its courtrooms, JEP's Executive Secretary Néstor Raúl Correa points out, break with the square shape of traditional courtrooms in favour of a circular design (Semana.com 2018). Interestingly, he notes that the circular shape of the courtrooms would allow 'dialogue to flow and expand' and, furthermore, to allow victims and perpetrators to look into each other's eyes, which ultimately, he argues, promotes reconciliation (Ibid.). He adds: "The judicial architecture must not separate, isolate, subdue, inhibit. A philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, notes that the real sorrow is judgment. And that judgment, if it is oriented to forgiveness and reconciliation, must take place in a propitious space"<sup>115</sup> (Ibid., n.p.). The belief of spatial designs to positively influence social processes is reminiscent of a kind of utopianism David Harvey (2000, 160) refers

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<sup>113</sup> Cabify is similar to Uber.

<sup>114</sup> English: "It's very painful [or embarrassing]. It's very embarrassing because foreign people, just like you, realise [or see] everything."

<sup>115</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

to as “utopias of spatial forms”; isolated “artificially created islands.” In the smallest sense of a spatial utopia, the circular motif of JEP’s courtrooms may be an attempt to build an alternative world; a microcosm of a Colombian society characterised by reconciliation, dialogue, and forgiveness. Although utopias may help us understand and strive for what is possible, and with that social change, the possibility of a mere architectural design choice to undermine deeply rooted complexities of violence and deeply set social wounds is doubtful. Some things simply cannot be forgiven.

While the design of the courtrooms aims to facilitate connection and dialogue, the presence of security personnel, police officers and riot gear, despite it possibly being there for protection, paints a picture of JEP shielding itself from the outside world. This is a disenchanting observation considering the Executive Secretary’s implication of attempting to create a promising space within JEP that induces reconciliation and forgiveness. A space that, in his words, “must not separate, isolate, subdue, inhibit.” Just as the “city of mirrors” in García-Márquez’s novel had, in the end, become “a city of mirages” (Higgins 2002, 40), proving its utopian promise illusory, a bright glass exterior, despite suggesting openness and transparency cannot, paradoxically, deflect Colombia’s problems like its sunshine.

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## 4.2 Fostering Trust

As Colombians find themselves unanchored from the pillars of safety that state institutions should represent, it comes as no surprise that state institutions and their agents may be deemed untrustworthy. As suggested by my informant Eduardo, the actions by state agents, affect how state-employed forensic anthropologists are perceived by victims of police and army brutality in terms of their trustworthiness. As outlined before, families as non-experts are inherently vulnerable when interacting with forensic anthropologists who possess specialised knowledge. This vulnerability might be exacerbated by the belief that state-employed forensic anthropologists represent the Colombian state and as such work for the perpetrators rather than the families. The question arises: How do forensic

anthropologists, including state-employed practitioners like Eduardo, foster trust? This is a question this section engages with.

“We [...] explain [to] them,” Eduardo noted, “that ok, we are the state agents, but we are social *científicos* [scientists], social professional, we are anthropologists, we are medical person, we are odontologists, we are, I don’t know, different professionals.” This statement suggests that they aim to make the family see the individual scientist, rather than a representation of a state institution. Interestingly, one may perhaps interpret this statement as pointing to the objectivity and neutrality that comes with being a scientist. Similarly, forensic anthropologist William D. Haglund, Rosenblatt (2015) states, never came to completely identify with the human rights organisation he worked for. Haglund would often use the pronoun “they” to refer to the organisation. He thus made a distinction between the human rights activists and scientists working for this institution. Eduardo elaborates that to shift families away from viewing scientists through an institutional lens and towards fostering a trusting interpersonal connection, they reassure families that they work *for* them:

[We explain to them] that we are working for them, for the families, but we are not working to protect the *victimarios* [the perpetrators]. We are trying to protect the families, with our work, with our knowledge, with our efforts, to try to *identificar* [identify] the victim, or the body, that we are looking for. That is the principal conflict with the families. Explain to them what we are doing for them. What [we] are [...] doing for them in this case. But after that, the situation is easier for us to work, for them, to work for the families. When they understand our work, it is easier. They understand so easy that we are working for them.

I talked to Alfred who aids Indigenous communities in Canada in locating potential areas of interest in the search of graves of missing children. On the relationship between the Indigenous communities, and the organisation he is employed at, he noted that “it comes down to individuals” to build trust. In other words, he must be perceived as simply Alfred and not the institution he is affiliated with. In the case of forensic anthropologists, it seems that the lines between the private individual and the professional sometimes become blurred. Colombian forensic anthropologist Marie stated, “you also get to build friendships, and people become somehow like your family, and you become also part, like a really important part, of their lives. You are a complete stranger, and they are

sharing with [you] all... everything and sometimes it's like 'you are our last hope to find them.'" Similarly, my informant Julia noted, "I have friends that lost a loved one and we became friends because of this work." Further, Maurice mentioned that he made friends amongst victims but that does not negate the fact that he is a scientist, too. In fact, for him, being a scientist comes first. He explained:

I have many friends among the families of the missing. But all the time I am saying, and this is [what] I try to explain: I am a scientist but before I am a human being, I am a person. I see a person. But when I am working, this scientific part is before. And [me] being friends [with you] doesn't mean that I will tell you what you want to hear. I will be objective, and I will show what is. No, because sometimes, some families, relatives they are not friends of [mine], they say, 'No, but you can say this...' 'No. I cannot say this because it is what it is.' So, I need to, base[d] on my findings, I need to say something. I cannot say something if I cannot prove. And this is what we also explain [to] people. So, the pressure that sometimes you can receive, even from the prosecutors [...] 'No, I cannot say this.' Because I have to say, 'if I cannot prove, I will not say.' [...] This is what people need to understand regardless of being friends, you are scientific, and you need to be objective. [...] for sure, you [...] try to find something to provide some answers. But sometimes you can say 'ok I did my best, but this is what I have.'

Maurice spoke about navigating the different roles he, and other forensic anthropologists, must inhabit when encountering the families of the missing. As this dissertation progresses, it will add to the complexity of proximity towards and detachment from the families.

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#### 4.2.1 *Confianza* – A Form of Reciprocity

For state scientists like Eduardo explicitly telling families that they work *for* them seems most important in promoting trust. Other informants added further, more implicit, aspects that they consider crucial. The Latin American concept of *confianza* will aid in framing these aspects. As mentioned previously, Cardoza (2017) holds that *una relación de confianza* needs to be established with the families of the missing as it aids with gathering antemortem information. *Confianza*, in English speaking contexts often simply translated to 'trust,' has been described as a complex, multilayered cultural characteristic of, and "psychosocial" phenomenon in Latin America (Adler Lomnitz 1977, 212;

Documet 2012). The concept implies familiarity between parties and a mutual commitment to reciprocity. Patricia Documet (2012, 491) notes the following about *confianza*:

*Confianza* is a necessity for any personal relationship that includes meaningful interactional behavior within the Latino culture. *Confianza* provides a comfortable, safe space, where the person can be himself or herself, with no need for false pretenses. A relationship with *confianza* is by definition personal, involves an informal way of relating that enables the formation of a special bond, and opens the possibility for sharing feelings and concerns at a deep level. Such a relationship also carries the understanding that the information being shared must be kept confidential and not disclosed to others who are not *en confianza*.

Conditions or actions that foster *confianza* can, according to Documet, include “a caring attitude, mutuality, informal communication styles, and repeated contact” (Ibid.). In this respect, a “caring attitude shows that the person matters to the other and is demonstrated by asking questions, listening attentively to what the person has to say, or showing interest in the person’s family” (Ibid.). Documet discusses *confianza* in the context of immigrant health, and physician and Latino patient relationships. The mentioned aspects of *confianza*, however, establish a framework in which the fostering of trust between forensic anthropologists and victims of political violence in Latin America can be examined.

**Listening.** The act of listening is a crucial component of forensic anthropological investigations in Latin America. It builds the foundation for a relationship founded in mutual trust, and ultimately for working with the relatives to find the missing family member. As previously noted by Miguel: “If I don’t know the family, the family is not going to trust me. If I don’t understand the context – and the only way to do it is to visit the families, talk with them, to understand them – I am not going to have a hypothesis of identification.” Hence, in the Latin American context, forensic anthropologists need to get to know the family, and understand their concerns, and their life, otherwise the family will not trust them. Neyerlin (n.d., 9) reminds us, “to be able to listen and to want to listen is of central importance for a human world. For only listening as an act of turning



towards the world and towards other humans makes possible actual encounter and encourages mutual understanding.”<sup>116</sup>

**Mutuality**, a further aspect that aids in fostering *confianza*, can take various forms. A prominent theme, it holds significant relevance within the Peruvian setting, where a distinct sociocultural divide exists between Indigenous *campesinos* and urban scientists. As previously outlined, mutuality may be demonstrated by engaging with Quechua-speaking communities as human individuals rather than numbers, and by showing recognition and respect for their cultural heritage. Moreover, Maurice mentioned the sharing of food. Sharing food is a complex matter as it carries cultural and social meanings (Jönsson et al. 2021). In a highly polarised, emotional and politicised environment, the supposedly simple act of accepting and sharing food can become a way of bridging barriers of power imbalances, turning the act into a bonding experience and a matter of building trust. A study carried out in the United Kingdom, for instance, concludes that communal cooking and eating “can offer a rich sensory and social environment in which trusting relationships can form between asylum seekers and host nationals” (Chaplin 2019, 1). In parallel, Maurice told me that Quechua-speaking communities would oftentimes cook for them, and thus share their food, to express their gratitude. “When we are working, they [people of the community] bring food or something to drink. They share [...] with us.” He added that in one instance he worked in an area for fifteen days, in which the families cooked for them every day, “At some point we say: ‘No, please don’t do this, we have our own food, we can do by ourselves.’ Because they don’t have the obligation to do that for us.” Acts of reciprocity, however, are deeply engrained in Peruvian Quechua culture. One of the most important concepts in this respect is *ayni*. According to Catherine J. Allen (2002, 72), “Life revolves around *ayni*. Nothing is done for free; in *ayni*, every action calls forth an equivalent response.” In fact, Allen notes, “Reciprocity is like a pump at the heart of Andean life” (73). Consequently, the author (1997, 76) points out, “Every category of being, at every level,

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<sup>116</sup> Translated from German by me.

participates in this cosmic circulation. Humans maintain interactive reciprocity relationships, not only with each other but also with their animals, their houses, their potato fields, the earth, and the sacred places in their landscape.” Accepting food, Maurice stated, “for us is different with the official state team.”<sup>117</sup> Maurice explained: “At the beginning, they didn’t want to receive anything because they are impartial, they are independent, they are neutrals, they cannot receive anything from them. This is because they said, ‘if I receive,’ I don’t know, ‘food from them, can be understood...”

“As bribery?” I asked.

“Exactly,” Maurice continued. “Something like this. And we are saying, ‘You know what? [...] No one is going to think about this. Is a matter of respect. They are showing their thanks. It is their way of saying thank-you to you for this [...] so you cannot start acting like a jerk.’” He laughed. “‘Just receive it and don’t...”

“Don’t question it,” I offered.

“Exactly. This is the truth,” Maurice said.

Patricia Documet (2012) further mentions that mutuality can be fostered through information sharing. While this seems to mainly refer to connecting through personal details like ‘My son attended the same university as yours,’ the aspect may be extended to the sharing of information as a form of knowledge exchange. As noted earlier, Ferllini (2013) suggests that the involvement of families and surviving relatives can be a disruptive factor for forensic scientists in maintaining the necessary scientific detachment required for their work. Ferllini (2013, 6) further notes about surviving family members:

In one particular instance [in Spain], the author recalls an elderly woman [at the excavation site] regressing to the past and speaking about the incidents as if they had occurred literally yesterday, with the stance conveyed being almost that of a child. In some instances, individuals may be emotionally depleted or psychologically damaged, and others of an advanced age able to only understand in part what is happening. However, such individuals cling to a tenuous and collective

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<sup>117</sup> EPAF (2015, n.p.) worked as an “official expert of the Peruvian State in cases of serious human rights violations, before internal and supranational jurisdiction and as an independent expert on behalf of violent crimes in cases that required forensic specialist advice.”

hope that on that particular day, or perhaps the next, they will finally receive confirmation of their desired news.

Although it may be true that some surviving individuals experience psychological trauma or are elderly, one should refrain from simplifying these natural reactions and their potentially ‘disruptive’ effects as the main defining traits of surviving relatives as it is reductionist and undermines their autonomy. Families, as María Alexandra López Cerquera (2018, 146) points out, “are not monolithic. Families have different life projects, needs, desires and opinions.” Families also are made up of individuals, and as such surviving family members possess agency.

In the Latin American context, families of the missing often work to acquire scientific knowledge, and forensic anthropologists sometimes even train them on various topics such as DNA analysis. Govier (1997) suggests that the knowledge and power of scientists affect everyone. As mentioned earlier, a power disparity exists between the forensic anthropologist, who holds knowledge, and the bereaved family, reliant on this knowledge and potentially seen as vulnerable. In other words, forensic anthropologists have specific knowledge that the families may not possess but that they need or desire. Forensic anthropologists training families, and thus sharing their knowledge with them, shapes the encounter between forensic practitioners and families of the missing. It moves the expert closer to the families. Sometimes, families take matters into their own hands and educate themselves about identification methods, a social process that may be likened to “scientific citizenship” – a term coined by Nicolas Sternsdorff-Cisterna (2015) in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant disaster in Japan. The concept describes the practice of citizens acquiring scientific literacy, born out of a lack of trust towards the government. The scientific knowledge Japanese citizens acquired allowed them “to critically assess expert advice and deciding to circumvent the state’s expertise to protect the health and life of current and future generations” (456). In Latin America, family members might pursue scientific knowledge for several reasons, including distrust towards the state and state agents, or a desire to reclaim agency and not feel at the mercy

of someone else<sup>118</sup> (i.e. being dependent on what experts and the state tell them). As Miguel suggested, “I mean is a like a hospital when you go to the hospital you receive a doctor who talk to you, or you have an operation you want to talk with the doctor who operate your family. Is the same.” Put differently, they might want to know what is happening regarding their family member, like someone reading up on a medical procedure a loved one needs to undergo.

My Colombian Santiago informant told me that he was instructed on how to approach the families. He said: “You have some instructions. And I remember one of them was like ‘Don’t look at the families like...,’ How do you say? I want to use a word in Spanish. *Probrecitos*<sup>119</sup>.” To underline what he meant, Santiago used the well-known exclamation of pity, “Don’t look the families like ‘aww.’”

I understood immediately, “Aw, ‘poor you,’” I offered.

“Yeah,” Santiago replied. There is a difference between expressing sympathy and compassion for someone and showing pity. The latter often being considered as having a negative connotation that drifts into condescension and superiority, therefore the opposite of mutuality. Santiago continued, “Just look at them like someone that understands you, [...] that needs answers. That was one of the instructions.” Here the aspect of mutuality is implied in that surviving relatives should not be considered as ‘different,’ ‘anything less’ or perhaps ‘damaged.’ They are people looking for the truth. Santiago noted, “And they give some instructions like ‘ok, these people they don’t understand anything about science, they don’t understand anything about *forenses*. You have to use words that they can understand what you are saying, what [analysis] you did to the victim, to the person that you have in the bones. So, you have to speak clearly.’ So, they give you some instructions. And the families [are] always with [...] a psychologist. So, before you explain to the family, the psychologist give[s] you some information about the families, or the psychologist say[s] to you, ‘ok, [...] the family are three members, or one

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<sup>118</sup> This might especially be the case for those from stigmatised and marginalised communities.

<sup>119</sup> to express pity, ‘you poor thing’

member,' [...] whoever is going to be there. The mother, the father, the brothers. So, you have like an idea of the members of the family that are going to be there. And then you explain, with your words, the procedures that you did.”

However, it is not just the information itself that is produced and shared by the forensic anthropologist that builds trust, but also ideas and perceptions surrounding who the person delivering that information is. Russell Hardin (2002, 11) holds, “What matters for trust is not merely any expectation that you will act in certain ways but also my belief that you have the relevant motivations to act in those ways, that you deliberately take my interests into account because they are mine.” Before considering communication strategies and how to treat the families, establishing trust delves much deeper. It starts with the initial motivation that led the forensic anthropologist to pursue such a career in the first place.

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#### 4.2.2 Encountering the Ego: Doing the Right Thing for the Right Reasons

Only a person who feels his preference to be a matter of course, not something out of the ordinary, and who has no thought of heroism but only of a duty undertaken with sober enthusiasm, is capable of becoming the sort of spiritual pioneer the world needs. There are no heroes of action – only heroes of renunciation and suffering.

– Albert Schweitzer, *Out of my Life and Thought*

In January 2023, I gave an introductory lecture on forensic anthropology at Western University. Attempting an icebreaker, I asked the students if there was anyone among them who might have thought about becoming a forensic anthropologist. One student raised his hand. I asked him why he wanted to become one. “Because it is cool,” the student responded. Sue Black (2015, 27) comments on the rising number of students entering the field of forensic anthropology, “There was a real blossoming of courses in

the late 1990s and early 2000s because universities realised if you stick that sexy F word, forensics, on the front of anything, then you get students' bottoms on seats. Many of those courses eventually fell away either because the teaching wasn't up to standard or students realised there wouldn't be a job at the end of it. However interesting it might be, we don't need 5,000 new forensic scientists a year." I wondered what moved people to become forensic anthropologists. For my informants César, Maurice and Sara, there are two kinds of people in forensic anthropology.

I met my informant César in a café close to the Colombian National Museum in Bogotá. César believes that your motivation to work as a forensic scientist affects your interactions with the families of the missing. "I think there are two kinds of forensic [practitioners], in general, forensic," César began sipping on his Colombian coffee. These two kinds have competing values: ego and empathy. On one side, you have the type of person that "wants to work in the team because is nice, is cool, is fashion, no? You have bones<sup>120</sup>, CSI and they are..." Here César exclaimed excitement by waving his arms around a bit, going "aaaah." He continued his explanation, "And then they have an approach that is not appropriate. When they talk with the victims, they say 'whatever.' They are..." He looked for the word.

"'Dismissive' maybe," I offered tentatively.

"Yes," César said, "and the other kind of people is the people that think, that believe, that feel, that is necessary work in the team. [That do] everything to try to find the people that [were] disappeared. And [they] understand that the knowledge that everyone has is important to try to find the people."

"Would you say you fall into the latter category," I asked, hoping he would not take offence.

"Of course!" he pointed out.

Similarly, Maurice distinguished between individuals who become forensic anthropologists because they believe in the cause and those who do it for ego or

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<sup>120</sup> Note: He might have meant bones in general or 'Bones' the television show.

popularity reasons. “Based on what I saw in my life,” he told me, “there are different people. There are people who really really believe this, and [there] are some people who believe that they are doing this for the sake of the families.” For Maurice, people who approached the work this way did it not just because they liked forensic anthropology, but because they were committed to something more, to the search for the missing, perhaps even to the truth. He contrasted that type of forensic practitioner with people who “become [a] forensic anthropologist because it’s cool being forensic anthropologist. [When they are at a party] or whatever or catching up with people. When people are asking you ‘ah, what do you do?’ ‘I am a forensic anthropologist.’ People start making a lot of talk. Personally, I try to avoid saying I am a forensic anthropologist all the time [he laughed]. Because I don’t like to start answering questions about this. But [with] my friends for sure because they know what I do. But with [strangers] I say I am an archaeologist. And people start asking me about dinosaurs.” He laughed again.

My informant Sara too shared her opinion on what should motivate someone when working as a forensic anthropologist:

If you want to be a forensic person, your motivation should be humanitarian motivation. Humanitarian doesn’t mean that you want to be the hero of the world. No! Humanitarian for me means that you will take care first [of] the needs of the relative of the victims. That you are going to be conscious that you are not working just with another material. You are working with human people. With the parent, the son of someone else. For me, it should be the best, the first, the most important request. Not to think about money. No. Should be [aware] that the first thought in your mind is the humanitarian aspect that you are bringing. And don’t expect anything from your work. Just doing your work in silence trying to help and support as much as you can.

She added that there are people who do not “care about the ideals or the justice, they just want their salary and the other people who are very compromised with the ideals with the justice but also with the big ego who want to be recognised as heroes of the world. And no collaboration at all, they just want to talk bad about you, bad about your work.” Similarly, César noted, “Always the ego is the problem. Always.”

On January 27, 2023, walkers came across an abandoned dog and mobile phone on a park bench close to a river in Lancashire, Great Britain. The phone was still connected to a work call, the dog was unleashed but waited patiently for its owner's return. However, there was no sign of 45-year-old Nicola Bulley. As the days went by, Lancashire police struggled to locate the whereabouts of the mother-of-two. In week two of the search, a specialist private diving team was called in to assist in the search. Its leader, an expert in underwater search operations, was confident they would find her. "If she is in here, we find her," he is quoted in an online news outlet (Chadwick 2023). After a three-day search, the team had not located Nicola. It was only after twenty days after her disappearance that her body was found in the river one mile from the bench. One reader of the article notes online: "[The specialist] was highly unprofessional given he deals with such sensitive issues. He talks far too much, it's all about his ego, and this is likely to bring even further anguish and false hope to the loved ones of a missing person. He needs an opportune reminder that in circumstances like these the better part of valour is discretion" (Ibid.).

Some of my informants expressed that ego should play no role in the type of work they do. Sara pointed out: "I didn't want to come back to that work because I saw the worst of the human people, the living people [...]. Most of the people were just looking [for] money. They want their names on the cover of the book, they want their name [...] on TV, they want to feel like heroes. I mean the forensic people [...], not all of them, but some of them they want to be recognised as the heroes of the world." In the aforementioned British case, the proclaimed forensic expert overstepped by making a, perhaps ego-driven, promise to the family of the missing Nicola. One which he did not keep. "It's very important to be honest with the people," my informant César noted.

"You should not make promises," I stated.

"Ja," he agreed. "And the people understand. It's hard but is necessary. When [...] your relationship is in that way is easier. But if you say 'no, we can do it. We have to find...'"

"We are going to find them..." Ana, who joined my interview with César, corrected.

I asked, "And are there people who make these promises?"



César pulled his head back and responded with what I can only describe as the drawn-out howl of a dog. “Every time,” Ana noted with a hint of defeat in her voice.

For César, Maurice, Sara and many others, it was important to approach forensic investigations without ego, without hubris, and without the claim that you will definitely find the missing person or be able to determine fully what happened. You cannot make promises because you can never be certain that you will find the answers. These different approaches seemed to mark out different motivations and different kinds of forensic practitioners. For César, the proper motivation for this kind of work must not be based in the ego but must come from a place of emotional connection to the cases and the families. That motivation, a kind of professional ethical disposition, shaped how they thought of forensic anthropological work itself. Not only did it mean that one should not be ego-driven, but it also meant that one had to establish an emotional connection with the families, to build trust with them, to work, in a sense, for them. And that entails a different kind of forensic science. For César, this approach “puts you next” to the families, and it stands in stark contrast to the seemingly globally dominant Western approach in forensic anthropological work, based on scientific detachment and the separation of forensic anthropologists from families (as detailed in Chapter 2). In the Latin American context, scientific detachment can block the emotional connections necessary to build trust and work with the families of the missing.

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### 4.2.3 Encountering Emotions as a Guiding Principle

My informant Canadian archaeologist and anthropologist Emma noted:

Why did they have to leave to cry? Why did they think I couldn't cry in that room in front of those other people? Because we were all acting like we were scientists. Everyone was putting on a big show that we were all scientists who were objective, and we were gonna get to the bottom of the mystery even though no one is in that room except for maybe like two people [who] had any experience. [...] And I talked to my boyfriend about it afterwards, and he was like: ‘Yeah, you just have to kind of shut that part of your brain off.’ And I was like: ‘Mmh, what!?’ ‘So yeah, you just go shut it off,’ and I was like: ‘I don't know if I want to do that. I don't know if I am capable of doing that. But doesn't it seem weird to you that no one

emotionally prepared us for this? And now you are just telling me, oh you just have to shut it off?’ I don’t know if I want the person who is trying to solve my murder to shut off their emotions when they are doing that. I know you have to compartmentalise a little bit, I understand that, in order to emotionally deal with it but... it felt weird. And it felt like we weren’t allowed to talk about that stuff.

This anecdote exemplifies that the topic of emotions in the world of forensic anthropology is complex. In both, Western and Latin American contexts, forensic anthropologists do not deny the presence of emotions in their work. However, as shown in Chapter 2, forensic anthropologists in Western, medicolegal, expert witness-focused contexts are normally removed from the emotions of families, and in some cases actively avoid both the feelings themselves (or overt discussions and displays of them) and the grieving family members. Emotions are often portrayed as an obstacle to maintaining scientific detachment and objectivity, both of which are deemed critical to forensic anthropological work. In the context of Latin America, however, my informants frame emotions not just as a positive element, but as something central to their work. Mike noted in this regard: “Of course, you are [emotionally impacted]! How can you not be, standing next to this family member who is crying and looking for their father or wife or whomever. Of course, you are moved by it. But that’s not a bad thing at all, right? It’s just a question of to what extend is that harmful or helpful towards you. And it’s not one or the other, it’s obviously not like that, that simple.” Maurice shared a similar contention in that you can feel the suffering and emotions radiating off the families, which extends to contexts in which you do not even speak the language. He told me: “Even if you work in a context where you don’t speak the language, you can feel the pain of the families [when] they receive the remains. So, you perceive. Is like something around you, to surround you and you can feel the pain and the sorrow of the people. Despite that they are not saying anything. Despite that you cannot talk to this person.”

Acknowledging and embracing the emotional aspects of forensic anthropological work was not just seen as a positive (or unavoidable) aspect of the work for forensic anthropologists; it was also deemed important because it facilitated the necessary relationships with the families of the missing. Emotions, I was repeatedly told, brought the forensic anthropologist closer to the families. César explained it this way: “You have

to feel. Necessary. Is necessary to feel because [it] put[s] you next to the people that is looking for [their loved ones]. I think that the day when [...] people doesn't feel, doesn't serve to the work.” For César, there is simply no other way to approach the work. He told me that the day you do not feel something about the work is the day you quit the job altogether. “Because you have to feel. Your approach is very different, and the [families] see the different approach and say, ‘that people is good and that people bad.’ Yes, is a big difference and is important to [the families] that if you are working in this you need to feel like this, like they are feeling, too.”

Similarly, Mike, a North American forensic anthropologist with work experience in Colombia, noted, “Only by allowing yourself to be in *closer proximity, physically, mentally, emotionally*, with the families, can you really serve them well. [...] You know the Latin Americans would tell me this, right? Not in those words but for them it's the most natural thing.” In the Western context, in which forensic anthropologists predominantly act as expert witnesses in the judicial system, emotions are often perceived as disruptive. For instance, as previously mentioned, Sue Black (2007, n.p.) notes they keep away from the emotions of families for good reasons, to maintain their objectivity: “You can't afford to be influenced by their emotion and their situation. So the majority of our work is in clinical isolation.” However, in Latin America, most forensic anthropological work is not done in “clinical isolation.” Rather, it is done in complex social and political contexts, and as I have been arguing throughout, the context shapes both the forensic anthropological work itself and the forensic anthropologist. In Latin America, forensic anthropologists more commonly operate in a humanitarian-centred, non-judicial, context. Families play a pivotal role in their work. As shown through César's and Mike's statements positive emotions such as empathy are framed as guiding and empowering. They affect how the forensic anthropologist approaches the interactions with the families, which the latter pick up on. Fredy Peccerelli (2022, n.p.), director and one of the founding members of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, put it this way:

I guess the most important part of it is [the question] what if it was you? What would you want to do if someone in your family disappeared, if your son, your husband, your father disappeared. What would you do? What would you want to

do? That's what we try to do. Something so powerful consumes you. The pain, the impotence, the sense of emptiness that every one of those family members has, flows through you, [through] everyone that works here and we use that to channel it, to try to find the disappeared and at the same time it gives us strength to be able to continue. And that's why I refuse to stop this work. I refuse to just let it go because I know that the second we stop doing this here in Guatemala it will probably end.

My Peruvian informant Sofía recounted an incident in which she became emotional and shed tears during a video presentation at a workshop, prompting a colleague to emphasise the importance of acknowledging and valuing emotions:

I was crying like a baby, you know. It was very, it was a very hard video on a search on a person from Chile. And that person told me, at the moment that you lose [those] feelings and that sentiment, you cannot continue doing this because that is what [gives] you your objective to continue. To be perseverant that you and the families, and we as a team know that you are gonna do anything that you possibly can do to identify that person or to just give a very good and objective analysis to the prosecutor, no?

My informant Maurice described himself as “very emotional.” Maurice said his friend told him: “You need to move [away] from this, you cannot work in this because you are not helpful because [the] cases affect you a lot. And this is not good.” He disagreed with her. “The day that I can't feel anything about this,” he proclaimed, “this is the day that I will say I will not work in this anymore.”

Emotions in forensic anthropological investigations are a complex subject matter which cannot be regarded in simplified terms. In the Western context in which forensic anthropologists primarily appear as expert witnesses in the judicial system, ‘feeling too much’ often seems to be seen by practitioners as a potential hindrance to their objectivity. By implication, scientific detachment is necessary due to the nature of the work and the context in which it is carried out. In short, it is what makes the work possible as several quotes by practitioners, as outlined in Chapter 2, suggest. In her anecdote, Emma described a “very particular understanding” of what her boyfriend thought was expected of a forensic anthropologist. Emma sees this understanding as “toxic:”

Objective, professional, always knowing the right answer. Never admitting when you don't know the answer. When you are wrong. I think the objective part is the

part that filters through the most. It's not just a forensic problem in North American anthropology, it's like a bioarch[aeology] problem more widely, where people seem to think that you can solve all the world's problems by being objective. And that the more objective people are the better workers [they are]. Which I do not agree with. Because I don't think you can really be truly objective about anything. So, I don't think it is just a forensic anthropology problem. I think this was a wider science of anthropology problem, in North America. I can't speak to the South American context obviously.

My informants believe that emotions can serve as guiding elements without compromising the objectivity of scientific analysis. Indeed, they suggest that you cannot do this job if you do not feel. Yet, for many of my informants – similar to the seemingly prevailing Western approach of *if you have to cry, you can cry at night* – there is a place and time for feelings. Even though emotions are embraced and a key part of the work for Latin American forensic anthropologists, they also talk about the right or appropriate ways to have, handle, or show emotions.

Sofía told me that she and her colleague were delivering human remains to family members along with their scientific findings when their usual scientific objectivity was interrupted by a question. “Did it hurt? Did she suffer?” one of the relatives asked. “It was a question that nobody expects,” Sofía said. “No,” her colleague reassured the relative, “it was fast. She died very fast with this.” As the family member started to cry, Sofía had to leave the room, “You are the scientist there. You can cry, but not there! You have to emotionally help the relatives; [and then] you are the one that are gonna be emotional? So difficult. So, for those questions you have to be prepared. Sometimes the questions are gonna be like that.” I commented that this is not something you get taught in university. “Never! Never,” she agreed.

Colombian state-employed scientist Eduardo shared a similar contention about regulating one's feelings in front of the families: “You can feel the sadness, you can feel the pain, you can feel all these feelings that the families have about the disappeared and about the dead of the family. [...] *Es muy difícil no sentir. Es muy difícil apartarse de ese*

*sentimiento.*”<sup>121</sup> However, Eduardo tries “to have a pokerface,” and he demonstrated what he means by breathing deeply in and out and putting his facial features into a neutral mask. This pokerface, he stressed, is for “that moment. But after the moment, you can uncharge all these feelings, with your family, with the friends, with maybe the colleagues talking and talking about the situation and talking with my family about what is happening in the country with all this situation of violence, of disappeared people, missing people. It’s the way to uncharge the feelings. But all this is after the moment I have contact with the families.”

Eduardo’s idea of a pokerface might be a form of what Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012, 2003, 1983) calls *emotional labor*. Emotional labour, according to Hochschild “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – in this case [of flight attendants], the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (7). Applied to the interaction with families of the missing, this might mean that when engaging with families of the missing, forensic anthropologists may need to control their emotions to present a calm demeanour that reassures families they are being supported by knowledgeable scientific professionals who are genuinely motivated to provide accurate information, especially when informing them that their loved one did not experience any suffering. At the same time, they need to allow emotions as a way to show families their genuine intentions and empathy towards them and the fate of their loved ones. The dissertation will revisit the topic of emotional complexity in a subsequent discussion in Chapter 6.

The preceding section of the dissertation delved into the sociopolitical context within which forensic anthropologists operate in Colombia and Peru, particularly focusing on their encounters with the families of missing individuals. The following chapters will further explore the working environment of these professionals, emphasising the risks they encounter. Key themes to be addressed include the danger of knowing, the perception of state forensic anthropologists as adversaries, and the pivotal role of

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<sup>121</sup> English: “It’s very hard not to feel. It’s very hard to get away from that feeling.”

neutrality of the International Committee of the Red Cross in facilitating work in Colombia. It is to a discussion of these themes that I now turn.

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## Chapter 5

### 5 Encountering Violence

**2 August 2022, Bogotá.** The bright faces of numerous young men are smiling at me as I pass them. Some are dressed in football jerseys; some are leaning against their motorcycle. Their families and friends come and go, many will sit down beside them; smoking, crying, perhaps telling them about their day, their worries and hopes. Maybe they are talking about the happy times they shared. Whatever the content of these quiet intimate conversations, the smile on the young men's faces engraved in the white marble of their final resting places stay forever unchanged. Usually, I bask in the tranquillity graveyards provide. They offer a window into our societies, perhaps telling us more about the living than the dead. On this cloudy Colombian day, the main cemetery of Bogotá would not bring its usual serenity, however. Only stark reminders of suffering and despair.

While Peru's Civil War has officially ended, armed conflicts and violence persist in Colombia. *How does work in the complexity of a shifting context look like for forensic anthropologists, and what dangers do they encounter?* To delve into these questions is the aim of this chapter. It provides a brief overview of the persistent conflicts and violence among different groups in Colombia, highlighting the risks faced by forensic anthropologists in the field. This sets the stage for the exploration of two main themes. The first examines the perceptions of 'enemies of the state' such as paramilitary and guerrilla groups towards various institutions and how their perception puts forensic anthropologists at risk or offers protection. In this regard, the experiences of forensic anthropologists affiliated with the Attorney General's Office, the *Unidad de Búsqueda*, and the International Committee of the Red Cross will be closely examined. The second



theme explores the specialised skills and knowledge<sup>122</sup> forensic anthropologists possess, and the relation between the production of knowledge from evidence<sup>123</sup> and the contexts in which forensic anthropologists work.

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## 5.1 Setting the Scene: Colombia's Continuous Unrest

I come from one of the three most beautiful countries on Earth.

There is an explosion of life there. Thousands of multi-coloured species in the seas, in the skies, in the lands...I come from the land of yellow butterflies and magic. There in the mountains and valleys of all greens, not only do abundant waters flow down, but also streams of blood. I come from a land of bloody beauty.

My country is not only beautiful, it is also violent.

– Colombian President Gustavo Petro Urrego, UN speech 2022<sup>124</sup>

To understand and highlight some of the risks forensic anthropologists in Colombia are subjected to, especially those working in the field throughout the country, it is necessary to look at the sociopolitical context within which they work. It is a context characterised by continuous conflicts, violence and precarity. In telling the history of Latin America, some assess violence as an influential aspect of Latin American culture, and thus Colombia. Marie Arana (2019, 2), for instance, speaks of “Latin America’s abiding culture of the strongman.” She notes that many writers such as Gabriel García Márquez pointed to Latin America’s tendency “to solve problems by unilateral and alarming displays of power. By brutality. By a reliance on muscle, coercion, and an overweening

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<sup>122</sup> e.g. on osteology, anatomy, biomechanics

<sup>123</sup> i.e. what happened to the person

<sup>124</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

love for dictators and the military: *la mano dura*, the iron fist” (Ibid.).<sup>125</sup> Paul Farmer (2003, 48) challenges the notion of culture being used as concept to explain the “*distribution of misery*.” He argues that “‘Culture’ does not explain suffering; it may at worst furnish an alibi” (49). Farmer assesses:

The abuse of the concept of cultural specificity is particularly insidious in discussions of suffering in general and of human rights abuses specifically: cultural difference, verging on a cultural determinism, is one of the several forms of essentialism used to explain away assaults on dignity and suffering. Practices including torture are to be “part of their culture” or “in their nature” – “their” designating either the victims, or the perpetrators, or both, as may be expedient (48).

In other words, acts of violence must not be rationalised by attributing them to the cultural norms of a particular group. Instead, Farmer emphasises the importance of examining the “national and international mechanisms that create and deepen inequalities” (Ibid.). Historian Gonzalo Sánchez G. (2001, 3) states:

Colombian violence has been multiple in terms of its origins, objectives, geography, *modi operandi*, and strategies. [...] Organized crime, guerrilla struggle, dirty war, and diffuse social violence – differentiated forms of violence but quite often intertwined – can be part of a single situation.

Put differently, the history of violence in contemporary Colombia in its various formations is not so much a story of individually separated narratives (or mechanisms) as of intersecting threads. The result is an entanglement of various forms of violence and conflicts spanning across decades, geographical areas, ages, ethnicities and social classes.<sup>126</sup> My informant, Colombian forensic anthropologist, Santiago noted: “The social context that we have is violence. In all Latin America.” Journalist Mark Bowden (2001, 12) states that “violence stalks Colombia like a biblical plague,” and Juana Suárez

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<sup>125</sup> LaRosa and Mejía (2017, 4) paint a more optimistic picture by leaving “a catastrophic vision of Colombian history behind” to show a “Colombia that endures.”

<sup>126</sup> As Uribe (2004, 80) notes, in Colombia, “violence does not follow linguistic, religious, or ethnic lines of difference.”

(2010, 19) speaks of an “endemic presence of violence”<sup>127</sup> in Colombia. It has been suggested that *violence* is typically classified as either a singular generic entity – as expressed in the previous statements – or divided into multiple distinct types (Moser 2001). Juana Suárez (2010) contends that simplifying the events in Colombia as *violence* having only one possible meaning would be reductionist as it fails to capture the intricate nature of this phenomenon and its ongoing complexities. Suárez (2010, 23) notes that given the “coexistence of political violence and violence generated by common crime, in Colombia one cannot speak of violence as a univocal term, but rather of various forms of violence.”<sup>128</sup> This chapter focuses on political violence encompassing violence stemming from the state and its armed forces, guerrilla and paramilitary groups, as well as violence arising from crime and drug trafficking. Forensic anthropologists in Colombia are exploring the repercussions of such violence, which consequently exposes them to potential harm. I am not attempting to explain the violence in Bogotá and Colombia.<sup>129</sup> Rather, I will highlight its contours and sketch out key actors to show how it shapes the lived experience of forensic anthropologists. Further, I map out the ways in which people talk about violence in all its ambiguity, and how questions of violence, security and uncertainty get folded into everyday life.

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### 5.1.1 *La Violencia*

“Trying to contextualise, *grosso modo*, the Colombian context is a major task,” Josefina Echavarría A. (2010, 18) states. Given the complex subject matter, where to

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<sup>127</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

<sup>128</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

<sup>129</sup> The phenomenon of violence in its multiplicity in Colombia has brought about its own field of academic study. *Violentólogos*, which translates to “those who study the violence” (LaRosa and Mejía 2017, 95) provide detailed analyses of violence and conflict in Colombia and explore, for instance, the mechanisms that created its continuous conflicts. See authors such as María Victoria Uribe, Germán Guzmán Campos, Orlando Fals Borda, Eduardo Umaña Luna, Michael J. LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía.

begin with outlining Colombia's history of violence? The period called *La Violencia*<sup>130</sup> has been characterised as a pivotal moment in Colombia's modern history (Sánchez 1992). The lack of consensus on the exact duration of *La Violencia* highlights the complex nature of this phenomenon. It has been given a general time frame spanning from the 1940s into the 1950s (Chasteen 2006, 2001). Others deal with "its distinctive periodization" between circa 1945 until 1964 (Palacios 2006, xv). It also has been dated between 1948 and 1964, followed by a period of "modern war" (Dudley 2004). Yet, others frame it "from about 1946 to 1960" (LaRosa and Mejía 2017, 93). Michael J. LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía (2017, 93) conclude that it is "impossible to date the origins of 'the violence,' but it is safe to say that Liberal-Conservative tensions, the root cause of the violence, had been boiling over since the 1930s."

Since their establishment in the early nineteenth century, the Liberal and Conservative political parties have prevailed over Colombian politics (Dudley 2004). The first decades of the twentieth century were marked by three areas of conflict: struggles of the working class due to poor working conditions, rural conflicts over land where impoverished individuals were displaced from their land by proprietors of large estates, and the war with neighbouring Peru in 1932-33 (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Sánchez G. 2001). Regarding the struggle for land, my informant Miguel noted, "The main problem in Colombia is the land. The property of the land. Many people don't want to give up what they have, rich people. Is the origin of the *paramilitarismo*, all those kinds of things, and the *narcos*. That's why as a society [Colombia] is hugely divided, like Spain. [...] [A] very small amount of people concentrates the huge fortunes here in Colombia." The disputes over poor labour conditions are encapsulated by one tragedy specifically. In 1928, 'United Fruit' Banana workers went on a strike to protest inadequate working conditions and low pay. The strike tragically culminated in a massacre carried out by the Colombian army under the Conservative government (Bergquist et al. 2001). The incident is referenced in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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<sup>130</sup> Capitalisation is used to mark a particular period.

(2006), and I found it alluded to in an art installation in Bogotá along with other massacres that occurred (see Figures 6 and 7). The massacre is not only believed to have established a precedent for the rest of the century, where conflicts were resolved through violence rather than peaceful negotiation, it also played a significant role in propelling forward the political career of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán Ayala, (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Kirk 2003; Sánchez G. et al. 2001; Bushnell 1993). Populist presidential candidate Gaitán Ayala embodied the hope of the marginalised labour class for a brighter future. “I am not a man, I am a people!” he would proclaim (Bowden 2001, 8). Although he did not win the presidency in 1946, he was highly favoured for the 1950 elections. The hopes of the working class were crushed, however, when Gaitán Ayala was assassinated in Bogotá on April 9, 1948 (Guzmán Campos et al. 2005; Safford and Palacios 2002; Sánchez G. 2001; Bushnell 1993). With his assassination “the modern history of Colombia starts”, and “[a]ll hope for a peaceful future in Colombia ended,” Bowden (2001, 10 and 11) notes.

The frustration felt by marginalised people over the Conservatives winning the 1946 presidential election, alongside the assassination of populist Gaitán Ayala, plunged the country into deep crisis (LaRosa and Mejía 2017). The uprising that followed would be referred to as *nueve de abril*, or *el bogotazo* (Bushnell 1993). Initially limited to Bogotá, riots and violence eventually spread to other cities and the countryside, with *La Violencia* eventually engulfing Colombia (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Uribe 2013; Dudley 2004; Allen 2002; Bowden 2001). Horrific displays of violence characterise this period, which includes acts of vengeance where individuals sought retribution for previous killings, and bodies were dismembered and mutilated<sup>131</sup> (Uribe 2020; Kirk 2003; Sánchez 1992). It was a conflict among civilians rather than being driven by ideologies or external interests (Kirk 2003). Attacks from members of both political parties, Robin Kirk (2003, 25) states, “were not crimes between strangers, but acts of astonishing violence between people who had known each other their whole lives.” The fighting was thus characterised by what Kimberly Theidon (2013) had termed *intimate enemies* in the context of Peru’s

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<sup>131</sup> For an in-depth discussion about the treatment of the body during *La Violencia* see María Victoria Uribe (2018; 2004).

internal conflict. By the late 1950s, violence in Colombia had gradually lessened, in part due to a military dictatorship that lasted four years, and to a political initiative known as the National Front. This new bipartisan agreement involved the Liberal and Conservative parties taking turns in the presidency every four years<sup>132</sup> (McFarland Sánchez-Moreno 2018; LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Bowden 2001; Bushnell 1993).

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### 5.1.2 Emergence of Guerrilla and Paramilitary Groups

The new political arrangement did not, however, resolve the conflicts. As Michael J. LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía (2017, 95) note, the “narrowness of the elite bipartisan agreement” gave rise to another source of violence. Leftist guerrilla groups, alongside paramilitary units and Colombia’s armed forces brought about new suffering for the people of Colombia. The first guerrilla group to emerge was the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; ELN) in 1964. Drawing inspiration from the strategies of Marxist revolutionary Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara in Cuba, its members aspired to replicate Castro’s rise to power in Colombia (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Leech 2011). I felt rather uncomfortable when my friend and I ended up in a bar in Bogotá that appeared to have been dedicated to Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. As we drank from mugs that bore the Marxist (-Leninist) revolutionaries’ faces, I joked to my friend: “Should I tell the owner that I was born in Communist Germany? I’m sure I will make a new best friend.”

In 1966, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*; FARC) appeared in response to the struggles in the countryside in the 1930s and 1940s that were suppressed by the Colombian government (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Leech 2011). They later changed their name to The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*; FARC-EP) (Leech 2011). This

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<sup>132</sup> The bipartisan government lasted from 1958 until 1974 (Palacios 2006; Uprimny Yepes 2001).

group was influenced by Soviet communist movements. One year later, the Maoist-inspired guerrilla group Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación*; EPL) appeared. Despite signing a peace agreement in 1991 and seeing over two thousand members demobilise to pursue politics through their own party, a significant number within the group refused to accept the accord. The faction that remained encountered numerous challenges in recent years, including struggles to appoint a leader, conflicts with the guerrilla organisation ELN, and internal rifts. These issues have fueled speculation that “EPL’s days as a criminal force may be numbered” (InSight Crime 2022a, n.p.).

In the 1970s, the 19<sup>th</sup> of April Movement (*Movimiento 19 de Abril*, or M-19) emerged. The guerrilla group focused on urban areas and gained notoriety for stealing Simón Bolívar’s sword and seizing control of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá in 1985, a tragic event as noted earlier. Following their demobilisation in 1990, M-19 transitioned into politics by forming its own political party (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Carrigan 1993). Colombia’s current President Gustavo Petro is a former member of this guerilla group.

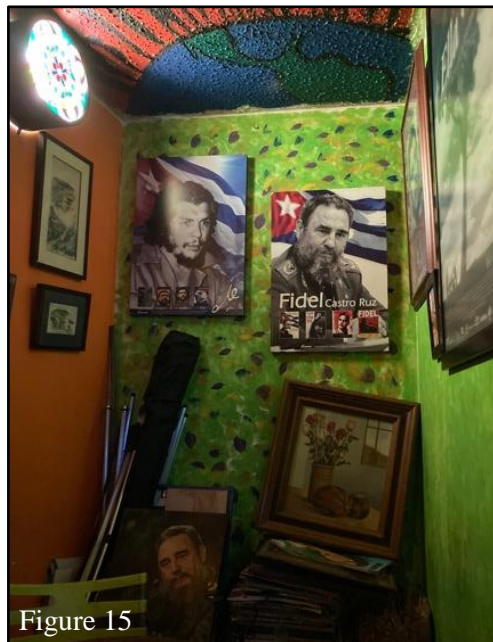


Figure 15



Figure 16

**Figure 15 and Figure 16: A bar dedicated to Communist revolutionaries.**  
© Franziska Albrecht

The emergence of guerilla groups and paramilitaries in Colombia has significantly shaped the country's contemporary context. These armed actors have played a central role in the ongoing conflicts, which have had far-reaching implications for the country's sociopolitical landscape, the lived experience of its population and ultimately that of forensic anthropologists.

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### 5.1.3 Intersecting Violence

By the end of the 1970s, cultural historian John Charles Chasteen (2006, 2001, 307) notes, “the rate of violent death in Colombia began to set world records for a country not at war. It was in this context of lawlessness that Pablo Escobar pioneered a new business, smuggling marijuana and then cocaine to the United States.” Until he died in 1993, Escobar's notorious Medellín cartel spread terror and corruption throughout Colombia, particularly in his beloved city (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Bowden 2001). During Escobar's reign, Medellín became known as the “murder capital of the world” (McFarland Sánchez-Moreno 2018, 2). My informant César noted that in the “80s and 90s [it] was very complicated living in Colombia.” Ana, who accompanied the interview with César, added, “With the bombs.” I wondered out loud if describing the situation as *complicated* would be a significant understatement. Ana responded, “Yeah, normal for us.”

In parallel, as the Cold War drew to a close in the late 1980s and early 1990s, funding from the former Soviet Union for the FARC-EP, a group inspired by Soviet communism, ceased. The organisation increasingly relied on entrepreneurial activities like kidnapping, extortion, drug operations, imposing taxes, and unlawfully acquiring land to sustain itself (O'Neill McCleskey 2022; McFarland Sánchez-Moreno 2018; Klobucista and Renwick 2017). Consequently, conflicts arising from leftist ideologies – which focused on achieving a perceived improved state for marginalised groups – intertwined increasingly with issues related to land ownership and drug trafficking. The rise of paramilitary organisations, paid by the wealthy elite and large landowners to safeguard their properties against guerrilla groups, exacerbated the existing dire circumstances by introducing further violence (McFarland Sánchez-Moreno 2018; LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Kirk 2003).



The paramilitaries, it has been argued, “were hard to distinguish from death squads for the military, or private armies for wealthy landowners and drug lords” (McFarland Sánchez-Moreno 2018, 16). Several paramilitary groups formed a coalition called United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, or AUC), about which it has been noted that “its mere presence and the ghastly, gruesome massacres it orchestrated caused reasonable people to question who, in fact, was in charge in Colombia” (LaRosa and Mejía 2017, 99).

Historians Frank Safford and Marco Palacios (2002) note that toward the end of the 1980s, a phase of violence began that is marked by a convergence of drug traffickers, guerrillas, and paramilitaries in different times and places (and which continues to this day). The authors state, “These are intermixed, in alliance or in conflict, with clientelistic politicians, cattle-owners, the military, and the police” (347). My Colombian informant Ana told me that the conflicts and violence in Colombia moved spatially and started to overlap. She pointed out that over the decades, violence has moved from different areas in the country, and that when one group would “retire” or dissolve, new groups would emerge to take their place. Decades of “*paramilitarismo*” led to more and more killings. “And the violence etc. moves between those groups,” she told me, noting that various groups vied for control over different territories, cities, and regions of the country. The causes of the violence shifted throughout the years too, from fighting for land to fighting over the control of territory, especially as the *narcotráfico* or drug traffickers emerged and began to use violence to control key routes. “I think in the ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s, the conflict was [about] the access to the land, for farmers etc. they [fought] for justice,” Ana told me. “But the ‘90s was about another thing, about drugs, about something else, so the violence was just violence. [...] It was indiscriminate, they killed [not only] people from another group but also civilians [...]. They know that as *dirty war*.” With intersecting state, guerrilla and paramilitary violence, in addition to conflicts related to drug trafficking and land ownership, violence had become an everyday occurrence in Colombia. Robin Kirk (2003, 177) likened the situation to the common practice of discussing the weather: “Will it be cloudy today or clear? Will there be a massacre or just bodies along the road?” According to Gonzalo Sánchez G. (2022), a total of 4,216 massacres were documented in Colombia between 1958 and 2020. More recently, these

incidents have been occurring at a disturbing frequency, with one massacre happening approximately every three and a half days (Ibid.).

My informant Santiago noted in our Zoom interview that conflicts in Colombia are contained within specific regions. He contrasted this situation with the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. He put it this way:

In the Ukraine, you can see the war in every place but in Colombia, you don't see the conflict in every place. You have to travel to the places. To the outside of the cities, [to] the rural areas. Especially, in places where [you can find] coco leaves cultivation.

“So, it's basically like two worlds – the city and the countryside?” I asked.

Santiago agreed with my observation. “Yes!” he exclaimed, “all this violence is for the drug control.” Santiago highlighted a duality within Colombia – a juxtaposition between the “normal” Colombia and a Colombia scarred by the illegal drug industry and the violence it has spawned. He noted:

Don't think that Colombia [is] like in the films, like in the movies. Like you are going to see a lot of people shooting, or something, no... or something like that, no. Because when I talk about the drugs [being] a huge problem is because is a huge business, the production is in the rural areas. [...] So don't worry about your stay [...] in Bogotá or something like that. But the thing with the drug trafficking is that is like if you see two Colombias. Like the normal Colombia [and] the Colombia that has a lot of production of this... of cocaine.

Despite the conflicts having been pushed back to specific rural areas, Santiago warned me regarding my upcoming visit to Colombia: “If you go to specific places alone, maybe be careful [...]. It depends on where you are going to travel. Just talk with the other people and ask them about the safety of the place, if you can go alone, things like that. I mean, don't do anything without asking first. [If] you don't know the place, ask first. Yes. You will be fine. It's not too bad. I mean you are not going to be in a very specific rural area where you have illegal groups or something like that. No. So you will be like in the normal place of the country.”

Another informant, Colombian forensic anthropologist Sebastián told me in our remote interview that in Colombia “it's dangerous depending on where you go.” Although he comes from the city, there are some areas where he cannot go. Bogotá, he

said, “is divided into North and South.” In the Northern part, wealthier people live that have “good flats and stuff like that.” In the Southern region, the majority of criminal activities would occur. Yet, the situation in the city does not seem comparable to the countryside: “But on the other hand,” Sebastián noted, “you have the rural areas. You know, the countryside. I must tell you even for me in Colombia for the last year that I have been living here in the city, when I go out of the city, is horrible. [...] The infrastructure is terrible, there are these towns that still have no pavement. The roads to reach [the places], they are horrible. [...] I don’t know even for me there are some places [...], there are places in the country where people<sup>133</sup> don’t really go. Like the West side of the country, people don’t go there. It’s too dangerous.”

Rural areas are increasingly linked with violence compared to the perceived safety of urban centres. Numerous Colombians have expressed to me that “Bogotá is similar to any other major city.” However, as suggested by Sebastián, within the city itself, danger and crime are associated more so with certain areas, with the perception that the North of Bogotá is a safer area compared to the South. My observations in Bogotá seem to indicate a broader sense of general insecurity. Upon arriving in Bogotá, one of the initial observations is the prevalence of gated structures – not only are windows secured by iron bars but also front courtyards, creating a cage-like appearance.<sup>134</sup> I further observe a significant number of police officers, patrolling in vehicles, on motorcycles, and on foot. This presence of police appears to be particularly the case in tourist spots like *La Candelaria*, and in the Northern zones like *Chapinero*, which is deemed a safer area. I also noticed several *CAI* (*Comandos de Atención Inmediata*, Immediate Attention Commandos) spread throughout Bogotá. These small command centres enable the National Police to be closer to the community and thus, respond faster to urgent situations.

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<sup>133</sup> Sebastián might mean ‘outsiders’ or individuals not belonging to the groups controlling these areas.

<sup>134</sup> I cannot speak to whether these safety measures apply exclusively to upper/middle class housing or if they are implemented for all residents.

I mentioned the police presence to my informant Ana, and she noted that in her neighbourhood in Bogotá, police patrols are not as common. I feel ambiguous about the over-policing of certain areas, whilst others seem to be under-policed. Should the presence of so many police officers instil a sense of safety? Or should I feel unsafe because there must be a reason as to why there are so many officers? Additionally, in Bogotá, detection dogs are positioned at underground parking entrances, shopping centre entrances, and soldiers at the military school inspect the undersides of vehicles using telescopic mirrors. That I was not used to this kind of security measures in everyday life became blatantly obvious to me on my first day of arrival. Upon entering the upscale Andino Shopping Centre, I encountered a female security officer with a non-threatening-looking Labrador in a vest. Before I could walk past her, she said something in Spanish to me and gestured at the dog. In my naivety and love for puppies, I briefly entertained the idea that she might be inviting me to pet the dog. I did not react as I was confused about why she would approach me to pet the dog. “*Lo siento,*” I said, “*no entiendo.*” It was only when she gestured at the dog’s nose and a man from behind me yelled “The bag!” that I understood that she wanted me to put my backpack in front of the dog for it to sniff. Later, I saw that the dog had ‘anti-explosive’ written on its vest. In 2017, a bombing occurred in the Andino Shopping Centre reportedly carried out by individuals associated with another guerrilla faction, the People’s Revolutionary Movement<sup>135</sup>(Symmes Cobb 2017). In another incident, a bomb detonated at the National Police Academy in 2019, which was claimed by the guerrilla group Colombia’s National Liberation Army (ELN) (Orjoux and Said-Moorhouse 2019). Not only rural areas but Colombian cities have recently experienced violence, with Bogotá being directly targeted.

Further security measures I observed in Bogotá point to more common criminal activity like seemingly spontaneous body checks by police officers, shoppers having their receipts and bags inspected by private security upon leaving the grocery store, my Airbnb host reminding me several times to lock my door behind me the instant I enter the apartment,

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<sup>135</sup> Spanish: *Movimiento Revolutionario del Pueblo* (MRP)

private security stationed at apartment buildings, and taxi drivers locking the door and rolling up the window when in a traffic jam. I realised that during my initial remote research phase I focused so much on larger national security issues, such as safety issues for forensic anthropologists in the field, that I did not consider how much safety and security aspects would already be part of their everyday life. In hindsight, of course, I could not have known; I only became aware of those issues on-site in Bogotá. It only took me a few days, however, to become accustomed to the security measures. So much so in fact that I became suspicious when at the entrance to the archaeological museum there was a metal detector but no guard, which prompted me to ask a police officer for help.

When I met my informant Ana in Bogotá, who had not been in her hometown for over a year, she said that those measures of having one's grocery bags checked were new to her, too. She sees them as something that is done "ritually, symbolically." That is, she perceives these practices as examples of the government trying to perform security and produce a feeling of safety. Security measures like having dogs inspect bags before entering a shopping centre that at one time might have been associated with an acute situation of rupture (e.g. bomb threat) now seem to have become routine in Bogotá.<sup>136</sup> As previously mentioned, Ana commented that the complex situation in Colombia in regard to violence is normal for them. In parallel, my North American informant Mike, who has worked in Latin America, noted about the region:

I mean North Americans, they are accustomed to security, right? But when you live in societies that are in so many ways precarious – you know just even petty theft, but it happens, you see it all the time – you have a very different perception of security and its value. You don't depend on it; you don't count on it. So, I think that creates a different sort of mentality towards threats. I'm sure, I'm certain it does.

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<sup>136</sup> Taussig (1992, 18) speaks of "a state of doubleness of social being" where individuals oscillate between accepting a situation as normal and then experiencing sudden panic or disorientation triggered by events, rumors, sights, words spoken or unspoken.

The potential exposure to certain risks and hazards is not a new issue for forensic anthropologists. Building upon Alison Galloway and J.J. Snodgrass's article (1998) *Biological and Chemical Hazards of Forensic Skeletal Analysis*, authors Lindsey G. Roberts, Gretchen R. Dabbs and Jessica R. Spencer (2016a; 2016b) offer an updated version in a two-part series about hazards (pathogens and chemicals) forensic anthropologists may encounter when working with human remains (e.g. Tuberculosis and Smallpox), and in field and laboratory settings (e.g. Tetanus and Lyme disease), respectively. While it is unquestionably important to be aware of potential dangers in the form of biological and chemical pathogens<sup>137</sup>, my dissertation emphasises the risks and dangers originating from the sociopolitical landscape within which forensic practitioners operate. According to my informant Elena, there was an incident in the Balkans where the radiologists suddenly started screaming for everyone to evacuate the laboratory immediately upon discovering a grenade inside a body bag. If the explosive device had detonated, everyone within a fifty-meter radius would have died. Elena mentioned that they felt fortunate to have escaped unharmed on that day. My informant Mike recalled an incident that occurred when he worked for the United Nations in the former Yugoslavia:

There were, you know protests, people were angry, yelling things, throwing things at your bus. But we always had security, we had military security, police. I remember one time being out for dinner and there was a guy at the table next to us and he was just... he had a coffee, and he was crying. And he kept looking at us. And I was with an investigator and a security guy. And I said to the security guy, I said: 'You see that guy?' 'No, what?' 'He's been staring at us and he's crying, and I don't know, it just seems a bit odd.' [...] His brother had disappeared during the conflict and yeah... but he was no threat, right, I mean direct threat. If we had engaged with him, he might have got pissed off, and thrown a chair at us and who knows, who knows. But that's not a real threat because I'm with a security guy who is ex-military. The police are around.

He stressed: "You can't compare anything that I have been through with what the Latin Americans typically deal with."

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<sup>137</sup> I am familiar with the concern of encountering airborne pathogens, particularly when handling wet human skeletal remains transported to the laboratory from the field in plastic wrapping.

## 5.2 “One of the Most Difficult Things in Our Work Is Working Between that War Scenario.” – Risks Faced by Forensic Anthropologists in Colombia

Armed conflicts and violence in its many forms continue to this day in Colombia. The prevailing sociopolitical context of unrest puts forensic anthropologists at risk. Before meeting Colombian student Ana in Bogotá, we discussed the dangers associated with working as a forensic anthropologist in Colombia during a Zoom conversation. Ana had recently completed her Master’s Degree in Forensic Anthropology in Europe. For her, the greatest risk factor is that they work in a context of unrest. She stated: “I think we made a step forward with this peace agreement [with FARC-EP] but just a part of the violence, of the war, stopped, yeah? But in other ways, in other parts in Colombia, we have violence like that. The violence keeps going. And I think that is one of the most difficult things in our work, at least in Colombia, is working between that war scenario.”

The working conditions in Colombia present a stark contrast to Peru. Ana put it this way: “You don’t go like in Peru to find bodies and people in field like... you know. You have to go in[to] [those] parts of Colombia with conflict. With the huge risk [to] your life.” Similarly, my informant Santiago noted that “Colombia is kind of a different place because of the sociopolitical issue but in Peru things are more quiet.” My Peruvian informant Elena stated that in the early days in Peru, forensic anthropology was a “dangerous career due to the political context.”<sup>138</sup> She recalled the Japanese Embassy Hostage Crisis in Lima in 1996. EPAF analysed the human remains of those killed. She mentioned that there were people who followed the “steps” of individuals who were part of the case as it has been a high-profile political case, “loaded with stigmatisation.”<sup>139</sup> In other instances, the telephone of a team member’s family was intercepted, and the house of another team member was broken into. While they did not take any of the money present in the house for an upcoming trip, the computer and laptop were taken,

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<sup>138</sup> From Liliana’s translations.

<sup>139</sup> From Liliana’s English notes on what Elena said.

suggesting that the perpetrator(s) were after information rather than money. When I asked my Peruvian informant Valentina if she thinks that forensic anthropology is still a risky career in Peru, she responded:

It will depend on which political party is in the government. Right now, no. Because the political party that is in charge is good with our work. But if the *fujimorismo*<sup>140</sup> wins someday, it will be difficult. Because they did pretty terrible stuff and they don't want the people to know so they threaten the experts.

Elena stressed that places associated with drug trafficking are particularly dangerous for forensic investigators. She points to Colombia where, she noted, forensic professionals and social activists would get killed. My Colombian informant Sebastián was cautioned by friends about the dangerous conditions in the field in Colombia. They recounted incidents of shootings and injuries during excavations. One event involved forensic anthropologists halting their exhumation at night due to being observed from a nearby hill, only to find no human remains upon returning the next day. Colombian forensic anthropologist José Vicente Rodríguez Cuenca (2004) highlights the threat of antipersonnel mines to both civilians and researchers. Recent data reveals that 12,390 individuals were physically or psychologically affected by explosions between 1990 and October 31, 2023 (Acción contra Minas Antipersonal 2024).

In Colombia, it is possible for forensic anthropologists to encounter the dangers of direct physical violence or to have to work in areas where armed conflict is still taking place. However, they also encounter conflicts in other ways, such as bearing witness to the anguish of the families, and engaging with perpetrators, who at times disclose the locations where they hid their victims. Santiago told me:

When I was [working] in the police, we were sometimes [...] with the perpetrators because they were giving us the directions of the burials. Because remember that I told [you] that there is another law. That is the law of the Peace and Justice Law,

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<sup>140</sup> The term *fujimorismo* indicates the political ideology of former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, who held office from 1990 to 2000. It has been argued that during his presidency, Fujimori overlooked or turned a blind eye to corruption and human rights abuses committed by members of the military (Flindell Kláren 2000).



2005. It was the peace agreement between the government and the paramilitaries groups. So, the perpetrators, if they told the truth they had like a... decrease of the punishment. That was the reason that we were travelling with them because if they [...] helped to find the people, the missing people, they get like reduce in punishment.

Working in dangerous areas or working with perpetrators shaped the context of forensic anthropological work. However, so too did working with the families of the missing. Santiago put it this way:

So, [working] with the families was very intense. It is you can see the suffering of the people. How, after many years, [...] they can't know the whereabouts of their loved ones. Yeah, you can see that. And you are like in the contact with the conflict because I think in Colombia [...], when you are in the cities, you don't feel too much the armed conflict. Because this is in the rural areas. In the places where there is the *narco*-traffic [...]. I mean with the control of everything is by illegal groups, even if you have like police and things like that, there are... there are not too many, there are few, so the institutions, the government institutions are not strong. So, the control is taken by the illegal groups. And they have the money because they have production of the coke. So, they have the money. *So, because I was raised in a city... I mean I was familiar with the conflict but indirect, indirect contact. So, when I was working with the families I have the direct contact with the conflict.* When I was working or when I had the opportunity to travel with these [...] perpetrators, I was not angry, I was like sad because they were young. They were very young. And they were people that [...] don't have any opportunity, so they were in that groups because they had a job. They were paid for that. Monthly, they were paid. So, I was like they were victims, too. Yeah, that was the feeling that I had.

Santiago's experience is reminiscent of my informant Miguel's statement that forensic anthropology is not "a science isolated in a bubble." In a context like that of Colombia, forensic anthropologists encounter risks that are embedded in the sociopolitical climate they work in. As noted above, these risks may include coming into direct contact with perpetrators, and the danger of hidden landmines. But there are additional factors too. Another key aspect of the complex sociopolitical context in Colombia involves the risks associated with the institutions that employ forensic anthropologists. The following sections explore the risks associated with working for the following three institutions: the *Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación* of the Attorney General's Office – a state organisation with a judicial approach to investigating the missing; *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas*

*dadas por Desaparecidas* – a state institution with a nonjudicial, humanitarian approach; and the International Committee of the Red Cross – a non-governmental institution with a humanitarian approach.

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### 5.2.1 State Scientists Considered the ‘Enemy’

One of the most principal conflicts is about the fact that we are working for a state unit.

– my informant Eduardo

“In Colombia,” my informant Mike, who worked in Colombia, noted, “the threat is real not to NGOs, I don’t think. I mean they need to be careful. Anyone in Colombia needs to be careful. There are places you don’t go to. Period. It’s not safe. But the *real* threat in Colombia,” he stresses the word *real*, “is [to] the state scientists, I would say.”

“How so?” I asked Mike.

He explained, “So [the guerrilla group] ELN, paramilitary groups, when state scientists from the Prosecutor’s Office or the Police are doing exhumations, I mean they have to have security in a lot of places. Like heavy security. That’s what I mean.”

In Colombia, forensic anthropologists are employed by various state institutions, earning them the title of ‘state scientists’ as described by Mike. I spoke to forensic anthropologists who worked for CTI at the Attorney General’s Office, the *Unidad de Búsqueda*, the Colombian National Police, and the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences. The section delves into their perspectives on the risks associated with working for state institutions, shedding light on their experiences. It further provides a concise overview of the present scenario concerning guerrilla and paramilitary groups in Colombia.

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## Working for the Attorney General's CTI

*Fiscalía Rima Con Porquería.* – Prosecutor's Office Rhymes with Crap.

– written in red capital letters on the handrails of a footbridge in Bogotá

**10 August 2022.** A shrill drawn-out sound penetrates my ears and I flinch. Dazed, I cannot immediately place where the sound came from or what was going on for that matter. I had just taken a photograph with my phone of the entrance to the *Fiscalía General de la Nación* (FGN) – the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation. It houses the *Cuerpo Técnico de Investigación* or CTI, its Technical Investigation Unit.

There are two permanent judicial police bodies in Colombia: CTI of the Attorney General's Office, and specialised agencies operating under the National Police of Colombia such as the *Dirección de Investigación Criminal e Interpol* (DIJIN) (Castellanos and Chapetón 2023; notes from my informant Hugo<sup>141</sup>). Forensic specialists of these divisions, my informant forensic anthropologist Hugo, who I met in Bogotá for coffee, explained, *van al terreno*; they go into the field to investigate and exhume in a judicial framework. DIJIN and CTI identify and determine the cause and manner of death, Hugo noted, but only for skeletonised bodies (also Castellanos and Chapetón 2023). Eduardo, who works for CTI, told me in our Zoom interview:

*CTI solo trabaja con restos óseos. No trabaja con cadáveres, fresh bodies. ¿Cadáveres frescos? No. Solo restos óseos. CTI. Los cuerpos frescos, los cadáveres frescos los analizar medicina legal – es otra institución.*<sup>142</sup>

The Colombian police officer standing at the bottom of the stairs that lead to the main entrance of the Attorney General's Office does not take my *faux pas* lightly. He blows his

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<sup>141</sup> I met with forensic anthropologist Hugo in Bogotá. He drew an overview of the organisations in Colombia that search for the missing for me.

<sup>142</sup> English: "CTI only works with skeletal remains. It does not work with cadavers, fresh bodies. Fresh cadavers? No. Only skeletal remains. CTI. The fresh bodies, the fresh cadavers are analysed by Legal Medicine – it is another institution."

whistle as if he had been waiting for the moment a foreign research student would dare to commit this violation. Rightly so. Later, I will joke to a friend that I was lucky he only incapacitated me with a whistle and not a gun. In other countries, where aggression seems to be the default setting for police officers, I most likely would have found myself pummelled to the ground with more than just a ringing in my ears. Embarrassed and slightly panicked, I make my way over to him and, babbling on in my limited Spanish, I try to explain that I am waiting for my friend Eduardo who works here. ‘*Lo siento,*’ I apologise profusely, a staple sentence on my research trip to Bogotá. ‘I only wanted to send my friend a picture of my location because he cannot find me.’ Thankfully, the officer is a good sport about it, and I am not joined by multiple Colombian police officers to take me on a full tour of the *fiscalía* with many questions being asked.

I am flooded with relief when I see Eduardo making his way towards me. He immediately engulfs me in a big hug. Eduardo and I talked over Zoom a few months earlier and he had invited me to see his laboratory. I am grateful he made time in his busy schedule to meet up with me before he heads out into the field again. As we are walking up the stairs to the main entrance, he asks me what I have in my backpack. Just the usual things, I reply as he takes the bag off me and slings it onto one of his shoulders. Water, my power bank. In hindsight, there might have been more to this gesture than him being a gentleman. He might have wanted to avoid any hassle for me at the security checkpoint. Just as the hug might have been more than an expression of ‘I am happy to see so you’ but a public demonstration to our surroundings that we indeed know each other. Whilst as an employee Eduardo passes quickly through the security checkpoint, I must hand over my passport number, information about my occupation, my stay in Bogotá as well as a fingerprint. After going through the metal detector and having a picture taken of me without my glasses, I receive a green visitor pass which Eduardo clips to my jacket, so it is easily visible. At the entrance to the building that houses the laboratory, my passport number is noted once again.

After exiting the elevator, Eduardo leads me into a hallway with a glass wall running along it. Behind it, I can see some examination tables like you would find in a mortuary. On some of them, skeletal remains are neatly spread out for analysis. There are also some tables with microscopes running along the far wall and an X-ray machine. I am used to

seeing this kind of equipment from working with human remains in a biomechanics laboratory and related visits to a city morgue. What I did not expect, however, is the natural sunlight flooding the space. Eduardo and I joke about it. Usually, I say, we are banned to basements. Yes, he agrees, it is because we work with human bones, and people do not want to see that. It reminded me that forensic anthropologist William M. Bass mentions the same issue:

Why are crime labs and morgues always in basements? Why not up on the top floor, with big corner windows looking out across the city or the countryside? Just because some of us like to look at bodies and bones, that doesn't mean we wouldn't appreciate a nice view out a window every now and then. (in Bass and Jefferson 2003, 176)

The windows that allow a pleasant view of Bogotá's mountains are fixed shut due to security concerns.<sup>143</sup> The natural lighting, however, proves beneficial for analytical work on the skeletal remains, Eduardo adds.

In this laboratory, he continues, a team of three specialists works together to create a biological profile of human remains: a forensic anthropologist, a forensic odontologist, and a pathologist. With a medical background, the pathologist can determine the cause and manner of death. While a forensic anthropologist can aid in establishing the manner and cause of death, they are unable to do so independently, as this falls under the purview of the medical examiner or pathologist. Eduardo highlights that although forensic anthropologists provide age estimations within a time span, forensic odontologists using dental analysis offer a more precise estimation due to the narrower range. Assessing the four biological markers *sex*, *age*, *stature* and *ancestry*, my informant Miguel, who I met with on the same day I visited Eduardo's laboratory, noted used to be the "classical role" of the forensic anthropologist. However, "that role doesn't exist anymore in the world," Miguel added. "More and more the forensic anthropologist works in taphonomy<sup>144</sup>, in

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<sup>143</sup> Eduardo points to the air conditioning in the ceiling as a substitute for open windows.

<sup>144</sup> Forensic taphonomy pertains to the "study of what happens to a human body after death" (Dirkmaat and Cabo 2016, 441).

trauma, with the families, expanding the role of forensic anthropology,” he stated. “It was in the ‘80s [the role] had changed a lot around the world now. Only in some places is still that role.”

Eduardo’s team examines antemortem, perimortem and postmortem trauma<sup>145</sup>. Trauma analysis aids in determining the circumstances surrounding the individual’s death and in establishing the identity of the person. Typically, forensic anthropologists cross-reference ante-mortem information like medical records (e.g. dental x-rays) with ante-mortem trauma observed on the remains. However, Eduardo notes that they hardly receive any ante-mortem data in the form of medical files from the victims’ families. This is because many victims killed during the conflicts came from rural areas with limited or no access to medical services. Once a biological profile is created, the data is entered into a database for matching purposes. It typically takes around two weeks to complete a biological profile, after which DNA analysis is conducted. Eduardo’s laboratory is conveniently located near the DNA department, although it appeared vacant when he gave me a tour. My informant Maurice noted that “people believe that DNA is the solution but is not.” The identification process, he added, is “more complicated than CSI and other TV shows try to explain [to] you [in] 45 minutes without advertisements.” Similarly, Miguel noted: “some organisations promote DNA as a magic thing to solve the cases.” This, for Miguel, is a “common frustration.” He added: “There is no discipline [that] is 100 percent sure. Also, DNA has what is called fake positives and fake negatives. [...] That’s why the approach has to be an integration of all the possibilities. But you know with the TV, people think is the magic solution.”<sup>146</sup>

Close to where we are standing, I can spot a skull cap that shows a black substance on it, and I ask Eduardo if this is mould. This discolouration, Eduardo tells me, is caused by the

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<sup>145</sup> Trauma that occurred before death, around the time of death and after death.

<sup>146</sup> In parallel, Parra et al. (2020) assess that in diverse contexts globally, relying solely on DNA for the identification of human remains can pose challenges. It is recommended to adopt a holistic approach combining genetic and non-genetic techniques. The use of DNA may not always be suitable due to factors like location, cultural beliefs, and DNA degradation over time.

acidity of the soil. Pointing to the only few bones they have of this individual, he explains that soil acidity is a problem for them as it destroys the skeletal remains. It makes morphological analysis – and therefore the identification process – more difficult, if not impossible. Within ten years, he adds, there might be no skeletal remains left.<sup>147</sup>

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## CTI is the Colombian State is the Enemy

At the end of my visit to his laboratory, Eduardo informs me that he will be returning to the field the following day to search for a group of individuals who have been missing for years. With no leads on their whereabouts, Eduardo likens the search to “finding a needle in a haystack.” During our prior Zoom conversation, Eduardo had already mentioned his work involving the search, recovery and identification of missing individuals, including victims of armed conflicts. This task entails travelling to suspected locations. The inherent danger in this work is a significant concern for state scientists like Eduardo. “For the guerrilla, for the FARC, for the *paramilitares*, for the [...] *delincuente* [...], call them the bad people, we are government agents,” Eduardo explained. “Doesn’t matter [if] we [are] anthropologists, medical – doesn’t matter. We are CTI, we are Attorney *fiscalía*, then we are enemies for them.” When talking about being an enemy Eduardo made a sweeping gesture across his forehead as if *enemy* was written there in bold letters. “So, in different *lugares*, in different places,” Eduardo stressed, “we can’t go. We can’t go because in these places are FARC, paramilitaries, bad people that don’t like the government agents there.” Similarly, my informant Santiago, who worked for Colombian state institutions, noted that in “some of places [...] they still have like the control or yeah, the control [by] some illegal groups so if you are in the government institution like the *fiscilía* or Legal Medicine and you travel there you are considered like a government

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<sup>147</sup> In a similar vein, regarding the exhumation and identification of victims of the Peruvian Civil War, it has been noted that in the Amazonian region, the bodies of victims have undergone significant decomposition over the ten years since the events occurred. The rapid disintegration of the bodies is due to the environmental conditions prevalent in the region, which include: high soil acidity, temperature and humidity, and microbial fauna (Parra et al. 2020).

person so you cannot go there. So, the humanitarian because they are humanitarians, they are neutral so they can go and collect or rescue or recover the body.” Non-governmental organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) take a humanitarian approach in their work. Rather than collecting evidence for prosecution, their focus is on the recovery and repatriation of human remains to the victims’ families. A key principle that the ICRC upholds is neutrality. This will be explored in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

Although many guerrilla and paramilitary forces officially demobilised, not all members accepted the decommission of their respective groups. When I visited the *Centre de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación*<sup>148</sup> in Bogotá, I came across tactical gear worn by a former guerrilla member. Paper notes in the shape of flowers are now attached to it; the joyful colours are a stark contrast to what the gear would represent to the victims of FARC-EP. *Gracias por decidir crear en la paz* – thanks for deciding to create peace – one of the notes says. Underneath, the author drew a small peace dove. In 2016, the Colombian government and FARC-EP signed a historic peace agreement, which saw 13,185 FARC-EP members listed as demobilised by January 2020, according to the United Nations (2020). As part of his *total peace* policy, newly elected President Gustavo Petro, himself a former leftist guerrilla, not only continues to honour the peace deal with FARC-EP, but he has also promised to extend peace negotiations to all armed groups (Hege 2022). Although a peace agreement has not been signed yet, his government resumed peace talks with ELN<sup>149</sup> – a Marxist-oriented guerrilla group – and a ceasefire began in August 2023, and initially lasted for six months (Rueda and Suárez 2024). The ceasefire was extended for another six months in February 2024 (Ibid.). ELN reportedly stands as the largest remaining rebel organisation in Colombia, boasting around 3,000 combatants (Acosta 2024). However, armed groups frequently fragment into new factions either during or following the conclusion of peace negotiations, a situation that frequently

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<sup>148</sup> English: Centre of Remembrance, Peace and Reconciliation

<sup>149</sup> Spanish: *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*; English: National Liberation Army



coincides with the reemergence of conflicts (Human Rights Watch 2023; Cárdenas et al. 2022). FARC-EP, it has been reported, fragmented into thirty different splinter groups, also called dissident groups (Ibid.; McColl 2022).



Figure 17



Figure 18

**Figure 17 and Figure 18: Military gear with a note saying, “Thanks for deciding to create peace.”**

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Despite an initial decrease in violence following the peace agreement between the Colombian government and FARC-EP, it has been contended that soon after new forms of violence emerged, leading to increased abuses by armed groups in remote areas in subsequent years. By 2022, levels of violence had risen to a point comparable to those observed just before the peace process (Human Rights Watch 2023). The rise of newly established dissident factions has been linked to heightened direct confrontations with other armed groups like the National Liberation Army (ELN), within dissident factions, and with the Colombian military. This escalation has resulted in heightened insecurity in certain communities, marked by enforced confinements preventing residents from leaving, and forced displacements. Additionally, these factions target advocates against violence such as social and human rights leaders (Cárdenas et al. 2022). Notably, this violence extends to investigators from the CTI who investigate the groups’ criminal activities. In 1998, the CTI succeeded in a significant operation against paramilitarism, described as “the hardest blow that paramilitarism received in the middle of the process

of national consolidation”<sup>150</sup> (Aldana 2021, n.p.). Reportedly, at least fourteen CTI investigators were killed both before and following that raid (Ibid.). Recently, in 2021, CTI investigator against criminal structures Mario Fernando Herrera Aparicio was murdered (Buitrago 2021). In 2018, three CTI investigators were murdered: Douglas Dimitry Guerrero, Willington Montenegro Martínez and Yair Alonso Montenegro (Monsalve Gaviria 2018). Both crimes were reportedly committed by FARC dissidents (Ibid.; El Pais 2021).

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As highlighted by my informants, state scientists in Colombia face threats not only from guerrilla groups but also from paramilitary forces. Political anthropologist Winifred Tate (2011, 192-193) notes that Colombia not only has a “dizzying array of paramilitary groups commonly called self-defense forces, warlords, military entrepreneurs, mafias, gangs, bandits, and so on,” classifying and distinguishing among those groups is a complex feat. The author further notes that one of the most contentious issues concerning Colombian paramilitary groups is the extent of their independence from other political and economic entities as well as their ability to govern “social life as a statelike power” within their controlled territories (Ibid., 193). These groups seem to have evolved into entities that, while acting to some degree *independent from* the Colombian state, are also by extension *with* the state – as their relationship with the Colombian military shows.

With the emergence of guerrilla groups in Colombia, the United States was anxious to obliterate the communist threat in the Global South, but unlike in the case of the Vietnam War, it did not directly intervene by sending troops to Colombia. Instead, the United States offered military assistance and training to governments fighting communist uprisings, urging them to forge alliances with occasionally questionable yet efficient “civilian irregulars” (Human Rights Watch 1996, n.p.). A report by Human Rights Watch (1996, n.p.) notes:

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<sup>150</sup> Translated from Spanish by me.

For U.S. theorists and practitioners, civilian irregulars were most effective when they included army reservists, retired officers predisposed to a fierce anticommunism, and men familiar with local residents, customs, and terrain. Organized into so-called “self-defense forces,” these civilians would be armed and trained by the army and provide troops with intelligence and logistical help, like guides; assist in psychological operations; and even fight alongside regular soldiers.

The Colombian military supported the use of self-defence forces against guerrillas, allowing these newly formed groups considerable freedom of action, under the excuse of a shared struggle against a common perceived communist enemy. Declassified records released by the Colombia Documentation Project in 2005 shed light on the alliance between the Colombian military and paramilitary groups (Evans 2005). Notably, a series of more than twelve massacres carried out by the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) in Norte de Santander<sup>151</sup> in 1999 illustrates the tacit approval from the military with which the paramilitaries operated. Reports indicate that in many instances, local military units did not intervene during paramilitary attacks (Ibid.). When asked by U.S. officials why the military did not intervene in the paramilitary’s actions, Colombian army Colonel Víctor Hugo Matamoros of the local troop responded,

Look, I have 100 kilometers of oil pipeline to protect, as well as several bridges and the National Police... Plus, there are guerrillas to fight... If you have so many tasks to do with so few resources, and you’re faced with two illegal armed groups, one of which (guerrillas) is shooting at you and the other (paramilitaries) is shooting at them, you obviously fight the guerrillas first, then worry about paramilitaries. (Ibid., n.p.)

Although the paramilitary coalition AUC officially demobilised between 2003 and 2006, splinter groups persist. Similar to the FARC-EP, the AUC fragmented into over thirty factions comprising both former and new members. It has been reported that “at least three” of these factions remain active today (Cárdenas et al. 2022, 4), prompting a Human Rights Watch report (2010, 18) to label the demobilisation process as “flawed.”

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<sup>151</sup> A department located in the northeastern region of Colombia.

According to Human Rights Watch (2022), successor groups such as the AGC<sup>152</sup> continue to engage in violations of international humanitarian law and severe human rights abuses, including killings, disappearances, and sexual violence. Whilst paramilitary groups may act under the “blessing” of Colombia’s government and its military<sup>153</sup> (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, 10), CTI has been investigating paramilitarism, including paramilitary infiltration in state institutions with consequences for its investigators. Paramilitary coalition AUC threatened, kidnapped and killed CTI prosecutors and investigators involved in investigating this group; some investigators were forced into exile (Camillo Posso 2023; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas 2022; Aldana 2021; McFarland Sánchez-Moreno 2018).

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### *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas – A Hybrid.*

The *Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas* (UBPD, Unit for the Search for Persons Presumed Disappeared), which some of my informants refer to as ‘the Unit,’ inhabits a hybrid position – it is a state organisation, and it operates under an extrajudicial, and thus humanitarian paradigm. In 2016, the Colombian government came to a peace agreement with the guerrilla group FARC-EP, which led to the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. My informant Santiago explained:

So, you have the peace agreement and within the peace agreement was created the Comprehensive System for Peace. So, it is composed by the Commission of the

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<sup>152</sup> Spanish: *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*; English: Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia

<sup>153</sup> Jasmin Hristov and Juan Camilo Arias (2023, 55) criticise the current government’s passive stance on paramilitarism, labelling President Petro’s strategy as the “politics of love.” They argue: “Although both Petro and [current Vice President] Marquez have been outspoken critics of the state-paramilitary alliance and the elites’ predatory economic policies, since they came to power, their program reflects an approach ranging from nonconfrontation to friendship with the most reactionary sectors of Colombian society” (62). They further claim, “it appears that the word “paramilitary” no longer has a place in the new president’s lexicon. Petro went as far as attempting to suspend arrest warrants for the chiefs of *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* – a paramilitary group responsible for abducting girls as young as 10 from poor peasant families and keeping them as sexual slaves” (63).

Truth, the JEP and the Unit for Search People. So, this is the place for the Unit. So, the Unit is in charge [of] find[ing] all the missing people that are in the context of the armed conflict. That is the mandate for that Unit.

As noted by Santiago, the *Unidad de Búsqueda* is one of three bodies operating under Colombia's Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition<sup>154</sup> (JEP 2020). The *Unidad de Búsqueda*'s objective is to lead, organise, and support humanitarian efforts to search for and find individuals who have been reported missing as a result of the armed conflict, locating those who are alive. In instances of fatalities, the goal is to recover, identify, and respectfully return the bodies whenever feasible (Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas 2024). The *Unidad de Búsqueda*, Santiago further noted "is just humanitarian," clarifying that they "don't collect any information for any prosecution."<sup>155</sup> They can't do that." The institution therefore operates in a non-judicial context. My Colombian informant Marie stated about the work of the *Unidad de Búsqueda*:

They are also a humanitarian institution. Their only job is looking for missing people, that is the only thing they have to do. They have a time frame. They only go up to the date of the signature of the peace accords. From 1980 to 2016. After 2016, they can't.

Although the Unit does not collect evidence for prosecution, forensic professionals working for the state institution are considered enemies by association. My informant Horacio, who works for the ICRC, noted, "one [additional] problem [...] for the *Unidad de Búsqueda* is that the *Unidad de Búsqueda* is a state institution. And for the armed group it's the state. It's the Colombian state and the armed groups fight against this state. And is, is very interesting." The perceived identity of an institution and its individuals

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<sup>154</sup> Spanish: *Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición* (SIVJRNR), defined as "a set of mechanisms to guarantee the rights of victims to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition, as stipulated in the Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace, signed between the National Government of Colombia and the FARC" (JEP 2020, n.p.).

<sup>155</sup> UBPD's official website states: "Due to its humanitarian and extrajudicial nature, the information received or produced by the Search Unit, as well as its origin, cannot be used as evidence before the courts except for technical-forensic reports (Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas 2024, n.p.). Translated from Spanish by me.

appears to carry more significance in being viewed as an enemy than the specific approach it employs, whether humanitarian (non-judicial) or forensic.

Ana, who worked for the Unit, told me that in her experience, not every individual working for the Unit was aware of the risks. She said: “They thought it is ok if you go anywhere with the team and work for, I don’t know, two weeks, one week. And if something goes wrong you [can] leave [...], just leave...” She chuckled in disbelief and continued:

‘Oh, is a problem here, we need to go back home.’ Is not that easy, is not that easy. And that’s the reason why so many Colombians, at least, don’t choose this career, [...] because it’s so risky, you know. Yeah, this is so difficult for us and Peru, for example, was another thing. It completely stopped. We don’t.

Ana again highlighted the differing contexts of Colombia and Peru in which forensic anthropologists work. Whereas in Colombia, the armed conflict is still on-going, Peru’s internal armed conflict is generally considered to be over. It needs to be mentioned, however, that at the time of writing, Peru was engulfed in political turmoil that caused violent protests and citizens getting killed. The British daily newspaper *The Guardian* describes it as “a flashback to a past many hoped they had left behind” (Collyns 2022, n.p.). One witness likened what was happening right now to the armed conflict with the Shining Path: “It was like reliving all that happened in the ‘80s and ‘90s, to be under the overflying helicopters and the sound of shooting. [...] It shows that we haven’t learned anything, we keep making the same mistakes. [...] In the ‘80s and ‘90s we lived in a constant state of emergency which meant there were systematic violations of human rights” (Ibid.).

I asked Ana which institution in Colombia she would like to work for. Her response highlights the heightened risks for forensic anthropologists working for institutions that follow a forensic, judicial approach. She told me: “I would like to work with those

organisations like EQUITAS<sup>156</sup> or something like that. Or with the Unit. [...] With *fiscalía* or Police, no. I don't want to. I prefer to work in the humanitarian field.”

“Why?” I asked. “Do you think that working for the Unit or the Police is more dangerous?”

Ana replied: “With the Unit, no. But with the Police... yeah, I have some friends that used to work for the Police. Or *fiscalía*.” She told me that if some people in the Unit do not understand the risks, the situation is worse in the Police: “They don't understand at all.” She continued, telling me that it can be difficult to explain but that the type of work you do as a forensic anthropologist makes an important difference. She put it this way: “Maybe you can say the humanitarian work, you can move a little more free in our country. But in your team, you go with police, with military, it will be a little bit more dangerous. Because some armed groups are, you know, in those parts, in cities etc., it will be more risky, I think.”<sup>157</sup>

Although Ana noted that engaging in “humanitarian work” may afford some degree of freedom of movement within the country, the Integral System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition, which the *Unidad de Búsqueda* and JEP are part of, has faced attacks and intimidation, raising concerns about the safety of its officials and the challenges they encounter in their work. In December 2023, JEP's official YouTube channel got hacked and all videos including recordings of JEP tribunals were deleted

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<sup>156</sup> EQUITAS: *Equipo Colombiano Interdisciplinario de Trabajo Forense y Asistencia Psicosocial*, (Colombian Interdisciplinary Team on Forensic Work and Psychosocial Assistance). Miguel noted that EQUITAS was “created in the late ‘90s. [It] start[ed] as [a] forensic anthropology team but very soon they began involving psychosocial work and investigation.” He further stated that it is “not a typical forensic anthropology team.” My informant Marie, who works for EQUITAS, described the organisation as follows: “EQUITAS basically is an NGO that works with victims of the armed conflict or great violations to human rights. Mainly from the forensic perspective like giving advice in cases to either victims or victims organisations or like [inaudible] collectives that represent groups of victims and such. And also, we work with government agencies like the UBPD which is the newly created Unit for Searching Missing People and the District's Attorney and the help which is [...] the Special Peace Jurisdiction that was created with the Peace Accords.”

<sup>157</sup> For Ana, it is also important to understand the underlying problems that cause the violence in Colombia and tackle them at their roots. She noted: “If we don't understand what [...] the problem [is], how can we fight the problem?”

(López 2023). In February 2022, JEP recordings, featuring interviews with the captured leader of the Gulf Clan drug trafficking group, Dairo Úsuga David, were stolen, potentially leading to the loss of information regarding events from the armed conflict (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz 2022; Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas 2022a). In an incident in August 2021, near the Venezuelan border in Saravena, Arauca, armed individuals approached an employee of UBPD and a driver, intimidating them to hand over a vehicle marked with the UBPD emblem (Semana 2021). The attacks on investigators of CTI and the *Unidad de Búsqueda* highlight the risks involved in the search for missing persons in the sociopolitical environment of Colombia and the importance of protecting those involved in this crucial task. Within this sociopolitical context, another actor navigates through the violence – the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC is both, a non-governmental institution and operating under a humanitarian, extrajudicial framework.

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### 5.2.2 The International Committee of the Red Cross – Protection Through Principles?

There are places [in Colombia where] the government can't go. So, they need the help of the humanitarian institutions like the ICRC.

– my informant Santiago

The last section outlined that the perception by armed groups of forensic scientists embodying the state makes them enemies by association. This prompts the question of whether working for an independent institution such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) carries fewer risks. As will be shown, the response is not a straightforward *yes* or *no*. My informant Horacio, who works for the ICRC, noted that it “is very interesting to try to imagine the work in the Colombian jungle with the ICRC and the armed groups.” Safety depends on a multitude of intersecting factors and is never a



certainty.<sup>158</sup> This section will concentrate on the aspects highlighted by my informants in the context of Colombia.

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“After the 2016 [...] peace agreement,” my informant Miguel stated, “the FARC start[ed] [to] create a unit to provide information to the ICRC to collect bodies. But those are non-judicial recoveries, are humanitarian so ICRC recover the body and they send the body to the Medicolegal Institute.” The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the *Unidad de Búsqueda* both operate under a humanitarian approach. However, the ICRC holds a special role as it can operate in territories that its Colombian state institutions counterpart cannot. My informant Mike, a forensic anthropologist who works for the ICRC, explained:

There are a lot of areas that are controlled by armed groups so in theory, sure the government could go in with the army, but they are really risking people’s lives by doing that. So, it’s a bit unreasonable to expect the government to risk lives to recover the dead. And they do it. To be clear. I mean some of the forensic colleagues there tell awful stories about doing exhumations under gunfire. Like it’s really ridiculous. [...] Everything they [the ICRC] do is confidential [...] so if an armed group, let’s say the ELN says ‘there is a body here of somebody we killed and they are buried here and you can...,’ and we’ll ask them, we say ‘hey, can we get the body so that it can be ID’d and returned to the family?’ and they’ll say ‘yeah, ok, whatever.’ Most often they don’t care. They say, you know, ‘no problem.’ *So, we can get access because we don’t pose a threat to them.* But when we’re doing that, we do an exhumation, we hand the body over to the authorities to be identified but we don’t give them any contextual information.

I will provide more detailed information below about how the (ICRC) gains access to controlled territories.

In its mission statement, the International Committee of the Red Cross describes itself as an:

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<sup>158</sup> The details of the aspects can be found in the ICRC’s *Safe: Security and Safety Manual for Humanitarian Personnel* (2021).

impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence. (International Committee of the Red Cross (a) n.d., n.p.)

With its mission being exclusively humanitarian, Shuala M. Drawdy and Cheryl Katzmarzyk (2016, 64) note, that the institution's focus is on the "the victims and their families, rather than judicial investigations." The authors emphasise the benefit of the ICRC's humanitarian approach paired with its inclusive view of missing persons. Drawdy and Katzmarzyk (2016) assess that adopting this method would allow for a comprehensible response to the numerous missing individuals globally, encompassing instances such as the disappearance of individuals in Colombia. According to the ICRC's official webpage, Colombia belongs to the ICRC's twenty-four areas of key operations (International Committee of the Red Cross (b) n.d.). it has been in the country for over five decades, as my informants noted.

The ICRC operates under seven fundamental principles: impartiality, neutrality, independence, humanity, voluntary service, unity and universality<sup>159</sup> (International Committee of the Red Cross 2023). It appears the ICRC's ability to assist individuals in distress in conflict zones is facilitated by adherence to the first three principles, a shared belief in these principles among ICRC staff and armed groups alike, and consistent action based on these principles. As the renowned expert in the fields of international relations and global governance, Thomas Weiss (2013, 12), explains: "If aid agencies are perceived by combatants as partial, allied with the opposing side, or having vested interest in the outcome, they have a difficult time getting access; or even worse, they may become targets [...]. Operating according to these principles and being perceived as

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<sup>159</sup> For a definition of each principle, refer to ICRC's *The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement* (2023).

apolitical are particularly important during times of armed conflict.” In the case of Colombia, these principles allow forensic anthropologists access to the missing in occupied and contested regions. Lorenzo Caraffi (2023, n.p.), head of the ICRC delegation in Colombia, notes: “For more than 50 years, our neutrality, impartiality, and independence have enabled us to fulfil our humanitarian role in the most conflict-affected areas of Colombia.” Regarding the principle of neutrality, anthropologist Peter Redfield (2011, 66) states: “The classic Red Cross adherence to neutrality traded public silence for operational access and cast its moral appeal at the level of formal agreements and long-term influence. Its aura of moral authenticity thus relied on consistent adherence to principle and recognition by political powers.” In parallel, Caraffi (2023, n.p.) finds that neutrality “is not only a moral stance.” Rather, it is a “humanitarian and pragmatic one, which enables us to speak with weapon bearers and have access to communities in need. Neutrality means we cannot take sides in a conflict, but we can take action to help its victims. It allows us to cross front lines to provide humanitarian assistance that saves lives” (Ibid.).

Neutrality is considered so crucial that employees are expected to uphold it even in their personal lives. I asked my informant Santiago, who worked as a forensic anthropologist for Colombian state institutions and the ICRC, whether ICRC’s public image of neutrality has any effect on how he must behave as an employee. He replied:

Yes, because I have to be neutral so I couldn’t be any position. Like take any position, any political or social position so I have to be very, very neutral. Especially in my work and even after my work. Because I was representing that institution so... it was kind of... I mean it was not difficult to me because I am apolitical. I don’t know if that’s a word in English. I mean I don’t like any politics. So, I don’t make any opinions in social media or something like that. So, for me was like fine. But it was kind of difficult too because in this institution you can see the things outside of the government, [you] can identify the issues of the government, especially in forensics. I am talking about forensics. So, it was like a little bit difficult for me to have a position of neutrality because you are seeing the issues [and] you want to act. But you cannot do that, that’s not the way to act. You have to act in a different way. So, it was like... at the beginning but after that I was completely adapted.

Maintaining a neutral position in ICRC's operations not only facilitates access but also impacts safety concerns. The Security and Safety Manual of the ICRC (2021, 12 and 58) urges its members "to think about what you publish on social media" and to "sanitize your online identity" as it can affect their safety. The manual explains in this regard: "Some threats are visible, others less so. In our increasingly connected world, the image you project online can affect your security. Expressing your personal opinions may offend those who don't share them. Advertising the details of your private life may tarnish the image of the organization. And any information you share online is liable to be used by others, against you or the ICRC. So, before you publish anything, ask yourself whether it could cause problems later" (Ibid.).

In Bogotá, I met with forensic anthropologist Hugo, who works for the ICRC, at a coffee shop by the Chile Shopping Centre. I was nervous because it was my first interview in person for my research project. So much so that I had difficulty falling asleep the night before and on my way to the interview, I discovered that I had forgotten to remove a sticker from my new jeans before leaving my apartment. As we drink our Juan Valdez coffee, Hugo highlighted a further aspect that is of utmost importance in ICRC's work. When I informed Hugo that a source from CTI had indicated that CTI and its employees are viewed as adversaries by armed groups, Hugo responded that while there is a risk for CTI, the same level of danger does not apply to forensic scientists working for the ICRC. That is because, he told me, "*en el contexto colombiano, nosotros tenemos una muy buena relación con todos, los actores armados y [...] con las familias.*" In Colombia, they have a very good relationship with the armed actors and the families. Hugo added that "*nuestro dialogo es confidencial.*" The contents of the conversations with the armed groups or families are not shared with anyone else by them. The ICRC's Security and Safety Manual (2021, 47) notes in this regard: "The authorities are not allowed to use confidential ICRC information in judicial or administrative procedures." This confidentiality, Hugo said, is "*una gran ventaja*" – a great advantage. The ICRC's mode of operation emphasises confidentiality. This principle, it might be argued, furthers a good relationship with armed groups as the latter do not have to fear that anything they disclose could lead to prosecution. One could contend that fostering positive relationships through a humanitarian mission approach, which stands in contrast to CTI's judicial

mandate, provides a level of protection for ICRC members and enables them to reach areas inaccessible to other teams.

The process of gaining access, however, can still prove complicated as my informant Horacio, who works for the ICRC, told me in our remote interview. He noted that there is a difference between finding a missing person “in a country at peace” and in a country in continuous conflict. The latter scenario complicates the recovery of human remains, sometimes even making it impossible because the presence of multiple armed groups needs to be navigated. Horacio stated:

[In Colombia], we have five, at least, at least five internal armed conflicts in the country with different armed groups. For example, I work for the ICRC, if I want to find a missing person and try to do a humanitarian recovery of human remains in x area, I need [...] the green light of all the armed groups in the area. Without the green light, I cannot enter to the territory. And this is [to] try to do humanitarian dialogue with the groups, sometimes we can't find them, sometimes they deny the access. Maybe for one human remains we [are] working three, four, six months early, and it's impossible.

I wanted to find out more about what ‘getting the green light’ entails so I asked: “I don't know if you are allowed to say this but when you say ‘you can get the green light from an armed group’ is that just a telephone call or do they sign something? How does that work?”

Horacio laughed. “Sometimes WhatsApp,” he replied. I thought I must have misheard him. He continued: “Sometimes but is not the regular way. The regular way is talking with the High Commands. [...] We don't have [to] sign something. Only we say to the High Commander ‘Ok, we are going to this point for a humanitarian mission, for recovery [of] human remains, please inform to your troops we are in this zone in this day.’ ‘Ok, no problem.’ They inform and we are going to the grave site to the area, we don't see the troop because the troop is not there because the High Commander do the order. Say the order and [we] don't have a problem.” Communication primarily occurs verbally and only sometimes on WhatsApp. “But the WhatsApp in the jungle,” Horacio continued, “is not working always and [then] we need to go to the jungle and try to find them and try to get an appointment.” He acknowledged that it “is crazy, it really is crazy. But in other cases, this in the 95 percent of the cases, we have the green light. Sometimes

we don't have green light for example, they are messing with us and say this zone 'we are putting mines, anti-personal mines, is better that you don't go into this area.' And we [say], 'Ok, is a red light. We don't go in there. No problem.' Or when they are [doing] tactical military operation [to] attack another armed group or to attack to the Colombian armed forces, ok, no we can't do this. 'You are a red light, is impossible. We need military priority' or something like that and we don't go on this date. Maybe they say, 'Don't go in three months. Five, four, five months you can go. But not now.' Everything is [done verbally]. No form, no document."

As Horacio was frank about the situation, I allowed myself to be direct, too. "I just can't imagine it," I said, "Sorry, it sounds crazy to me."

Horacio laughed again, "Is very interesting because Colombia is crazy. I don't know. I don't know how to describe the situation here."

Horacio pointed out that the *Unidad de Búsqueda* encounters difficulties accessing specific regions, especially due to being a state entity viewed as adversarial by armed groups. Consequently, the Unit aims to emphasise its humanitarian focus when engaging with armed groups. Horacio told me that the *Unidad de Búsqueda* has been trying to emphasise their humanitarian, extrajudicial objective to make it easier to work in areas controlled by armed groups. "Sometimes," he said, "it's received in a good way [by] the armed [groups]." Still, being able to access territories controlled by armed groups is not just due to ICRC's approach, but also to the long operational history. The *Unidad de Búsqueda* is still a young organisation, as it only started officially operating in August 2017 (Barometer Initiative, Peace Accords Matrix, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies 2018). By contrast, the ICRC has worked in Colombia for more than fifty years, which means that it has been able to successfully demonstrate its commitment to its principles and non-judicial methods to armed groups. This involves maintaining ongoing communication at all levels, as highlighted by Horacio. He elaborated:

Yeah, we have this advantage, we can access to war territories in the country. But we can do that now because ICRC have worked here in the country for fifty years and for fifty years the humanitarian dialogue is very continuous, is very frequently with the armed groups. We have humanitarian dialogue with all levels of the armed groups in military structure from command to [inaudible] soldiers. And we are working in the humanitarian mandate for example for evacuated injured soldier

from the armed groups as well. We do workshop in the management of the dead with the armed groups, for like troops. And the dialogue is very continuous. But is a work from fifty years, and now we can access to all the territory but in this neutral and independent and only for humanitarian purpose but is a work intensive for many many years ago. But *Unidad de Búsqueda* is a new institution. It's only working in the territory from 3, 4 years ago.

Yet even the ICRC's reputation for and adherence to neutrality does not always ensure safety. A former UNHCR<sup>160</sup> official notes on the general safety situation of humanitarian workers: "The simple truth is that humanitarian workers are no longer, if they ever were, shielded from violence and attacks of various forms by the mere fact of being in the humanitarian field. Quite the contrary [...] they are now sometimes deliberately targeted because they are humanitarians" (in Weiss 2013, 78). In early November 2023, an ICRC convoy "came under fire" in Gaza City. A public statement by ICRC stipulates: "The ICRC reminds the parties of their obligation under international humanitarian law to respect and protect humanitarian workers at all times" (International Committee of the Red Cross (c) n.d., n.p.).

The ICRC recognises that complete safety cannot be guaranteed in the diverse operational environments they work in. Their Security and Safety Manual (2021, 19) notes: "The complex and often unpredictable environments in which you will work mean that you'll never be totally safe. As a humanitarian professional, you must therefore be cautious and be prepared to challenge yourself." The ICRC addresses the question of whether attacks on ICRC members are increasing. The institution notes: While the "concerns underlying such questions are justified, [...] the analyses available reveal a more nuanced situation and don't provide a clear "yes" or "no" (Ibid.). The ICRC manual indicates that there has been no significant global increase in the number of humanitarians killed, injured, or abducted over the past fifteen years. Additionally, most severe incidents have been concentrated in a few specific regions, as highlighted in the 2020 Aid Worker Security Report (Ibid.). The ICRC's manual acknowledges that regardless of what the statistics may indicate, humanitarian organisations are

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<sup>160</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

encountering a concerning lack of safety, particularly in specific operational areas. The convergence of criminal organisations and armed factions, the ICRC notes, along with the disregard for International Humanitarian Law by both governmental and non-governmental entities, is leading to intentional assaults on humanitarian workers. While not a new issue, this trend appears to be escalating in certain nations.<sup>161</sup> Although the ICRC recognises that in the past twenty-five years, several of its staff members have lost their lives in attacks aimed at the organisation or after being kidnapped, the manual does not specify exact figures. In 1996, ICRC workers in Colombia were attacked by a division of FARC-EP – the Tenth Front – which has been labelled as “one of the most active elements of the ex-FARC Mafia” (InSight Crime 2022b, n.p.). Writing about the attack, Human Rights Watch (1998) reported that members of the guerrilla group opened fire on a car belonging to the ICRC (bearing its emblem), hitting its tyres and fuel tank. Reportedly, the present ICRC delegate was told not to report the incident and then forced to draw up a handwritten letter to the Tenth Front commander promising not to issue a complaint (Ibid.; Redacción El Tiempo 1996). Human Rights Watch (1998, n.p.) denounced this incident, calling it “a serious violation of the protection guaranteed vehicles marked with the red cross, the internationally recognized symbol of protection granted to medical and religious personnel, medical units, and medical transports,” deeming ICRC vehicles as untouchable. Regarding its emblems, ICRC’s webpage states: “The red cross, red crescent and red crystal emblems provide protection for military medical services and relief workers in armed conflicts” (International Committee of the Red Cross 2015, n.p.). The red cross on a white background, as a symbolic representation, is closely associated with the ICRC and plays a crucial protective function. The organisation states:

In armed conflicts, the protective emblem must be in red on a white background with no additions. It must be clearly displayed in a large format on protected buildings, such as hospitals, and vehicles. Emblems on armbands and vests for

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<sup>161</sup> The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB) (n.d.) reports 207 attacks on ICRC workers between 1997 and 2023 worldwide. The latest incident recorded in the database as of December 9, 2023, occurred on November 24, 2023, in Northern Gaza. It involves the death of a male ICRC driver killed by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), with verification of the incident still pending at the time of writing.



protected personnel must also be clear and stand alone. *A deliberate attack on a person, equipment or a building carrying a protective emblem is a war crime under international law.* (Ibid., emphasis added)

“Yeah, we have the *emblema*,” Horacio pointed out. “In all the cars, we have flags, and we have a little shield [with the *emblema* on] the back and the front. And is visible wherever you want. [When] we are sleeping in the jungle in the community, we need to put up a big, big flag for the armed groups to identify ‘this is ICRC, don’t touch it.’” Horacio chuckled. The protection the emblem and its associated principles provide can be fragile. While attacks on ICRC workers in Colombia have been rare, especially in the last twenty years, they remain a possibility. The Aid Worker Security Database ((b) n.d.) reports nineteen aid workers who fell victim to physical assaults, including kidnappings, in Colombia between 1999 and 2023. This includes one ICRC international staff member of British nationality who was kidnapped on November 10, 1999, and released unharmed four days later. As in most of the nineteen cases, the actor who committed the crime remains unknown.

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## State Effects

In conclusion, it can be noted that there are various ways of thinking about the state – as a wide array of institutions and individuals therein, as a monolithic entity, and as “a set of practices and processes and the effects they produce” (Trouillot 2003, 89). As outlined, the CTI of the Attorney General’s Offices investigates crimes committed by paramilitary groups. The efforts by the Attorney General’s Office to investigate paramilitarism infiltrating state institutions appear to contrast with President Petro’s approach towards paramilitaries, which has been labelled the “politics of love” (Hristov and Camilo Arias 2023, 55). Alison Mountz (2003, 633; Gupta 1995) notes, “the state is often misconceived as a unified, homogeneous category.” However, in the case of Colombia, it might be better to think of the state as “a set of institutions operating at different levels across disparate geographies, comprised of individuals working within diverse mandates and frameworks” (Ibid.). Viewing the state as made up of various institutions and actors rather than as a monolithic entity, it is not incongruous for Colombian paramilitaries to

view the military, a state institution, as an ally, while perceiving investigators from the Attorney General's Office, another state entity, as adversaries. In parallel, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003, 80; Aretxaga 2003) suggests that "the state has no institutional or geographical fixity" but becomes recognisable through "state effects." Conversely, non-state actors can assume state-like roles and generate impactful state effects (Aretxaga 2003; Trouillot 2003). This phenomenon is evident in instances where Colombian paramilitary groups are observed to wield authority akin to the national government, and, as noted, govern "social life as a statelike power" within their controlled territories (Tate 2011, 193).

For some families of the missing, and armed groups, as pointed out by my informants, forensic practitioners *are* the state because of the work that they do. Firstly, some forensic anthropologists work *for* state institutions and are therefore perceived as the state. As noted by my informants, CTI and the *Unidad de Búsqueda* are considered the state by for guerrillas and paramilitaries, and therefore regarded as the enemy. Secondly, regardless of where or how they are located, it might be argued that forensic anthropologists are perceived as the state because the knowledge they produce is part of the larger project of the state to investigate violence, and that might make them the target of violence, as exemplified by the attacks on CTI workers. The inclusion of soldiers or police for protection in the field further solidifies this type of forensic work as government related. When I asked Eduardo, who works for CTI of the Attorney General's Office, how they protect themselves when going into the field, he exhaled audibly. "In different occasions we are with army, with soldiers, and police men, people that [accompany] us," he noted. "They care for us, and they surround the site, around the place that we are working [in]. [...] We are not working alone in places that we have presence of FARC, paramilitaries, guerrillas. We don't work alone. We always go with company of army and police people." While being 'with' the army and the police might provide some measure of protection, it could also be seen – by families and armed groups – as involving forensic anthropologists in the longer history of the state's involvement in the violence, and its ambiguous relation to other armed actors.

In contrast, the International Committee of the Red Cross relies on adherence to its principle and operational instrument *neutrality* and a good relationship with the armed groups, built within fifty years, and its emblem for protection. The organisation works independently from the Colombian state. Yet, the ICRC enters territories state agents cannot, thereby doing work *for* the state. In some instances, my informant Eduardo noted, “the Red Cross, NGOs<sup>162</sup> people do this work for us [of entering the territory and retrieving the human remains] and we do the rest of the process, in the lab with the medicolegal process, with attorney, with all the things. And we make the identification of the body and give the body to the family and the family is *complacida con el procesa. La familia está acuerdo en que se hará de esa manera*<sup>163</sup> because the family wants to recover the body and the state makes the medicolegal process. It’s a mix, it’s mixed work between government and humanitarian groups.” And then he added that the guerilla and paramilitary groups do not see people like me, that is, foreigners, as enemies. They do not treat “NGO people” like enemies. This is because they understand foreigners and NGO teams to be doing humanitarian forensic anthropological work, and thus to not be part of the state (and its associated legal processes). In the context of forensic anthropological work in Colombia, then, “humanitarian” or NGO can signal “non-state.”<sup>164</sup> By contrast, Eduardo notes that the armed groups see Colombia forensic practitioners, especially those working for state agencies, as a threat. “It’s difficult to think they look at you like the enemy,” he said. “They look at us like enemies.”

However, it is not just the (real or perceived) association with the state or the government, that is an issue. It is also the kind of forensic anthropological work (for prosecution) and the information drawn from evidence the state seeks to produce that is of concern for the armed groups. The next section thus explores the matter of the knowledge forensic anthropologists possess and produce in more detail. In Latin

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<sup>162</sup> Spanish: *Organización no gubernamental*, English: non-governmental institution

<sup>163</sup> English: “The family is pleased with the process. The family agrees that it will be done that way.”

<sup>164</sup> Except in the case of *the Unidad de Búsqueda* – while it follows a humanitarian approach, it is still a state actor and therefore perceived as the enemy by armed groups.

America, this knowledge may put them at risk as it unveils crimes committed by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the state.

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### 5.3 Unwanted Witnesses – The Danger of Knowing

In Latin America, individuals who possess knowledge about atrocities committed, such as activists, journalists, and forensic scientists, may find their safety compromised. A key pattern that runs through Latin America's contemporary history. Journalist John Simpson (1993, 13) notes about the Shining Path era in Peru in 1992: "It was a seriously dangerous place. Journalists who dug too deeply into the activities either of the Shining Path guerrilla movement or the Peruvian Army frequently ended up dying by the roadside. More of them have died in Peru than in any of the wars which have taken place since Vietnam, the war in what was Yugoslavia included." Exploring the experiences of journalists in contemporary Mexico, Argentina and Colombia, Gabriela Polit Dueñas (2019, 3) notes that "when it comes to reporting on local violence, no one is safe in Mexico." Mexican journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas, who reported on drug cartels, is quoted as saying: "We may be scared, but we won't stop publishing about this human tragedy" (Lauría 2017, n.p.). In 2017, Valdez Cárdenas was fatally shot near the building that housed the newspaper he helped establish (Faidell 2017). Journalists, Polit Dueñas (2019, 120, emphasis added) holds, "are witnessing truths that those in power are withholding from us, and they are seeking truth in spite of the dangers and the risks necessarily implied in that search. They have become the *unwanted witnesses*."

This section concentrates on the fact that through the knowledge they produce, forensic anthropologists interfere with the perpetrators' intention of hiding the committed atrocities. This ultimately puts forensic anthropologists at risk. They too become *unwanted witnesses*. For as long as there have been forensic anthropology teams in Latin America, they have encountered threats. During the 1980s, Clyde Snow and his team of young volunteers faced death threats as they initiated the first forensic anthropological investigations in Argentina. Despite the threats, Snow approached the situation with a touch of dark humour. He is quoted as stating: "Yeah, death threats are so common down

here they ought to set up hours of the day when calls will be taken. [...] ‘Sorry, we don’t take death threats except between the hours of ten o’clock and two o’clock. You’ll have to call back later.’” (Joyce and Stover 1991, 297-298). Despite having police officers present for protection, they could not be trusted. During a 1985 exhumation in Buenos Aires, a team member heard one police officer say to another: “‘If we had done the job right in the first place, these people wouldn’t have anything to dig up.’” (Ibid., 298). Threats against forensic anthropologists have persisted. In 2011, Amnesty International reported that Fredy Peccerelli, founder of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (*Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala*, FAFG) and three of his colleagues had received death threats. They received these threats after testifying as expert witnesses in a high-profile human rights violation case. The case involved the Guatemalan army acting as the aggressor, resulting in the deaths of 250 villagers in 1982 (Amnesty International 2011).

For my informant Elena, Mexico is “another quite complicated place to work because of the corruption, the system is part of that so it’s complicated, too.”<sup>165</sup> On April 6, 2023, Mexican forensic anthropologist Juan Carlos Tercero Aley (got) disappeared (Cruz 2023; Lopez 2023). Mike also brought up Mexico, informing me that a member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology team has been monitored in Mexico recently. “So, it turns out,” he said, “that state services have been monitoring with legislation that was designed to monitor *narco* traffickers. But they are monitoring, you know, a lawyer, a journalist, [a member] from the Argentine team. So there always exists a degree of security risk for NGO people, but state scientists it’s like ‘you’re told you’re not investigating that!’ ‘Ok.’ You have no choice, right? You want to keep your job.” Although Mike has worked in Iraq and Colombia, two places deemed dangerous for forensic professionals, he does not want to work in Mexico. He stated: “There was a possibility for me when I was leaving Colombia to go and work in Mexico and I just said ‘no, Mexico scares me.’ It’s... yeah... I don’t know. It’s... really... it scares me. You

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<sup>165</sup> From Liliana’s English notes on what Elena said.

don't know who to trust. But anyway, I think [the Argentine team member] will be fine. There's enough attention around this that I'm sure [they] will be fine. I say sure, I'm not sure. But I think so. [...] The government is watching, and the government is being watched. There is so much distrust.”

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The knowledge produced by forensic anthropologists could endanger them, as it entails revealing information that guerrilla and paramilitary groups, as well as state actors, prefer to conceal. It has been noted that forensic anthropological investigations have the “capacity to unmask terrible truths” as “they can detect patterns concerning burials, criminal behaviour, and other data that is helpful for the identification of victims and aggressors” alike (Buriano Castro 2020, 34). This includes being able to discern trauma patterns and making statements as to the circumstances in which the victim died.

A research study by María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra and Jaime Enrique Castro Bermúdez (2019, 11) revealed that forensic anthropologists of the Attorney General's Office in Colombia identified a “systematic method of burial” regarding killings committed by paramilitaries. This method was characterised by the following “primary features: 1) they were bodies buried in shallow graves (sometimes individual, sometimes multiple), 2) by the side of the road, 3) folded in half or dismembered, 4) often (semi)naked” (Ibid.). Examples of contempt which go beyond the act of killing shown by paramilitaries towards the victims include burying the bodies “tied at the hands and feet” and positioning them “in obscene, sexual positions” (Ibid.). Thus, the forensic anthropological investigations uncovered *necroviolence*, a phenomenon described by anthropologist Jason De León (2015, 69) as “violence performed and produced through the specific treatment of corpses that is perceived to be offensive, sacrilegious, or inhumane by the perpetrator, the victim (and her or his cultural group), or both.” This includes physical mistreatment or disappearance of the body. The latter not only hinders a respectful burial for the deceased but also provides those committing violence with a way to deny responsibility (Ibid.). I will return to the complexities of uncovering and documenting necroviolence and other forms of violence, and the question of how my informants rationalise what they witness in the following chapter. Here, I want to emphasise that the kind of information that forensic anthropologists produce can itself put

them at risk. The risk comes from guerrillas and paramilitaries. Being considered as being part of the state may put them at risk from those fighting against the state (guerrillas) as well as from organisations that might be said to be part of the assemblage of the state (like paramilitaries). However, the danger might also come from within the state, as exemplified by an incident involving a forensic pathologist in Honduras.

The state not only engages in violence when committing crimes, but also by interfering with investigative processes to conceal these crimes and engaging in threatening behaviour. My informant Mike highlighted the risk encountered by forensic scientists when using the knowledge they possess and the knowledge they produce to confront state perpetrators. “The risk for state scientists in Latin America is of political *ingérence*,” Mike stated. “The term exists in English, it’s the same word but I don’t know how to pronounce it in English. Interference, let’s say. So political interference. So, there’s a case that’s sensitive because maybe the police or the army was involved and forensic science services are told ‘We are not investigating that,’ right?” Interference pushes state actors and forensic scientists into an antagonistic relationship. While state perpetrators strive to conceal their crimes, forensic scientists strive for the truth. Consequently, state scientists speaking out against complicit state actors run the risk of losing their job, or life. Mike recalled the story of Semma Julissa Villanueva Barahono, a pathologist and former head of Forensic Medicine at the Public Prosecutor's Office in Honduras. “There was a young agent of a new criminal investigation agency, ATIC,”<sup>166</sup> he told me. “And this young agent, young female agent, turned up dead,” Mike continued. “I think in the house of another ATIC agent, no, a higher-ranking person, I’m almost positive. And so ATIC investigated the crime and determined that she had committed suicide. And the head pathologist did an autopsy and said ‘no, she’s been strangled to death.’”

The young agent was Sherill Yubissa Hernández Mancía. She was only 28 years old when she was killed. “In an unprecedented move,” a *New York Times* article in 2019

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<sup>166</sup> ATCI stands for *Agencia Técnica de Investigación Criminal* (Technical Agency for Criminal Investigation) which operates under the Public Prosecutor's Office and has been called “Honduras’s F.B.I” (Nazario 2019, n.p.).

reports, “ATIC barred Forensic Medicine officials, along with the police and the prosecutor, from the crime scene. ATIC officials went alone and pronounced the death a suicide” (Nazario 2019, n.p.). Forensic experts at the Honduran state morgue, however, did not agree with the manner and cause of death reported by ATIC. Dr. Villanueva and her team spoke out publicly, and consequently, Dr. Villanueva lost her job. “She is actually running for parliament now, for Congress, she has become a politician,” Mike pointed out. “Because it’s not just that she said, ‘oh no, she was strangled to death, she did not commit suicide,’ she was super vocal about it. I mean she was with the press, and she was directly pointing the finger at this criminal investigation agency, at the chief prosecutor. She is not the type to just be silent. So anyway, she lost her job and now she’s becoming a politician. That’s a great example of political interference with investigative processes,” Mike continued. “But that’s the dilemma for state scientists where their independence is weak, and their capacity to be independent is weak. And we see [it] in a lot of places but in Latin America in particular.” In this case, speaking out against state perpetrators had real consequences, including threats to personal safety and professional standing. Not only did Semma Julissa Villanueva Barahono and her team need police protection, she also had to temporarily leave the country (Ibid.). Ultimately, Villanueva Barahono returned to her country and was elected as the Vice President of Security in Honduras in 2022 (El Heraldo 2022).

Villanueva Barahono used her medical knowledge to show that the ATIC ruled suicide was indeed homicide by strangulation (Nazario 2019). Voicing this finding publicly and thereby revealing complicity within the state system put her in grave danger, forcing her and her colleagues to seek refuge outside Honduras. In those instances of having to flee one’s home country for protection, the difference between being a local and an outside forensic anthropologist becomes apparent. Mike has not experienced anything like Villanueva Barahono’s story. There is a “sort of unfairness of the structure,” he noted, “of the system that we operate in.” He recalled an instance of excavating mass graves in the Iraqi desert. Despite the small number of scientists present, they were safeguarded by more than a hundred security personnel. “When you are in the middle of the desert!” he exclaimed. “So, if someone is coming out to get you, you gonna see them, you know, an hour before they actually get there because it’s the desert. It’s vast and flat. And [...] a



110 people. Now I'm not an expert in security so it's not for me to criticise but what I mean to say by this is the resources invested in security were incredible." The level of security, he assessed, depends on who you work for, like the United States Department of Defence, in this instance. Mike highlighted that there is a further advantage to working as an outsider in a different country – one which Latin American forensic anthropologists working in their home countries may not have. He pointed out:

If I wanted to leave, I would say 'you know what, I'm done! I wanna be on the next plane out of here.' And I can do that. If I'm working in my own country and I can't trust the government because I'm uncovering crimes committed by the government or the army or whatever, then I can't just say 'Ok, I'm done. I'm not interested in this work anymore.'

Outside investigators occupying a different position from locals when it comes to safety is reminiscent of what Ieva Jusionyte experienced during her research. Her book *Savage Frontier* (2015) is about news-making and security on the Argentine border to Brazil and Paraguay. At one stage, she became actively involved as a journalist and investigated "controversial themes" that usually were not talked about openly in the region (54). Her local colleague, however, stopped her planned reporting. He explains, "if anything happens... you will get on the plane and take off. I have to stay on living here" (Ibid.). Jusionyte acknowledges that uncovering those issues "was less a heroic act of exposing public secrets as breaking news than it was a practice that largely depended on concerns about security" (Ibid.). In other words, had she rattled the proverbial cage by reporting on controversial issues, as an outsider she could have left any time, thereby leaving it all behind. Whereas her local colleague would have had to live with the consequences. The situation is similar for forensic anthropologists, as Mike noted when he suggested that, as a non-national forensic anthropologist, he had the option to leave an unsafe situation in foreign countries, whereas local forensic anthropologists when uncovering crimes committed by the very state that employs them might not have the luxury to do so. Who you are, a national or a foreigner, matters. So too, does who you work for, the state or an NGO. Additionally, it is not only the conditions in which forensic anthropologists work that are dangerous but also the knowledge they produce.

The nature of the violence in Colombia and Peru was, at least in part, designed to hide both the perpetrators and the victims (as in the case of the disappeared). The knowledge forensic anthropologist produce is therefore a crucial matter. “The exhumation and identification of bodies [conducted by forensic anthropologists] have different meanings and implications for the parties involved,” Olate-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez (2019, 7) note, “with some bodies, for example, being uncomfortable for governments and public intuitions as they evince State-perpetrated violations.”

One of the probably most notable cases where forensic anthropological expertise caused ‘uneasiness’ within a public institution in Colombia was the *falsos positivos* (false positives) scandal, mentioned above. In 2002, the government under then President Álvaro Uribe Vélez introduced the so-called Democratic Security Policy, which pledged Colombians protection from domestic terrorism (Olate-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019). This policy gave rise to the concept of the “omnipresent enemy” represented by terrorists (Ibid., 15). What followed is dauntingly reminiscent of US-American military practices during the Vietnam War, where emphasis was placed on presenting numerical body counts to justify the conflict. Callous atrocities committed by members of the US-Army, it has been argued were the consequences of the Pentagon’s goal to reach a “‘cross-overpoint’: the moment when American soldiers would be killing more enemies than their Vietnamese opponents could replace” (Turse 2013, 38). Consequently, the production of a high Vietnamese body count would become “‘the measure of success’” in the Vietnam War (Ibid. 39; Greiner 2009). This approach fostered a competitive environment among troops and incentives were offered for achieving the highest body count. The implications of this system, which prioritised body counts, not only affected Vietnamese soldiers but also had repercussions for civilians. Similarly, actors of Colombia’s military produced numbers to justify the ‘war on terrorism.’ The victims of that policy are known as *false positives*. In essence, the military engaged in the extrajudicial execution of civilians, who “were disappeared, killed, and then made to reappear as guerrilla combatants by military actors” (Olate-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, 5).

Between 2002 and 2008, according to JEP reports, 6,402 individuals died as a result of artificially inflating casualty numbers, which earned members of the military vacation

days or promotions (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz 2022b; Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019). It was forensic anthropological knowledge that aided in proving that the circumstances surrounding the individuals' deaths were staged. Forensic anthropologists proved inconsistencies with the 'props' used (or not used, respectively) in an attempt to create a false identity. In the aforementioned research project conducted by Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez (2019, 16), a forensic anthropologist of the Attorney General's Office is quoted as saying:

Their uniforms did not fit, or they had damaged weapons, or even boots on backwards. [...] But, above all, one could see that they were set-ups because they were bodies that had nothing of their own. When you find the bodies of guerrillas or paramilitaries, you can see that their clothes are marked – embroidered with their name –, and that they carry their spoon and fork in their uniform. They even have photos or the medications they take. In false positive bodies there's nothing like that. Their clothes are sometimes new, and there's no sign of the person having had a life before that moment. And that's very unusual, that doesn't happen.

Forensic anthropological investigation is not only concerned with human skeletal remains as such but also with clothing and personal belongings, as these are potential indicators of a person's identity. "There are cases where the clothing is very critical," my informant Miguel noted. "In some cases, [it] is the personal belongings, in other cases the kinds of disease the person could have. So, you need to evaluate all that and you need sources to get that information." One needs to consider the context, he told me, and I recall a lesson I learned when aiding in identifying World War Two soldiers in Germany – we found that the boots soldiers wore were not necessarily an indicator of their true identity. I was told by colleagues that Russian soldiers would take the boots of German soldiers they had killed, for instance, as they needed the boots to protect themselves from the bitter cold Winter of 1944-45. Therefore, without taking the context into account, the individual's identity might inadvertently be obscured. In the Colombian case, however, members of the Colombian Army attempted to obscure their victims' identities on purpose by equipping them with clothing and broken weapons that were not their own. Consequently, clothing and personal belongings not only help to determine who a person *is*, but also who they *are not*.

Additionally, skeletal trauma analysis contributed to showing that these individuals were not who they were staged to appear to be. Forensic anthropologist Jaime Enrique Castro Bermúdez notes:

We knew they were such cases when we found inconsistencies between the reported wounds and the wounds found by forensics. For example, the report said “wounded in combat” and we found bodies that were still whole and with only one shot... Do you know what a body looks like when it is shot from a distance and with a rifle? The bullet doesn’t open a hole, it blows off a leg, a head, an arm. Whatever it hits, it turns to dust. The wounds on these bodies were not from combat, they were from executions; they were wounds from a small gun, a revolver [...] most of them in the head [...] in combat, you shoot anywhere and shooting at the head is not easy and if you do hit it, it doesn’t stay whole. (in Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019, 17)

In forensic and humanitarian cases in which human bodies are in the process of decomposition, skeletonised, or heavily fragmented, bones become one of the most important sources of evidence for determining the cause, manner and circumstances of death (Passalacqua and Rainwater 2015a; Pinheiro et al. 2015). A fractured larynx or hyoid bone, for instance, might indicate anoxic death by strangulation (Pollanen 2010; Pollanen and Chiasson 1996; Ubelaker 1992). Some trauma found on bone might not have contributed to the direct cause of death but are equally important as they give forensic examiners the possibility of reconstructing the circumstances in which the victim died, which in turn might affect the nature and length of someone’s sentence (see for instance case studies in Passalacqua and Rainwater 2015b; Steadman et al. 2011). Thus, the kinds of interpretations of skeletal trauma made by forensic anthropologists can play a pivotal role in forensic investigations, and their findings might assist in reconstructing the events, the results of which manifested as defects on the bone (Blau 2017).

In the *falsos positivos* case, forensic anthropologists of the Attorney General’s Office provided evidence showing that the individuals who had been killed were not guerrillas, contrary to what the public was led to believe. Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez (2019, 18) assess, “forensic knowledge not only produced victims in the sense that it was able to identify them as such, but also produced perpetrators among the military who, in some cases, have been tried by the ordinary justice system, which in turn provides inputs and

information to support the recently established JEP.” JEP (Special Jurisdiction for Peace) is part of Colombia’s Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition. It was established under the agreement to end the conflict and establish a stable and lasting peace signed between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz 2020). However, achieving peace requires confronting the past. Forensic anthropologists working for the state in its pursuit of truth and reconciliation creates tension as the information they uncover may implicate the state; that is, members of public forces, and military figures. This, in turn, may not only put them in danger but, as previously outlined, it affects the trust between state scientists and families of the missing.

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Summing up, forensic anthropologists encounter violence through various aspects. They may encounter violence by being perceived as state agents by guerilla and paramilitary groups. Additionally, their specialist knowledge and the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce may put them at risk. In the case of the false positives scandal, forensic anthropologists showed that innocent individuals were staged to appear to be guerrilla fighters to inflate numbers and thus justify the alleged war on terrorism (Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019). Consequently, forensic anthropological knowledge, as with many other cases, revealed perpetrators in complicit state systems. It comes as no surprise then that perpetrators might consider forensic anthropologists as disruptive actors who interfere with keeping the truth hidden. In other instances, as will be shown in the next chapter what might be a blessing to families (knowing what happened to their loved ones), might cause forensic anthropologists great suffering. In this sense, forensic anthropological knowing can be considered a fraught form of knowing as besides providing empowerment (allowing families to know what happened to their loved ones, contributing to justice), it can be risky, dangerous, and for forensic anthropologists, even emotionally, psychologically and morally wounding.

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## Chapter 6

### 6 Encountering the Moral Witnesses

Previously, I have described forensic anthropologists as *unwanted witnesses* as they produce knowledge that perpetrators, including in some instances state agents, wish to keep hidden. This knowledge production can potentially put forensic anthropologists at risk of violence. This chapter explores the role of forensic anthropologists as *moral witnesses*. In his autobiography, British forensic pathologist Richard Shepherd (2018) notes that it was not the act of examining dead bodies that gave him what has been described in psychological terms as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Rather, it was the deeper significance and meaning behind what those bodies represented, and what he witnessed through them. He writes:

My PTSD is not caused by any particular one of the 23,000 bodies on which I have performed postmortems. And it is not caused by all of them. It is not caused by any particular disaster I have been involved in clearing up. And it is not caused by all of them. It is caused, in its entirety, by *a lifetime of bearing firsthand witness to, on behalf of everyone – courts, relatives, public, society – man’s inhumanity to man.* (377, emphasis added)

This statement highlights two key dimensions of witnessing. First, there is the juridical aspect of forensic scientists’ role as expert witnesses, where they document scientific facts and present professional analyses. This judicial and technical form of witnessing is crucial in establishing the circumstances, manner and cause of death. Second, there is a moral dimension to witnessing as they bear witness to the darkest aspects of the human condition: the capacity for cruelty, violence, and disregard for human life. In a similar vein, forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru juridically witness in their professional capacity as expert witnesses; that is, through the knowledge they produce around the circumstances of death and trauma analysis, answering the questions of what happened to that individual, and how they died. Philosopher Avishai Margalit (2002, 148) argues that “to become a moral witness one has to witness the combination of evil and the suffering it produces: witnessing only evil or only suffering is not enough.”

Forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru morally witness through various aspects. These aspects include: the dangers and risks they encounter in the sociopolitical contexts where they work; issues of racism and distrust they must navigate when interacting with the families of the missing; the impact of listening to stories of pain and suffering; the felt weight of expectations from families and superiors; their commitment to the profession as a calling or vocation; the toll of working with human remains of a modern context of extreme violence; and the fact that, in many cases, they may be working with the remains of fellow countrymen. Margalit (2002, 150, emphasis added) notes:

The paradigmatic case of a moral witness is one who experiences the suffering – one who is not just an observer but also a sufferer. The moral witness should himself be at personal risk, whether he is a sufferer or just an observer of the suffering that comes from evil-doing. An utterly sheltered witness is no moral witness. There are two senses of risk here. There is *the risk of belonging to the category of people toward whom the evil deeds are directed*, and there is *the risk of trying to document and record what happens for some future use*. We may thus speak of the risk of being a victim and the risk of being a witness.

As shown, forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru have to navigate both senses of risk. Additionally, they may not only become “sufferers” as the knowledge they produce potentially puts them in danger. They are also at risk of becoming morally injured, as this chapter will show. It follows that moral injury ties back to the notion of the *unwanted* witness. The *unwanted* aspect takes on a double sense – the sense that the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce is unwanted by various groups implicated in and responsible for political violence, disappearances, and killings, and the sense that the knowledge might also be unwanted because of what it does to the forensic anthropologists. Framing forensic anthropologists as *moral witnesses* thus includes exploring the questions: *How do forensic anthropologists navigate the various kinds of encounters?* And ultimately, *what do their experience and encounters do to them?* I have already addressed some of their encounters in the preceding chapters, such as the dangers and risks encountered by forensic anthropologists. In what follows, I want to elaborate further on the interactions forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru have with the families, on the knowledge that forensic anthropologists produce, on the expectations that come with this profession being considered a vocation, and on ways that forensic

anthropologists discuss the emotional or affective dimensions of their work and the professional stance of scientific detachment.

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## 6.1 Encountering Forensic Anthropology from a Bioarchaeology Perspective

People [...] didn't understand how I switched to all this crazy.

– my informant Sofia

Most of the Peruvian forensic anthropologists I interviewed began their careers in archaeology and bioarchaeology. This section outlines their experiences of working in these two disciplines in contrast to working in forensic anthropology, and the impact on the self this shift contains. As will be shown, the field of bioarchaeology is associated with working predominantly in the laboratory with archaeological (sometimes prehistoric) artefacts and remains. Forensic anthropology, on the other hand, is concerned with modern contexts, and interaction with the bereaved families. When discussing their experiences of the transition from working in an archaeological context to a contemporary one, my informants address various mentally taxing issues, which this part of the dissertation will go into more detail as it progresses. One of those issues is the interaction with families. Ferllini (2013, 7) states that interaction with the families of the missing results in forensic anthropologists “invariably carry[ing] forward memories that remain with them for the rest of their lives,” and a “modified outlook with respect to various aspects of their own lives.” The dissertation has highlighted the importance of a close relationship with the families in the context of investigating cases of forced disappearances in Latin America. However, the experience of my informants outlined below will show that interpersonal relations in the context of their work can become mentally taxing for various reasons. The impact the interaction with families can have is further exemplified when outlining my informants' statements on the differences between



working in the laboratory and working more directly with the families. Again, I would like to stress that it is not my intention to psychoanalyse my informants. Instead, I will regard them not just as ‘data’ but provide them with room for their voices and explanations to be heard and respected. Furthermore, I will connect and contextualise how they talk about their various encounters to the wider conditions in which they work.

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My Peruvian informant Elena worked with the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team EPAF but is now involved in human rights work and describes herself as a “social activist.” She told me in our Zoom interview that, in Peru, there is no academic training in forensic anthropology. For that reason, the first Peruvian forensic anthropology team was made up of archaeologists. While a Master’s program in forensic anthropology did exist for a short time, it was closed down after two years due to insufficient funding. Consequently, “there was only one group of people [or graduating class] that came out [with a] degree,” my Peruvian informant Julia noted in our remote interview. Julia describes herself as both, a forensic anthropologist and bioarchaeologist. She is interested in isotopic analyses in bioarchaeological contexts and endeavours to apply this expertise to forensic investigations. My Peruvian informant Sara, who is a bioarchaeologist, shared that Dr. Sonia Guillén, recognised as “the first doctor in bioarchaeology in Peru” and a former Minister of Culture, founded *Centro Mallqui*,<sup>167</sup> a non-governmental bioarchaeology centre. The centre worked with prehistoric human remains of Indigenous people, and two of my informants received hands-on experience in bioarchaeology there. Bioarchaeology is concerned with the scientific study of human remains from archaeological sites. By learning about human health, disease, diet and behaviour, practitioners establish an osteobiography – the life history as unveiled by the skeleton of the person under analysis. Despite the (former) existence of the bioarchaeology centre, my Peruvian informant Valentina, who described herself as a “biological anthropologist”

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<sup>167</sup> In March 2024, the centre was listed as *permanently closed* on google.com, with the centre’s webpage only displaying a general overview of museums in Peru.

doing both, bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology, mentioned: “We don’t have training in bioarchaeology either. We learn by working with other people that have the formal training and then some of us have done this Master’s [program]. Other people have done other Master’s programs in other countries. But in Peru is nothing. Basically [it is a] sociocultural anthropologist with osteological manual doing the investigation.” She added: It “is a funding problem. Because people in Peru don’t gain<sup>168</sup> too much. And the problem is, it’s expensive. [People] want to learn but they don’t have the money to pay for the education. That’s the problem.”

Most of the Peruvian informants I interviewed have a background in archaeology, and bioarchaeology, respectively. Because of this, I was interested to know more about how they think about both fields, forensic anthropology and bioarchaeology. In particular, how they think about the differences between them, especially the transition from working with human remains in archaeological contexts to working with the remains of fellow Peruvians who were victims of political violence. My informant Valentina noted that she “cannot live without one of them.” She clarified: “When I am doing bioarchaeology, I miss forensic anthropology and when I am doing forensic anthropology, I miss bioarchaeology. So, I have to combine them.” I asked her what she misses about forensic anthropology. She told me: “I miss the sense of [being] helpful for my people. That’s the thing. And with bioarchaeology, yeah, is interesting, yeah, good stuff, but I don’t have that feeling of making a change on the living of someone.” While for Valentina working in the field of forensic anthropology does have its rewarding aspects, she also highlighted the downsides of working in this field: “When I am doing forensic anthropology, [there] is all the *stress, the sad things I know*. When I want to be in a safer place, I return to bioarchaeology.”

“You mean stress, the psychological stress?” I asked to clarify.

“Yes,” she responded.

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<sup>168</sup> She seemed to mean that Peruvians do not earn much and cannot afford access to such training.

Valentina's comment highlighted how she experiences forensic anthropological work in comparison to bioarchaeology. As noted in the preceding chapters, forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru is a fraught enterprise. While helping people, forensic anthropologists face many dangers and risks. Valentina's comment showed that the sense of stress is also a key element of the experience of their work. The stress experienced in forensic anthropological work was contrasted with the safety and comfort of bioarchaeological work.

My Peruvian informant Sofía, who has also worked in forensic anthropology, described the work in similar terms, casting the field of bioarchaeology as less stressful than working in forensic anthropology. Working in forensic anthropology, she stated, "*it's a lot of pressure and responsibility.*" She noted that perhaps not everyone felt "that responsibility" but she did. "I was so *stressed*," she said, and she described working with the families as being at the centre of both that feeling of stress and of responsibility. "You and the families," she said, "we as a team know that you are [going to] do anything that you can possibly do to identify that person or to just give a very good and objective analysis to the prosecutor." She continued: "Of course, it is not the same as bioarchaeology, [where you are] in your lab, very nice, with your books. [...] Nobody is knocking at your door to ask you if you [can] identify the relative or the loved ones." Thinking about all of this, she emphasised that "if you don't want to do this, and don't want to compromise you and your work with the families you better do bioarchaeology. Don't enter into this world that is complicated. But well, and I continue – my mother and all my family were telling me sometimes, 'just when are you going to leave this, it's killing you, it's killing you.' Well, but I didn't." She gave a small laugh.

While Sofía associates the forensic anthropological field with pressure, responsibility, stress and complexity, she does not prefer doing desk work. She stated: "When you love the field and the lab and you are in *clausurado* in an office with the computer, it was killing myself. Killing myself. I really need the field and the emotion. Of knowing, of finding. That's something that I really really missed." I asked her how she experienced switching from the field of bioarchaeology to the modern context characterised by violence in her home country. "That's a good question that probably nobody [has] asked

me before,” she said. “But it’s interesting because I probably don’t have the answer completely to that. I was very happy doing bioarchaeology.” However, she knew that in the field of investigations of political violence “they need the people and I probably think that it was my like one right, you know, to help and to identify these people or to help in trying to search for the missing in my country.” Sofía split her time between working for EPAF as a forensic anthropologist and working in the field of bioarchaeology. “I just wanted to be known as both [...], forensic and bioarchaeologist,” she said. “I love, you know, bioarchaeology, just really love to investigate, to search, to go with the analysis. [...] It was like my hobby, you know, when I get vacations in EPAF – [which] we didn’t – but in my own vacations going to the field in the North with [a biological anthropologist<sup>169</sup>] was my vacation time, you know. Was just my time to do what I really like to do.” Sofía’s statement reflects the distinction between bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology, highlighting the emotional and ethical complexities involved in forensic anthropology. In bioarchaeology, Sofía suggested, researchers work in a controlled laboratory environment with skeletal remains, focusing on archaeological and biological analysis without direct interactions with families seeking identification of loved ones. On the other hand, forensic anthropologists are faced with the task of identifying individuals for legal or humanitarian purposes, which can be psychologically demanding due to the involvement of families seeking closure. Sofía emphasised that those who are not prepared to handle the ‘complicated world’ of forensic anthropology should consider working in bioarchaeology. However, she also highlighted how forensic anthropology allowed her to contribute to finding the missing in her home country.

For my Peruvian informant Julia making the move from the archaeological context to that of investigations of political violence initially was a shock until she became aware of the rewarding aspects of her work:

It was ok for me. I was comfortable with the two contexts because they both involved the human bone analysis and also, when we have the chance, we also

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<sup>169</sup> name redacted

have to differentiate [...] between animal bones and human bones, in some context. First, it was like maybe a change, a big change, because in archaeology you see the context and the [inaudible: burial objects?] the family offered to the deceased. And in this case [of investigations of political violence], you saw the clothes that maybe some person, or maybe you, [wore] in that time. The kind of pants and you begin to think [about] what was going on in your country. At first, it was very very shocking but then I realised that [...] I know I could help to identify people [...]. I could help a lot.

Despite the rewarding aspects of the forensic anthropological work, due to the emotions this work evoked, Julia needed to distance herself from the forensic context by treating it like an archaeological one. She put it this way: “And then I treated it like – not to maybe to touch a lot our emotions – I treated maybe at the beginning all the cases like [they were from] an archaeological context. Not being attached because then you saw their relative come alone to see the skeleton and you have [to] explain.” In response to the question of how she feels about working with the families of the missing, Julia highlighted the temporal difference between working within an archaeological context in contrast to a contemporary, conflict-related one:

This is difficult at the beginning. You have to realise that you are not working with somebody who [lived] a lot of years ago. But you have the direct family looking at what you are doing, and you have to be very very careful. And also, to be very clear when you explain what you are maybe seeing. That you maybe don't know [...] [what happened to their relatives]. Because they also don't know how they died. And also, in the aspect of identifying the person because some of them are like there are many people in the same burial, so you have to differentiate between them. And also, when you can't do that, you have to explain why. Like in simple words for them. For them to understand. So is a little bit more difficult in that part that you have to be also sensible with the information you are dealing with. And you also have to make yourself clear for them to understand what is happening. And what you can tell from what you are analysing and what you can't tell.

For Julia, the archaeological context involved fewer emotions and it was easier to be detached from the work, to approach it just as the scientific analysis of human (or animal) remains. Personal belongings or burial goods found in archaeological contexts were associated with individuals from hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Whereas in the modern context of forensic anthropology, the victims might have worn clothes similar to clothing the forensic practitioner themselves might have worn. For Julia, details like

recognising the style of clothes made it harder to be detached and reminded her of the sociopolitical context (as noted by her comment about remains making her reflect on “what is going on” in the country). Additionally, Julia highlighted a further key difference between working in the two fields; that is, the direct contact with the families of the missing. In an archaeological context, one might come into indirect contact with the deceased’s kin through burial goods and scientific analysis observing the care put into the burial rite. In the modern context of investigations of political violence, on the other hand, the family is right there. Not only that, but, as previously outlined, in the Latin American context, they are considered a key part of the investigative process. Julia noted that she felt that it was important to be careful when interacting with the families, that forensic anthropologists need to be careful about how they talk to them and what they tell them. Honesty is highlighted as an important aspect when working with the families. That is, to give definite answers and not get entangled in probabilities of what *might* have happened. Julia stressed it is key to explain to families what is possible and what is not, to make it clear that not all their questions might get answered. Similarly, my Colombian informant Ana told me that it is important not to give families ‘false hopes.’ As Ana put it, forensic anthropologists need to “try to find again the point between giving [the families] information, make them part of the process, but also doesn’t keep false hopes. Say, ‘yeah, this is your husband, here we found a body, maybe is your husband. Don’t worry, we find them.’ No, this is so so risky. Is a fine line that you can’t cross. I see it. I was in a situation like that, was terrible. He wasn’t the relative. Yeah, we need to understand anthropologists, everyone in the team, [at] what point we need to just say [...] ‘we need to wait for the results’ and don’t get into these situations because that is so painful for the families and for us [it is] also painful.”

Elena, a former member of the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF), spoke similarly about her experiences with forensic anthropological work. She summarised the difference between working in an archaeological context versus investigations of political violence stating that to *excavate*, and to *exhume* are entirely different matters. Like Julia, Peruvians Maurice and Elena highlighted the temporal difference through clothing which draws the victim to the here and now. “I used to work as bioarchaeologist, analysing and recovering human remains,” Maurice, who also worked for EPAF, noted. He further

stated that in the archaeological context, you may find human remains “sometimes dressed but you don’t recognise the dress like the clothes you are wearing every day.” In the modern context, however, “you start finding jeans and shoes and a belt, rings. So, you feel more close to them than the archaeological people. Yeah, for sure, you respect them because they are people, but you don’t feel so close. *You are conscious that they belong to another time.*” While there is a sense of respect towards prehistoric human remains, it appears the connection and closeness felt towards contemporary items like clothing, belts and shoes are more profound due to the forensic anthropologist’s familiarity with them.

When discussing her experiences as a forensic anthropologist in Peru, Elena also mentioned her earlier forensic anthropological work in the Balkans as a formative experience. The issue of clothing the victims wore stood out for her in that context too. Recovering intimate and familiar items like blue jeans or a pair of shoes had an emotional impact on her. Elena preferred the “time barrier” of archaeological excavations because when faced with human remains in situ (rather than in a burial ground) she felt it hard not to dwell on the context and circumstances. “You start thinking, this person could be my brother, that person could be a friend,” Liliana, who was Elena’s colleague at EPAF, translated what Elena said. Eventually, Elena reached a point where she decided not to continue with forensic anthropological work. She preferred archaeological work because the distance of time made it easier to do. Liliana further translated: “The sad thing that is also part of our Latin American reality are the memories that people carry until the end – photos, letters, money, etc. [...] Coming across personal effects was very hard, the farewell letters, it affected [Elena] a lot emotionally and physically because those people never reached their destination.”<sup>170</sup> Referring to her decision to leave EPAF, Liliana noted that for Elena “it was very hard to work with the dead people.”

Summing up, while the rewarding aspects of working in a forensic anthropological context are highlighted, my informants also associate impacts on their selves, such as stress and responsibility, with forensic anthropological work. Both, bioarchaeology and

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<sup>170</sup> Translated by me from Liliana’s Spanish notes.

forensic anthropology, offer a glimpse into the lives of human beings. In the former discipline, the remains and burial goods of individuals from hundred, perhaps thousands of years ago are analysed. In the case of forensic anthropological investigations of political violence, the practitioners come across clothing and personal belongings that are only a few decades old. Thereby a temporal bridge between the victims and the practitioner is formed, and associations of the self with the victims are made. The temporal distance of archaeological work highlighted, by contrast, the temporal closeness of forensic anthropological work. For some of my informants, it meant they withdrew from work in contemporary contexts, seeking comfort in the more detached work of remains from the distant past. For others, it meant a constant encounter with the realities of the families of the missing and sociopolitical contexts of violence. Some, like Elena, preferred archaeological work, while others, like Sofía, found that forensic anthropological investigations gave them a sense of purpose. Emotional aspects of the work, such as the presence of the families or a possible identification with the victim were some of the ways that Peruvian forensic anthropologists spoke of their experience. Underlying those experiences were the feelings of moral responsibility and of stress. In the next section, I explore these issues further by looking again at what it means to work with the families of the missing and how this shapes the sense of self and the moral experience of forensic anthropologists.

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## 6.2 Working with the Families

[If you] don't want to compromise you and your work with the families you better do bioarchaeology. Don't enter into this world that is complicated.

– my informant Sofía

*“[Trabajar con las familias es un tema] emocional y es un tema que es de la antropología forense.”* – ‘Working with families is an emotional issue and it is an issue that’s part of forensic anthropology,’ my Colombian informant Hugo, who works for the



ICRC, noted in our interview in Bogotá. Forensic anthropologists in the region view working with families and having contact with them as a non-negotiable and natural part of their work (unless perhaps solely working in a laboratory environment). This stands in stark contrast to the way that forensic anthropologists in the Global North talk about their work, as the latter view contact with the families as either outside the scope of the work or as something that might make their work less ‘objective.’ As noted in the previous section, working with the families also distinguished two kinds of work (forensic or bioarchaeological) *within* the Latin American context. In this section, I want to explore further how working with the families, which is so central to forensic anthropology in Latin America, affects forensic anthropologists and shapes their moral experience of their work and of themselves.

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“It’s understandable why people don’t want to engage with families because it is difficult,” my informant Mike told me. Mike is from North America but has done forensic anthropological work in Latin America for many years. While I have explored the physical dangers and risks of that work in Chapter 5, here I want to highlight something else, for what Mike was referring to when he described working with the families as “difficult” was the impact that getting close to families might have on forensic anthropologists themselves. Mike suggested two related kinds of difficulties that arise from engaging directly with families of the missing: first, that working closely with families can be emotionally difficult because it means having to be close to their suffering and grief and having to attend to the emotions of family members; and second, that the emotional proximity that comes with working closely with families might impact the work itself, making it less objective. Based on his years of experience in Latin America, Mike noted that he had seen other forensic anthropologists have emotional reactions even when they were not directly working with families, about which he said: “Culturally and psychologically, this is to me something that I don’t understand but that I think is really interesting. And I experienced it to a degree but not as seriously as some colleagues.” In the following, he outlined an example of practitioners having an emotional reaction outside any contact with relatives of the missing:

I do the work, I'm in a grave, doing autopsies, whatever. Yeah, emotionally it's difficult but somehow there is this mechanism that separates you from the person. It is a body. When you're at home and you watch a documentary, it's a very different experience. Physically or psychologically, you should be more removed. And you can see a documentary about the work you did but your brain is functioning differently now. And your defences – defences! That's probably not even a good term. Ah, to a degree. It's like stress, you know. A bit of stress is good. But too much stress overwhelms you. So, when you think of defence it's like defence against too much of this, too much proximity. [...] Watching a documentary and suddenly it's very moving emotionally. It's very difficult. And you think 'how odd that I should be at home, in a sort of safe space, watching a documentary about my work.' Not my work but the context or the work that I have done in that place and it's very emotional. But when I'm doing the work, I don't experience the same intimacy. That's something I don't understand. And I've seen colleagues, you know, at work, we watched a documentary and later we were going out for dinner and a colleague just broke down. Just lost it, emotionally. And I thought 'What's going on?!' Like I didn't understand. And it was my inability to connect what I myself had experienced but not to such a degree with his experience. *But there were not even families there. And that's what people are worried about, I'm sure, when they are worried about being close to families. Like it's emotionally taxing and perhaps dangerous.*

However, he highlighted that the perceived danger of being close to families may be exaggerated “if people think of it in those terms.” He drew an analogy between being close to families and the concept of a vaccine, suggesting that some exposure or interaction with family members can further a connection to them: “A little bit of that helps you develop – immunity is not the right word – I think it helps you to [inaudible] mindset and brings you closer to them.” Mike then discussed the relationship between proximity to the families and bias in scientific research:

What the sort of conventional scientific thinking is, is that the closer I am to them the more bias-able I am. That's the risk that I will be influenced by them. *But what's wrong with being influenced by them?* The conception is I will be influenced by their version of events. [...] *A fear of that proximity of families is, I would argue strongly, completely mistaken.* Completely disoriented. [...] [But] *'how much is too much?' in terms of psychological and emotional proximity.* And I would argue, well, it's not something that is quantifiable and it's something that is progressive.

Mike sought to explain this in relation to what he sees as the cultural differences in emotional expression and intimacy between Latin America and the Global North:

But in Latin America because there is a cultural tendency simply to be more open in general terms in relations [...] Oh, from day one they are much more adept about being open, about feelings and exchange. Sort of a more intimate emotional exchange with other people. Look at salsa. You are right in there. There are two people who are one unit. And then you compare it with the waltz [...], the degree of intimacy is so distinct and to me, it's just another reflection of that distinction of proximity of physical, emotional, psychological proximity. *So, I think Latin Americans culturally generally are more adept so when they are suddenly with families at a graveside, you know, it's not such a stretch for them emotionally or psychologically.* But for people who grew up like me, it takes time. It's something you either avoid all your life or you gradually come to accept and gradually work towards. *And that doesn't mean you are not emotionally impacted by it. Of course, you are! How can you not be, standing next to this family member who is crying and looking for their father or wife or whomever? Of course, you are moved by it. But that's not a bad thing at all, right? It's just a question of to what extent is that harmful or helpful towards you. And it's not one or the other, it's obviously not like that, that simple.*

In Mike's account, Latin Americans are described as being more comfortable with emotional and psychological closeness, making it easier for them to navigate emotionally charged situations like having the families present at the exhumation side. Cultural and social differences in how emotions are experienced and expressed are well documented in anthropology (see for instance Will 2017; Hepburn 2002; Lutz 1988; Abu-Lughod 1986; Lutz and White 1986). In his account, Mike challenged the notion of emotions as binary – either beneficial or detrimental. Emotions are multifaceted and can serve different purposes depending on the context – they can bring the forensic anthropologist closer to the families but can also have a negative psychological impact. Ultimately, what Mike's comments suggest is that it is not so much whether or not emotions are a part of forensic anthropological work but rather *how* people experience and express their emotions in relation to their work that matters.

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In the Latin American context, where families are present and part of the investigation, emotions play a key role in building trust and fostering good relations, but this points to the kinds of emotional labour that forensic anthropologists also need to perform as part of their role. My Peruvian informant Sara highlighted how hard it can be to interview the

families, as forensic anthropologists must maintain professionalism while providing comfort for the family members, while at the same time dealing with their own emotional responses as they listen to stories of suffering, violence, and grief. About working with Peruvian Quechua-speaking communities, Sara noted:

They were not numbers, they were people. And you can feel it, I mean, you can feel when someone comes to you just to ask you for information and then you are just a number, another statistic. Which is not the same when someone comes to you and says, ‘I want to hear your history.’ It’s important. It’s important for us, and also find psychologists [that know how to] to train us how to do it. It’s not easy [...] to recover information, very hard – *be professional* but also *give comfort* to the other people. [...] You cannot say, ‘no, I’m professional, I will hear everything, and I will not feel anything.’ This is impossible.

Sara’s statement highlights the complexity of recovering information from the families, stating that it is challenging and requires a balance between professionalism and emotional connection (something she noted they needed to get trained in). The notion that forensic anthropologists cannot detach completely from their emotions when dealing with the families underscores the human aspect of their work. While Sara highlighted the importance of receiving training on supporting the relatives of victims, she also stressed the importance of recognising the need for psychological support for forensic anthropologists. She put it this way:

I remember, [...] in 2010, [there was] the congress in Colombia, the Latin American Forensic Congress, you know the ALAF, the Latin American Association. And one of the topics that they [talked about] in that congress is the need of the psychological support for the scienti[sts]. Because most of the time we think about the psychological support for the relatives of the victims, but as equally important is the psychologically support for us. But no one of the Latin American team took much attention really.

Sara highlighted that psychological support for forensic anthropologists was discussed in regional association meetings. In section 6.4 below, I will return to the issue of psychological support (or lack thereof) for forensic anthropologists. The focus of this section has been on the question of the emotional impacts of working with the families felt by my informants. While it previously has been noted that some of my informants

found the modern clothing worn by victims emotionally impactful, here it is a connection with the living, the families, that becomes centrally important.

I asked my Colombian informant Marie how she feels when seeing the suffering of family members looking for their loved ones. She stated:

Well, I think, you know, at the beginning, it was more complicated. I feel like I got more emphatic with like the sad part [...]. Mostly the people who search for missing people are women. So, either mums or wives or daughters or sisters. They are like heading the search process. And they are very resilient so like even if they are like [inaudible] what probably is the worst day of their lives you always find there is hope in the narrative they tell you. They never quit the search even if they had to face many many obstacles starting with state institutions for example. Like getting around the bureaucracy. Just getting someone [to listen] that this happened to their families and that they are looking for them. [inaudible] So, I feel like even though the stories are heartbreaking, the conflict, the whole context around what's happening is very, very nerve-wrecking, *I try to focus on the... yes, I think the resilience is the main thing.*

In many cases, it has been groups of women, as such the famous *Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina in the 1980s, who have led the search for the missing (Robben 2005). As Marie noted, in the Colombian context (as elsewhere), families of the missing have shown great strength and resilience in their search for the truth. As hard as it might be to experience their emotions as a forensic anthropologist, Marie also noted that the persistence was inspiring. She explained:

People never stop fighting or searching. Even when they are faced with [the fact that] it might not happen. Even if they lose a bit of that hope, there are support groups around them, there is a close-knit group of people that have gone through the same or something similar and they are always there with each other. So that's why these organisations of families are so important because they give you this circle of protection around. So, if one of them just like falls, they try to pick them up and carry on the fight. Or if, as it has happened, maybe some of the family that is searching maybe they died because they are old people and COVID and other things. So, a lot of mums, particularly elderly, have died recently and they haven't yet found their husbands or their daughters or whoever they are looking for. And the rest of the groups takes the flag and are in charge of continu[ing] the search even if there is no more family member left.

It appears Marie gets her strength and motivation to deal with what she witnesses through the resilience, as she calls it, of the families – ‘They do not give up, neither do I.’ Gabriela Fernández Miranda (2019) makes a similar observation when exploring the theme of frustration in Colombian forensic anthropologists. The author states: “Forensic anthropologists feel that, if family members are capable of continuing searching, despite obstacles, pain, institutional obstacles, limited resources, etc., they as professionals have no right to give up either”<sup>171</sup> (72). To quote one of Fernández Miranda’s interviewees: “if they haven’t tired of searching, why, that is, I haven’t been looking for it for so long, why am I going to be like this?” Let’s continue” (Ibid.). These statements highlight the profound impact of familial resilience on forensic anthropologists (working in Colombia). It appears that some of these professionals feel a moral obligation to match the families’ perseverance, recognising that giving up would be a disservice to those who continue to seek closure and justice. In this sense, the emotional response to the families is not an obstacle to forensic anthropological work (as some might see it in other contexts). Rather, it informs that work and gives it a specific moral purpose.

While my informant Santiago acknowledged that it is emotionally difficult for forensic anthropologists to have to witness the families’ suffering, he finds solace in knowing that he can help them. “I mean, it’s hard,” Santiago said. “You can feel...” he paused. “You have a lot of feelings in that moment when you are with the families. But the good thing is that, I mean, you feel good, or...” he paused again, searching for the words to explain how it might also feel good. He continued, “you feel fine because you are contributing to the truth. To the families, I mean. You are giving a contribution to them. So, you feel like – how do you say that? – *recompensado* [rewarded]. So yeah, I mean you can see the family crying, you can see the suffering of the family. And you can identify with the family in that suffering.” As he spoke, he shifted the pronouns he used, almost as if to provide an example of the kind of empathic identification he was describing. He continued: “Because it’s a person, it’s your loved one that is in bones, the person has a

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<sup>171</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.

[gunshot] whatever it has, whatever the person has. So, you feel that if that happens to a member of your family, I mean, you can understand the suffering. But you feel kind of connected with them because you are helping them in order to find the truth.”

For Santiago, then, the presence of the families might be emotionally difficult, but at the same time, it led him to think about his work in a particular way – that is, to see forensic anthropological work as a kind of moral relation with the families. This empathic identification with the suffering of families of the missing was not accidental or secondary to the work; rather, the connection was key to Santiago’s felt sense that he was working with the families to find “the truth.” By recognising the shared humanity and interconnectedness with those affected, it underscores a moral responsibility to help and provide answers to the families. While providing answers to the families may be rewarding, for Santiago and others, it also creates new kinds of pressures for them – a sense of responsibility to the families that shapes the experience of their work. My informants acknowledged the pressure they feel to find the missing and to bring answers to the families. Julia told me of feeling put under pressure by the families themselves. She mentioned instances where families want forensic anthropologists to continue the search although they have no indications as to the whereabouts of the missing person:

We have pressure basically from families. But there are some cases that are very difficult to solve. [Where] we don’t have any clue where the missing [is] or the group of missing persons, or we need the help of anonymous informants to know what happened. Because we search a lot of places, and we can’t find the persons or the person that we are looking for. So those cases are difficult for us, [having] to stop the search for these people because *there are always families that put pressure to go on*. But [...] you have to maybe to close [the case] because you don’t have any more clue, you are going like in circle [in the sense that] there is no more new evidence that will help you to know the... we call it *en paradero* [*desconocido*: unaccounted for] – where is this person? And what happened to him? Or to her, no?

My Colombian informant Horacio also highlighted the pressure experienced in relation to the expectations of the families. He mentioned a difficult period in 2018 and 2019, emphasising the extensive fieldwork conducted, with and without family involvement, often without finding the missing person. Horacio underscored the importance of meeting families’ expectations, despite the team feeling fatigued, not just within the forensic

teams but also among other colleagues. “Expectation of the families [is] the most important. But *the team is tired* [...] not only of the forensic, of the other colleagues,” he noted.

My Colombian informant Ana highlighted that while working in the field has its advantages, it also comes with mental demands:

Before, I thought I was an anthropologist for the lab. Just working with bones etc. But now I think the work in field is so important. I think is so beautiful for me. But is so so so hard. So hard. *In the cases that I worked, emotionally was shocking for me. Is really another thing.* Now I understand why the institutions are so disconnected with the reality. Because [on] paper or hearing testimonies or something like that, you can think, ‘ok that was difficult’ etc. When you are in the field, when you are working with the *victimarios*, the killers etc., you see the monster to the eyes. You really understand how cruel [it was] for the families. How terrify[ing] [it] was for them. And you can put yourself in their position and [...] that makes you feel like them, that makes you understand that your work is something you have to do. Something like [...] make you understand everything. [...] That is something important but is also so hard. The first time when I was in field searching for a young boy, so young boy, a child, I cry every day. It was so hard for me. And with the mother crying and told me the story. And told me everything about him. I used to think, ‘ok I can separate that reality with my mind.’ It can happen. To me, that is so hard. *I can’t make this barrier or this wall between them.* [...] I love it but is hard for me. *Maybe in a couple of years, my mind would feel tired or burned out.* I know some people that are working for so many years in this field, for the CTI and now a friend that work with ICRC, *cruz roja*, and he told [me] that. *He told me, ‘I am so tired. I am tired but I don’t need vacation. I don’t need sleep more. I just need to this reality stop. Yeah, stop. I don’t want to find more dead people, young people.’*

While Ana still only speculated whether “maybe in a couple of years, my mind would feel tired or burned out,” this has become a reality for my Peruvian informant Óscar who has been working as a forensic anthropologist for over a decade. He highlighted that he enjoys working with the families, but also recognised his limitations in providing professional support. He noted that while he prefers to work in the laboratory he also “love[s] to take contact people, to contact the families.” Óscar acknowledged: “But I’m not quite qualified to bring support. I’m not a psychologist, I’m not a specialist in that kind of techniques to make a *compañero mental* to the relatives.” He continued:



I like a lot to talk with people which is, [with] the families of the victim, no? But it could sound a bit contradictory, but I like to work in the laboratory, I like, I like. I can spend days until night, until the last one to leave the laboratory because I like it a lot. For me, it is my passion. I remember that. So, but I enjoy when to transmit that part, the results, I don't know if that's the word I could express my feelings, joy, but I feel fun. I enjoy, I feel.... I don't know how to express that in English. *Me siento muy tranquilo.* [...] My work has a purpose, I mean. That's a good feeling. Something like that. [...] That's why I like to talk to [...] with people, with the families. But [...] to be part of that, of all the process that continues after that. [...] All of my energy is gone. I don't know why. I don't know why. It's a personal, physical feeling. *But I like the laboratory, to transmit my results, to talk with families, contact with the families, but after that I feel demanding for my energy. I don't know why. I don't know why.* [...] *I feel exhausted. I don't know why. It's like my energy is in minimum level.* Is when I have to be part, for instance, [...] of the funeral itself, when we took the coffin into the grave, for instance. All this part. In that part, I feel exhausted, I feel like, I don't know, because I am anthropologist as well.<sup>172</sup> It should be enjoyable for me. For me. But I don't know why. I don't know why. Maybe it's a bit a result of all these years working as forensic anthropologist as well, I think. Yeah, I think from that could be a change. With these years working as forensic anthropologist. Maybe something like, it is not a burnout, it's more like I don't know how to say that in English. [...] *I think it's a consequence maybe for us working as forensic anthropologists, I mean always, 12 years, 13 years.* I don't know.

Óscar expressed a sense of fulfilment and purpose in his work, particularly in tasks like conducting laboratory work, sharing results, and interacting with families. However, he also described feeling drained and exhausted after, it seems, the forensic anthropological work is done, and he attends the funerals of the victims he aided in identifying (a potentially intense emotional experience). Wondering whether his exhaustion stems from his ten or more years of working as a forensic anthropologist could indicate incrementality or a slow accumulation as a result of prolonged exposure to mentally taxing work or contexts. It is an aspect I will discuss below when in section 6.4 I address in more detail the mental impacts of forensic anthropological work.

Marie, a Colombian forensic anthropologist, also commented on feeling pressure to find the missing, but she noted that such feelings “varies from people, person to person.” She

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<sup>172</sup> Óscar studied social anthropology before switching to forensic anthropology.

stated that becoming too involved is a probability, especially in cases where the forensic anthropologist feels deeply connected and invested in helping a particular person or group, possibly because they remind them of someone. Marie concluded:

And those [cases] maybe become more of a *heavy load*. I don't want to say like a burden. It's not a burden but it feels heavier sometimes when you talk about this case and sometimes, well, you can't promise things that you can't fulfil so... you can promise that you can do the best, everything that's in your control like everything that is available. Or continue [...] researching for new ways to... for example search in a place that is very secluded and you don't have a specific spot to search, you have a huge area. And it's in the middle of the jungle or something and maybe those [are] the case[s] and the people that are heavier in this line of work. *But you also get to build friendships and people become somehow like your family. And you become also part, like a really important part, of their lives. You are a complete stranger, and they are sharing with [you] [...] everything and sometimes it's like 'you are our last hope to find them.'*

Despite the challenges and emotional weight involved in their work, Marie also highlighted that being able to provide support and assistance in such critical and emotional situations can lead to meaningful connections with the families and a sense of being an integral part of their lives – even more so, becoming the family's *last hope* (which can add another layer of complexity to the situation, as the families come to rely on the forensic anthropologist as their beacon of hope). My informant Ana too emphasised the importance of integrating the families into the forensic anthropological investigation process. She mentioned that in some cases families wait for years to receive an answer, to ultimately not receive one at all. In some instances, families, she noted, received a cardboard box with remains without much information or closure, which emphasises the need for more compassionate and transparent procedures. “That was so hard for the families,” she pointed out, “for any human being.” The involvement of institutions like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and specialised units like the *Unidad de Búsqueda* is crucial in addressing these challenges, Ana noted. These organisations play a vital role in providing support, facilitating communication, and aiding in the search for missing persons. As Ana stated, the families wanted to “be part of the process because that is important for them. That is important for them to know what is going on. How [the investigation] advances. Maybe say what they

like, what they don't like. You know, everything, and be part of the process because it is important for them.”

My informant Horacio pointed out that forensic anthropological investigations in Colombia and across Latin America are carried out with a strong emphasis on being close to the families affected by these tragic events. Emotions can run high during exhumations as forensic anthropologists may find themselves in situations where family members are present, grieving for their loved ones. Horacio stated:

We [are] working here in Colombia, [...] in all Latin America, very close to the families. Very close to the families. The emotion can be an issue because you maybe, you are in the mass grave try[ing] to do the archaeological process but outside is the mother and the father crying, for example. And is very, very... I don't know the word... uncomfortable sometimes because you need concentration. But we do frequently this work that you can have the situation more accepted to you – and sometimes the families ask everything, and you are the only specialist in the mission, and you are the only person that can bring answer to the families. This is the clothes, is male, is female, why the cranium is broken, why this bone is broken, you can try to bring the information you can see.

One of the poignant moments, he described, is when, after months of analysis and investigation, they can present findings to the families. This may involve showing them the remains and explaining how injuries occurred. “And the family get answer,” he noted. Horacio's comment that the presence of the families at the exhumation site can be distracting in terms of their expressed emotions has also been noted in the wider literature (see for example Ferllini 2013). Although the presence of the families can be challenging, Horacio highlighted that providing answers and information to the families is a significant aspect of their work, and that they, as specialists, are often the sole source of information for the families about what happened to their loved ones.

When asked what challenges forensic anthropologists face in Colombia, my informant Santiago mentioned pressure from multiple sources:

I don't know – maybe the amount of work? The amount of cases is a challenge because you have to... I mean, to work is kind of under pressure. You have the pressure of the time because you have to... you have the pressure of giving answers to the families. And also, the pressure [...] of your bosses. What is the

pronunciation? My boss, they want like results. Fast. This kind of things. And there are cases [where] sometimes the interpretation is very difficult. I mean is not cases that you find in a book. That you open the book, [and you can say], ‘ok this is the answer.’ You need days to think, to understand, to read [...], you have to do it fast. So that’s a challenge.

The pressure for Santiago comes from needing to provide answers to the families while meeting the demands of superiors who prioritise fast outcomes. Some cases are not straightforward and require extensive thought, research, and interpretation, making quick decision-making a significant challenge. I further asked Santiago if he thinks the connection that they have with the families puts pressure on them to do a good job or to show results faster. “Yes,” he said. It is “like a *commitment*, like a *responsib[ility]*. So, I have to be responsible. *I have to do a good work because I’m working for the people that are suffering. People that didn’t have my opportunities.*” Forensic anthropologists work for various teams, whether those teams are part of governmental or non-governmental institutions (see Chapter 5), but for some, their work becomes a felt sense of responsibility to the families too – framed by Santiago as working *for* them. The ethical dimension of his last statement is significant. By acknowledging the needs of ‘people that did not have his opportunities,’ a commitment to ethical behaviour and a desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others is demonstrated.

As shown, empathy and a connection with the families play a crucial role in addressing the plight of families. While providing them with answers and contributing to the truth and justice can be rewarding, recognising the shared humanity and connections with those affected can create a sense of ethical responsibility for forensic anthropologists towards the families of the missing. This highlights the delicate balance between feeling compassion for the suffering of the families, and a moral obligation to help them.

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### 6.2.1 Forensic Anthropology as a Vocation

Feeling a sense of commitment and (moral) responsibility may be related to the idea that certain professions, like forensic anthropology in the context of Colombia and Peru, go beyond mere work; they involve a deep sense of purpose, moral obligation, and a

commitment to helping others, thereby making these jobs vocations. Indeed, Liliana translated that Elena realised that what she did “was not a work, that was not a job, that was more than that [...] you have that commitment to finish your duty, you were compromised to the goal, to the mission, to the vision of that team.” Both, Elena and Liliana agreed, however, that while they felt a sense of professional duty, they do not feel it as an obligation.

My Peruvian informant César, who worked as a forensic anthropologist in Colombia and Peru, stated: “*If you work in this, is for every moment. In every moment you are thinking of the missing people.*” For him, being a forensic anthropologist is a “life choice.” He stressed that it “is very important [to] have [a] clear [idea] what you want to do. And why! Is a life motif. And you have some moments, special moments for you, for your family, for your partner, for your wife, whatever... But *in every moment, you are working in a mental work.* You are in a mental working about the [...] work. I have [worked] twenty-three years maybe in this way. 24/7,” he laughed. César has dedicated over two decades to constant mental work on his cases. This enduring commitment can be seen as treating his work as a vocation or calling, which is how César perceives it.

In a similar vein, while employed by EPAF, my informant from Peru, Sara, discovered that being a forensic anthropologist means dedicating oneself fully to the work without much, if any, time for a personal life. Sara repeatedly stressed the importance of doing forensic anthropological work for the right reasons. For her, a humanitarian approach is crucial, which involves prioritising the needs of the victims’ relatives rather than personal glory. She said:

If you want to be a forensic person, your motivation should be humanitarian motivation. Humanitarian doesn’t mean that you want to be the hero of the world. No! Humanitarian for me means that you will take care first of the needs of the relative of the victims. That you are going to be conscious that you are not working just with another material. You are working with human people. With the parent, the son of someone else. For me, it should be the best, the first, the most important request. Not to think about money. No. Should be conscious that the first thought in your mind is the humanitarian aspect that you are bringing. And don’t expect anything from your work. Just doing your work in silence trying to help and support as much as you can.

This human-centred approach underscores the emotional impact and responsibility that comes with it – doing the work this way came at a price for her, and she eventually left to return to bioarchaeological work. While for Sara travelling around Ayacucho<sup>173</sup> with the team was generally a “good experience,” being immersed in the work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – the same approach to always working that César noted – without having the opportunity to switch off came as a shock to her. “Everything goes around ideals,” she explained. “Everything goes around the relatives of the victims, so we work without any schedule. *We work without time*. I mean you can start your day at nine or ten or eight am at the office and you could finish maybe at five, maybe at six, maybe at eight, maybe at ten.” In essence, the work was demanding because it could never be finished, because “you had the pressure of the relatives of the victims,” and because she felt a commitment to the work that went beyond the structure of the working day. She added: “We didn’t disconnect from the work completely. Sometimes [a colleague] was in the other part of Europe and called and said, ‘you have three hours to give me a project because we can obtain funding for the organisation.’ So, everyone was running around [working on] that. So, you couldn’t have a personal life, so that was very... I mean you can support that for a couple of months, but you cannot assume that as a way of life.”

Reflecting on her experience, Elena noted that EPAF approached the work with “an almost militant dedication.” This came at a cost – “an emotional drain.” Eventually, she felt that “you need to establish limits to the job.”<sup>174</sup> That sense of commitment was amplified by the institutional conditions, such as limited resources. As Sara put it, the team tried “to do more than they could do.” The gap between what everyone wanted to do and the realities of the limitations of what could be done heightened the emotional drain. Sara noted the team was constantly “trying to support more relatives of families, trying to do more cases, trying to do more than we can do. And that’s normal when you work for an ideal but when you get to a point and you see ‘Ok, I am a human person, too,

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<sup>173</sup> City in south-central Peru. It was one of the regions most severely impacted by the violence during the Peruvian Civil War in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>174</sup> Translation by Liliana, who had accompanied the interview.

I need a personal life, I need psychological support, I need to disconnect from all of these problems. I need at least some economical peace to be safe.” Approaching it as a vocation meant there was no real distinction between her work and her life outside of work. In addition to not having a personal life, there was also the issue of economic precarity – that is, the constant need to procure funding to receive a salary.

As I listened to her describe the situation, I commented that in the end “ideals don’t fill the fridge.”

Sara agreed: “You work for ideals, and you hope,” – she gave a small laugh – “to continue to receive money from the institution, I mean foreign institutions, to keep the salaries, to keep the office open. So, with no psychological support, [...] and also having to support the egos inside of the team, I decided it’s not the place for me.” Sara felt the work required a certain approach (human-centred, ideals, vocation). However, in the end, that same approach made it impossible to continue. Sara’s experience highlights the emotional and practical toll of dedicating oneself entirely to a cause. The blurred boundaries between work and personal life, coupled with the pressure of economic instability, can lead to burnout and a sense of unfulfillment (the need to have a personal life). To maintain a sense of self (her ideals, her sense of herself as a professional) she had to leave.

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Prominent German sociologist, Max Weber, delved into the concept of *Wissenschaft als Beruf* – ‘Science as a Vocation’ in his lecture delivered in 1917 at Munich University. Weber explored the value of pursuing a career in academia focusing on science. He highlighted that while science provides methods of explanation and justification, it falls short in addressing the fundamental questions of life, such as guiding individuals on how to live and what to value. He stated:

Today youth feels rather the reverse: *the intellectual constructions of science constitute an unreal realm of artificial abstractions, which with their bony hands seek to grasp the blood-and-the-sap of true life without ever catching up with it.* But here in life, in what for Plato was the play of shadows on the walls of the cave, genuine reality is pulsating; and the rest are derivatives of life, lifeless ghosts, and nothing else.

[...]

Under these internal presuppositions, what is the meaning of science as a vocation, now after all these former illusions, the ‘way to true being,’ the ‘way to true art,’ the ‘way to true nature,’ the ‘way to true God,’ the ‘way to true happiness,’ have been dispelled? Tolstoi has given the simplest answer, with the words: “*Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’*” *That science does not give an answer to this is indisputable.*<sup>175</sup> (Max Weber 1958, 140-141 and 143, English translation, emphasis added)

Weber argued that science cannot offer answers to these existential questions, emphasising that values are derived from religion rather than from scientific inquiry. In that sense, he connects science as a vocation to objectivity, emphasising value-neutral scientific pursuits focused on facts rather than values. However, it is interesting that some of my informants add to this perspective, highlighting how dedication to forensic anthropological work is associated with ideals and values – as shown throughout the dissertation.

I began this chapter by suggesting that forensic anthropologists can be described as unwanted and moral witnesses. As outlined, this happens through several aspects. Let me briefly summarise those before continuing. Forensic anthropologists in Colombia work in sociopolitical contexts that put them directly at risk due to on-going violence. Therefore, they bear witness to the conflicts they work in through the potential danger on their lives and the security measures that need to be taken. Further, they become moral witnesses through interaction with the families, observing and feeling their pain and suffering. In

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<sup>175</sup> German: Heute ist die Empfindung gerade der Jugend wohl eher die umgekehrte: Die Gedankengebilde der Wissenschaft sind ein hinterweltliches Reich von künstlichen Abstraktionen, die mit ihren dürren Händen Blut und Saft des wirklichen Lebens einzufangen trachten, ohne es doch je zu erhaschen. Hier im Leben aber, in dem, was für Platon das Schattenspiel an den Wänden der Höhle war, pulsiert die wirkliche Realität: das andere sind von ihr abgeleitete und leblose Gespenster und sonst nichts. (490)

Was ist unter diesen inneren Voraussetzungen der Sinn der Wissenschaft als Beruf, da alle diese früheren Illusionen: »Weg zum wahren Sein«, »Weg zur wahren Kunst«, »Weg zur wahren Natur«, »Weg zum wahren Gott«, »Weg zum wahren Glück«, versunken sind? Die einfachste Antwort hat Tolstoj gegeben mit den Worten: »Sie ist sinnlos, weil sie auf die allein für uns wichtige Fragen: ‘Was sollen wir tun? Wie sollen wir leben?’ keine Antwort gibt.« Die Tatsache, daß sie diese Antwort nicht gibt, ist schlechthin unbestreitbar. (Max Weber 1919 in Kaesler 2002, 494)



some instances, forensic anthropologists might even speak to the perpetrators and, as such, encounter the conflicts. What is more, they produce knowledge of the crimes perpetrators want to hide. This, as outlined, may also endanger their safety. The knowledge forensic anthropologists produce may result in two conditions. I have tracked one of them already in previous chapters. First, there is the condition of danger as forensic anthropologists can become a target of violence through the knowledge they produce. The second condition that opens up from the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce relates to the questions *What does this knowledge do to the person producing it? How do they rationalise what they witness?* As the sections above have shown, forensic anthropological work impacts practitioners in multiple ways. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine those impacts in greater detail and explore how forensic anthropological work shapes peoples' sense of themselves in order to address how they come to rationalise what they witness. But first, I present some examples of what my informants witness in terms of death and skeletal trauma.

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### 6.3 Unearthed Truths: Rationalising the Atrocities that Forensic Anthropologists Witness

The joke Colombians told was that God had made their land so beautiful, so rich in every natural way, that it was unfair to the rest of the world;  
He had evened the score by populating it with the most evil race of men.

– Mark Bowden,  
*Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw*

If you believe in the evil [...] I have to say that I saw the evil.

– my informant Maurice

My Canadian informant Emma recalled her forensic anthropological experience in Somaliland. She described herself as an “archaeologist by training” and as a young

student travelled to Africa to exhume and help identify victims of the 1980s Civil War. Emma noted:

I pulled out one of the bodies, skeletons, human remains, and it was really small and there was a lot of clothing still on him. It was very likely a man. Because it was from the '80s there was hair, often head hair, often pubic hair, but there wasn't skin. But there was often clothing preserved, especially like non-organic materials like polyester. The outfit, the shirt that was still there, had a pattern on it. And it was a pattern that looked a lot like something I remembered a kid, that I know, wearing when he was like seven or eight. And to be clear, this person was not seven or eight, they were probably like early teens. But I remember looking at that and realising how young some of these people were. They were almost all men, some of [them] boys. [...] realising that no matter what the spin is about this conflict, no 14-year-old knows what they are signing up for. No 14-year-old is self-radicalised, no 14-year-old is a soldier. Because the argument is that these were all soldiers or guerrilla army. No 14-year-old is. And the way their human remains in the particular area had looked – they had their hands behind their backs, they had them tied because we found some rope. It looked like a lot of them had been shot at really close range like with an AK-47 or something equally and then just kicked [...], pushed into the grave. And to think of a 14-year-old had had that happened to them.

Although not within the Latin American context, Emma described a poignant scene of discovering human remains of a contemporary conflict. As this victim stemmed from a conflict in the recent past, the 1980s, the clothing was still intact and hair present. The pattern on the victim's shirt triggered memories of clothes worn by a child Emma knew. Her experience is another example of the knowledge forensic anthropological work can produce (in addition to the knowledge outlined in Chapter 5) and the emotional impact this knowledge can have on the forensic anthropologist. In forensic anthropology, practitioners analyse, and record information needed to create an osteobiography. Forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow believed that the human skeleton entails a biological record that unveils details about an individual's health, lifestyle, and even the circumstances surrounding their death – “the biography of bones” (Weizman 2017, 83). Moreover, forensic anthropologists make inferences about how the individual died (e.g. gunshot wound to the head), record additional evidence, and give information that contributes to potential legal investigations, such as time-since-death evaluations, the location of the grave, position of the body (e.g. tied, face down) and artefacts within the

burial context. Emma reflected on the tragic reality that many of the victims of the armed conflict in Somaliland were young boys, not soldiers or guerrilla fighters, as they are often portrayed. The image of their hands tied behind their backs and evidence of close-range shootings with firearms like an AK-47 evokes a sense of brutality and injustice. The statement reflects the key themes of this section – the context in which forensic anthropologists work and the knowledge they produce. Whether they are working in a legal or a humanitarian context, forensic anthropologists produce knowledge that testifies to acts of violence and terror. The experience of such work can be emotionally difficult, as Emma noted, and it can expose the truth of what happened – knowledge that perpetrators would rather see remain hidden.

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It is not just what they find that can be difficult but also the process of forensic anthropological work itself. Elena, for instance, talked about saponified bodies in Croatia, where after death the body fat turned into a wax-like substance called *adipocere*. Liliana noted that “cooking heads to be able to remove the hair to be able to see the injury [...], boiling the pubes and ribs to see the age range to apply the standards that has been the hardest thing in [Elena’s] life.” In her book *The Violence of Care* (2014) Sameena Mulla sheds light on the complexities of forensic nursing and its effects on victims. Elena’s experience is reminiscent of Mulla’s analysis, which highlights the intricate nature of forensic examinations of sexual assaults, emphasising the intimate and challenging aspects of these encounters. For example, Mulla argues that not only the victim but also the healthcare professionals involved are vulnerable during these interventions. Furthermore, she emphasises the need for forensic nurses to have strategies to navigate these emotionally demanding situations effectively, especially when faced with cases that push the boundaries of their comfort. Like the forensic nurses Mulla discusses, forensic anthropologists in Latin America engage in emotional labour and need to cultivate coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with what they witness.

Like Emma, some of my informants mentioned children or young adolescents as victims when speaking about the most horrific atrocities committed or when stating what impact

their work had on them. Children might stand out because they are seen as innocent. As suggested by Miriam Ticktin (2017), children are a key figure of innocence. Liliana translated that Elena “cannot understand how a human being can be so cruel.” Although she has seen many cases, “no matter how much time passed away she cannot understand how cruel the people could be.” Elena worked on a case that impacted multiple passengers aboard a train. When they found the body of a two- or three-month-old baby in a suitcase, her colleague needed to leave the room as his daughter was the same age. Liliana translated what Elena said as follows: “Work with dead is difficult and there could arrive [a] point that you can just explode. Everyone has an emotional moment. We cannot say that we are not going to feel anything. That is not possible.” For my informant Maurice, “the worst part, the most horrifying part [is] when you analyse remains of kids, children.” He explained, “Because you know when they disappeared, when they died. And sometimes you see that [when] they disappear[ed], or they die[d], and they [had] the same age like you [...]” For Óscar, perpetrators that commit these atrocities do not act like humans:

My first thought is that from my point of view is not possible for me to rationalise how people can make suffer other people in that way. For me, that’s inconceivable. *It’s not a human...* I don’t know what happens in the minds of those people. Because that idea appeared as well when I was in Rwanda. [When I] was in the memorial centre of Kigali [which contains] the bones of [the victims from] the genocide of 1994 [that] occurred there. The same idea I had, the same thought I had there. *Because how is [it] possible [for] people can use violence for another person and even for a child?* I don’t know. My way to rationalise that, to rationalise that, for me it’s not possible, to conceive how [this is] possible. I don’t know.

Óscar’s statement reflects a deep sense of disbelief and incomprehension towards the capacity of individuals to inflict suffering on others, especially in extreme situations like the killing of children. In a similar vein, my Peruvian informant Sofía wondered if pregnant women and children getting killed in a beastly manner can still be considered war, or if it is something altogether different. I asked her how she makes sense of the violence she witnesses in her profession and her home country. She blew out air, indicating that this question might be difficult to answer or a topic difficult to talk about:

It is hard. [...] You know it was a... we were in a war. People died in a war. [...] People died in a war but you [...] seeing, you know, kids from one or two years killed in that manner?! Why? [...] Are they also a part of a war? No. no.”

Sofía highlighted the stark contrast between the reality of such brutal violence and the detached justifications some may offer. She noted:

Some people say, also relatives, ‘well, but some people must die, you know, in [a war]. You know, is just what happens.’ I say: ‘well, if your kid [had been] there, you’re not going to telling me that.’ But because it is in a community and is far away, it’s easy to say that. But no! No! A *mujer* or a woman pregnant? Also been killed?! In that manner?! No, no, no! Ten or fourteen bullet lesions in the body? No. Forty-five in a kid of eleven years old? No. *That’s not part of the war. That’s another thing,*<sup>176</sup> you know. No, no, no. *[These] atrocities that I see, amazing. It is just a lot.*

Her experience in Kosovo as a forensic anthropologist shows how they can get exposed to the grim aftermath of conflict, where they are confronted with the graphic details of violence inflicted on young victims:

In Kosovo, we were analysing, and I was a practician, you know, practician when I was first starting. The anthropologist was telling the pathologist about what she found. And she was telling eleven [inaudible] bullet lesions in the head, and it was twenty to each side [inaudible] and some in the arms and legs. And she was explaining but the pathologist said at one point ‘Can you stop?’ and I was really curious why [should we] stop. ‘Can you stop? Can we take one minute to think about why, of silence. Think about why they made that for a kid that you said he was eleven to thirteen years old? More than forty bullets.’

Sofía recalled her internal struggle, between professional duty and personal empathy, which underscores the complex emotions evoked by witnessing such atrocities:

And I was there and all [she takes a deep breath] was coming to me. I have to run, and another person run from me and like a movie, you know, all my tears were

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<sup>176</sup> What Sofía seems to refer to is indiscriminate killing. A phenomenon Ervin Staub (2011) characterises as evil. “By evil I mean human destructiveness,” he states. “I use the word primarily to refer to actions that create great harm, are not in the service of self-defence, and are not commensurate with provocation. Evil can take obvious forms, such as indiscriminate killing” (32).

just... at that point, you are a scienti[st], you are there but when you think about all the reconstruction of what that person has to deal with. With the dead. You know. And in five minutes, ten minutes, you have to continue working.

Her statement reflects the deep emotional impact of witnessing the horrors of war and the atrocities committed against innocent civilians, including children and pregnant women. Further, her statement shows that forensic anthropological work makes those who do it have to “make sense” of tragedy, violence, and evil. Not in the sense that they have to justify it – and many of them come against limits of understanding (how can someone kill innocent individuals and in such manner?) – but rather in the sense that their job is to understand what happened, to produce the knowledge of the situation, and this is not only difficult at times (as when a young victim reminds a forensic anthropologist of their own child) but also requires them taking an ethical stance (this is wrong and not part of the war).

I asked my Peruvian informant Julia how she makes sense of the atrocities that individuals have been subjected to. “Well,” she began, “I try to not to think about that. [...] is not easy not to think,” she chuckled. “At least me, I try to keep a little bit apart because I know it will affect me. I try to do my best to investigate the cases. And try not to think... yes.” She gave a small chuckle. While Julia makes sense of what she witnesses through a personal approach (she tries not to think about it), my informant Horacio’s approach is shaped institutionally – the stance of neutrality he works under as an employee of the ICRC. As outlined before, neutrality is a crucial operational instrument for the ICRC as their adherence to it allows them access to territories in Colombia controlled by armed groups. He stated:

Yeah, is hard because I am working with the ICRC and in ICRC we need to be, we must be very diplomatic. Very neutral, be careful with the word we use in the public opinion, in the public communication. And this is very hard because you see all the atrocities in the rural areas but in the city, everything works like Switzerland [he chuckled]. Is two world difference. And I going to Chocó for example, the department that is all jungle, and I see not only the missing person, I see with my own eyes people [who are] hungry, people cannot get out of the territory for the mines. Murders. All the humanitarian consequences you can imagine it. And I take two days or a flight, one hour to my city, and here in the city Medellín everything is good. Nothing happens in the cities, no conflict but the rural areas [is] different

situation. And maybe you cannot say this... I mean when I worked for the Medicolegal Institute, is a Colombian institute of the state of Colombia, but you can bring your opinion. Free. And if I say everything, [on] social media, with the people in the street or everything. But with ICRC very different. We need to be very careful with that because we are in dialogue with other actors. The bad actors, the good actors, everybody. [...] The strategy for access to the victims is this neutrality. And [...] [not to] express my opinion, my personal opinion is guarantee for access to the victims in the conflict areas. Is in personal ways a cost, in my silence, my silence for example, but is very difficult side to be very relax with the situation.

Horacio's statement shows that he witnesses not only matters related to his forensic anthropological work but other aspects of the conflicts too (such as individuals suffering from hunger and being restricted to their communities because of landmines) – yet he cannot discuss this publicly.

For my Colombian informant Eduardo “it's so difficult to imagine what happened with that body.” He explained, “because in different opportunities the body is dismembered. Is dismembered and have different injuries in different parts of the body. In different situations they are decapitated, they are without arms, without legs, and with different types of injuries that if you imagine is an atrocity.” He needs to see the human remains as objects of study to shield himself from the atrocities he observes the victims were subjected to:

*Yo tengo que ser muy profesional. [...] por un momento, [yo tengo que] deja del lado me emoción y ver el cuerpo como un objeto de estudio. Y ser profesional para analizar qué ocurrió y poder decir qué ocurrió.*<sup>177</sup>

Here we see Eduardo emphasise the importance of setting aside personal emotions to objectively examine and understand the situation. This approach underscores the notion of *emotional labour* forensic anthropologists need to engage in.

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<sup>177</sup> English: “I have to be very professional. [...] For a moment, [I have to] put aside my emotion and see the body as an object of study. And be professional to analyse what happened and be able to say what happened.”

My Peruvian informant Maurice responded to the question how he rationalises the atrocities that he witnesses as follows:

I have to say, yeah for sure, you are thinking many many things about this. [...] When I start [realising that] a new conflict starts, we deserve being destroyed now. We deserve the annihilation like human species. We don't deserve to live here anymore. Is interesting because for me, *the worst part, the most horror part when you analyse remains of kids, children*. Because you know when they disappeared, when they died. And sometimes you see that [when] they disappear[ed], or they die[d], and they [had] the same age like you [...].

Like for some of my other informants, children disappearing or dying is a key issue for Maurice. His emphasis on the similarity in age between him and the deceased children adds a personal and relatable dimension to their work. He continued: “And you can start thinking about this. Maybe if I was born not here, maybe there, maybe I can be this person. This is so horrible. And then you start feeling lucky. And sometimes you can feel bad to think about this because you think ... like a selfish...” He trailed off trying to find the words to describe how he feels. I asked him if he meant he felt guilty. “Exactly,” he said, “so you start feeling happy you [were not] born in [the] highlands.” As noted in Chapter 3, most of the victims of the Civil War in Peru were Quechua-speaking peasants (*campesinos*) who lived in the Andean highlands (Cardoza 2020; Rojas-Perez 2017; La Serna 2012). When he said he feels lucky not to have been born in the highlands, he is referring to that larger history and to the fact that he associates the highlands, as a place, with the violence and the likelihood of being a victim. Recall from above that Óscar emphasised the inhumanity of the violence. Maurice, too, felt that in his work he had to confront a kind of inhumanity:

After fourteen years [of] working in this, I can say that I see what another human being can do to another. *If you believe in the evil [...] as a conception, I have to say that I saw the evil*. It's tough. I know how it is. And I saw it when I recover remains from mass graves with bullets in the head or people who are chopped. This is horrible how another human being can do this. How can you not recognise this person as a human being like you? [...] I try to make some explanation... but I have a friend. Her father was a military during the armed conflict [...] and he was saying, [...] war is war. And he was telling me that every war just leaves to the people to... *Él dice que las guerras saquen lo peor de las personas*. Is like releasing the worst part of you. Appear during the worst times. He was saying, he was in conflict there. And all the time, [he] was saying, [he tried] to stopping



people to [...] shooting to the innocent people. *Because he said people becoming animals.* They don't think about it, they just think to kill and then because they have this rush of excitement, adrenaline. But you need to know how to control the beast. *The worst become the human being's beast.* This is why you can see [these] horrible things when you are analysing or recover remains. This is the only explanation.

Maurice highlighted the evil of what he witnesses, and he offered various psychological or social explanations for it. By doing that, he gives an account of the perpetrator's actions as evil or inhumane as a way of talking about what that does to him as a self, as a moral person – what are the consequences to forensic anthropologists of having to confront that inhumanity, that evil? My informant Ana too mentioned the concept of the *inhuman*. She told me: “When you are in the field, when you are working with the *victimarios*, the killers, *you see the monster in the eyes*. You really understand how cruel it was for the families.” With the last statement, Ana shifted to thinking about the effects of this inhumanity on the families – something that forensic anthropologists have to confront in addition to their own feelings of confronting *evil*.

When talking about ‘It was the ‘evil’ or the ‘beast,’ or ‘monster’ that did this,’ the human perpetrator is dehumanised as they are given an inhuman quality. Whereas earlier it was outlined how victims were dehumanised to rationalise killings<sup>178</sup>, it is now the perpetrator that becomes dehumanised. Why do this? It may be argued that, in this case, dehumanisation acts as ‘ethical scaffolding’ (Brodwin 2013) – perhaps due to the emotional difficulties, and limits of understanding. Perhaps we are unable to accept or imagine that a person is capable of atrocities such as those witnessed by forensic anthropologists. Therefore, something else must have caused this, something otherworldly – the beast or the evil. I once heard in a documentary something that stuck with me: We should refrain from seeing perpetrators as personified evil (which of course should not negate the fact that their crimes are evil). By doing so, we might give them power. Rather, we need to see them as fallible humans in order for them to be held accountable.

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<sup>178</sup> see Chapter 3

Miguel sees doing good and committing bad as part of being human. There are two sides or aspects to human beings for him: “I mean human beings are like that. They commit terrible things; they do wonderful things. Is a mix. You saw it every day.” This double nature became a lens through which Miguel comes to terms with the violence that he witnesses through his work. When speaking of members of the guerrilla group FARC and of the army, he stated that they are “human beings, they are no monsters.” For Miguel, it was important to note that everyone has done some good and some bad. His way of redeeming the perpetrators was not to humanise what they did, but rather to turn to the fact that, like everyone else, “they’ve got families.”<sup>179</sup>

Hannah Arendt (1958, 1951, 459) depicts the Nazi regime as “a society in which the nihilistic banality of *homo homini lupus* is consistently realized.” Arendt draws upon the Latin Proverb *homo homini lupus est* — ‘*der Mensch ist dem Menschen ein Wolf*,’ or ‘man is a wolf to man.’ The proverb has been used by many thinkers, most prominently perhaps by Thomas Hobbes. It has been argued that in Hobbes’ application, the proverb assumes “the meaning of a warning that is anchored in his time. People are capable of the worst” (Manzini 2023, n.p.).<sup>180</sup> Consequently, in Arendt’s context, human beings being capable of the worst becomes ordinary, bureaucratised and in that sense, perhaps a normal part of life (she speaks of the “banality of evil”). Interestingly, Hobbes’ contention that “man is a wolf to man” makes up only one part of the quotation. He

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<sup>179</sup> Seeing the perpetrators as human beings might contribute to closing the spiral of violence. There are things that simply cannot be forgiven, and to forgive lies in the decision of the victims. However, to close the spiral of violence, seeking justice should be about more than seeking revenge. Referring to psychologist Ralph White (1984), who writes about enemies in relation to his eponymous book *A Psychological Profile of U.S.-Soviet Relations*, Staub (2011, 327-328) notes: “Writing about enemies, White notes that fear, and the beliefs that one’s enemy is an inhuman monster and one’s group is always morally right, interfere with empathy. Knowing adversaries so as to accurately take their perspective, understanding their concerns and needs, and empathizing with them enables people to work on resolving conflict and overcoming hostility.” The implementation and success of this opinion might be one matter in relation to victimised groups like Indigenous people in Colombia and Peru (preventive measure), but an entirely different matter regarding the perpetrators that victimised Indigenous communities (reconciliation). In other words, it is a matter between reconciliation before and after violence has occurred (Staub 2011). However, this a discussion that goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>180</sup> Translated from German by me. Note: It has been argued that due to the unrest in England of the 1640s Hobbes feared a civil war.

states: “*Es besteht kein Zweifel, dass beide Formeln wahr sind: der Mensch ist dem Menschen ein Gott und der Mensch ist dem Menschen ein Wolf.*” (Ibid.) – ‘There is no doubt that both formulas are true: man is a god to man and man is a wolf to man.’ For Hobbes, man is capable of the worst, *and* man is capable of the best. The statement that humans are capable of both mirrors that of Miguel.

Outlining how my informants try to make sense of what they witness shows that the conditions of their work make them reflect on what they witness, and, in that sense, they have to think ethically about what they do. Even if not always testifying as expert witnesses in court (as some forensic anthropology teams in Colombia and Peru follow a humanitarian approach) – there is still a kind of moral (not juridical) witnessing. This strengthens the notion of the *unwanted* witness because forensic experts might expect to give evidence in court on scientific matters as expert witnesses, but the *moral* witnessing is a further, perhaps unwanted, aspect of their work. As shown throughout the dissertation, they face several encounters, and therefore cannot just slip into the *habitus* of detachment or objective science – forensic anthropology in the context of Latin America “is not a science isolated in a bubble” as suggested by Miguel. Rather, the encounter of forensic anthropological work itself becomes a difficult matter – emotionally and ethically. The next section will go into detail about the emotional and psychological impacts of their work and the ways that my informants navigate those impacts.

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## 6.4 Encountering Psychological Impacts – Unveiling Emotional and Moral Depths

Perhaps forensic anthropologists are the sin-eaters of our day, addressing the unpleasant and unimaginable so that others don't have to.

– Sue Black,

*All that Remains: A Renowned Forensic Scientist on Death, Mortality, and Solving Crimes*

In a virtual webinar on forensic anthropology, in which my informant Mike gave a presentation, the moderator – a friend and colleague of Mike's – asked him about how forensic anthropologists deal with the emotional challenges of their job. He recalled:

She asks me, in front of everyone, how do you manage, you know, psychologically, emotionally? So that's so revealing, and I said it then and it's absolutely true, it's the most common question I get. And I think my answer was, what my answer always is these days on that, is that I don't know why I don't appear to have been affected, you know negatively, I would say negatively. *Have I been affected? Of course! Absolutely. But that can be positive, it can be negative, it can be neither of those things. But I don't believe I've been traumatised by it.*

It might be difficult to fathom how forensic anthropologists who, according to the statement of Bill Bass (2003), immerse themselves in death<sup>181</sup>, are not traumatised by what they experience and witness. Anthropologist Michael Kenny (1996, 159) notes, “Not all traumas are the same; not all people respond to similar traumas in similar ways; the meaning of seemingly traumatic events, and therefore response to them, may depend on social circumstances and culture.” A view which has been echoed by many other authors (see for instance Horwitz 2018; James 2016, 2010; Nicolas et al. 2015; Allen 2005; Summerfield 2004, 2001, 1999). Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (2018, 09:43 mins) reasons, trauma cannot refer to the event itself as “something that may be traumatic

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<sup>181</sup> “Touched by death at such a tender age, you'd think I'd have had my fill of it early on and spent the rest of my life carefully steering clear. And yet, I deal daily with death. [...] I immerse myself in it” (Bill Bass in Bass and Jefferson 2003, 12).

for me may not be traumatic for you.” Note that Mike emphasised a belief that despite being *affected*, he does not perceive himself as having been *traumatised* by what he experiences in his work. The term and concept of trauma is one that not everyone uses to frame the impacts of experiences. In what follows, I would like to explore how forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru talk about the emotional and psychological impact of their work.

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Let me begin by returning to Mike, and his explanation of why he said he has been affected but not traumatised:

I think, I don't know, I think it's because I was in the classroom first. I was seeing things from a distance. Devoid of context or some else presenting a case study. So that on my first day of actual forensic work, I show up at 4:30 in the afternoon, I presume 'oh people are going to be shutting down' and a guy walks out of the morgue and hands me, you know, half of a pelvis of someone and says: 'Can you clean off this pubis?' Oh my God. Now that was that person's manner and tactic, whatever, it's not one I would advocate. But [...] I was shocked. I was like: 'Oh my God. You know, I'm wearing the only suit I own.' And I was thinking no, and he's like: 'Oh, you might wanna change into some scrubs.' Like 'yeah ok, thanks.' You know, that was just his way of doing things. But I wasn't traumatised by that, and I think it was because seeing images of these types of things and hearing people talk about it, I'm certain that helped me prepare. Yeah, I'm certain it helped me prepare. But that is not to say that other people with the same formation, training etc. for whatever reason aren't prepared or whatever. I don't know, I don't know. But I think it's remarkable that [name redacted] of all people – because we lived these things together – would ask me that question, rather than say a technical question. You know, what really matters, it's the politics, it's the psychology, it's not... our technical problems are, you know, little problems. We'll do an experiment, we'll figure that out eventually. Real problems are so much contextual. But again, it's such a common question and it's a common question because it's something we don't adequately understand, and we don't adequately manage. Sure.

Mike added: “There are taboos. That's why it's so remarkable that [name redacted] should ask me that in front of this big group.”

I asked him why he said it is a taboo.

“Why do I say it's a taboo? No, I mean, mental health is a taboo. Somehow, it's not real health, right?”

“Oh, you mean, in general, not just in forensic anthropology,” I said.

Mike responded:

No, I mean in general. Even still some forensic practitioners persist in pretending that this is something that’s not real, right? This is not something that hurts us and it’s not something that we should talk about. There are people like that, who still believe these things or behave as if these things were true. But yeah, mental health in general I would say. [Inaudible] We don’t like to talk about it, and we don’t recognise it and when we recognise it, we don’t like to admit it. I mean all of those things. Soldiers with PTSD or police officers, you know, they don’t like to talk about that stuff, and they are so seriously affected by it.

Mike’s comments point to several key themes that were common aspects of how my informants talked about, or did not talk about, mental health, trauma, and the emotional and psychological impacts of their work. As Mike noted, the question of trauma raises issues of stigma around mental health, the question of available support, and the tendency among forensic anthropologists to not acknowledge trauma or to deny that they have experienced it. Even in cases where there was some institutional support or acknowledgement of the possibility of trauma for forensic practitioners, there was a tendency among many to deny they needed it. As Sofía stated about working with EPAF, some flatly refused that any such support was needed, even when offered:

When I was in EPAF, and of course, they wanted to help us also because you have [...] the psychologists you know, working with the relatives. That’s of course what they have to do. But if we don’t maintain, you know, the people and your team could [inaudible: if they are not] you know, emotionally ok, you cannot do anything. [A colleague<sup>182</sup>] was very closed about that. He says ‘I don’t need it. We don’t need it.’ You know.

She disagreed, ending by noting: “But at one point, we need it. And some of us [...] talk with each other to help us.”

Reflecting on his own work with EPAF and the ICRC, Maurice said that the denial of potential mental health impacts and the need for support was a generational division:

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<sup>182</sup> name redacted

I have to say forensic anthropology sometimes, basically not [this] generation, old generation, they believe that they are heroes, and they are like superman, nothing happens to us, we don't need this, we don't need to go to the psychologist. But new generation, we believe that. When I am speaking with people who are starting in this, I all the time repeat, 'but don't forget about psychosocial emotional support because all of us need.' It should not be optional. It should be compulsory. You have to go and go.

Again, Maurice phrased this in the third-person, referring to the “new generation” and what “we believe.” Maurice counts himself in that generation, and also acknowledged that he has been affected by his work:

One important aspect that I learned in the beginning of my career speaking about... this is another aspect, the psychosocial support. This is important. And since I start working on this, I was working close with a psychologist. Was provided this. And we were discussing about this and about the need to protect yourself. How do you do this? You need to try do to a mental... you need to block. So, a mental block. Try to [not to] absorb this... for sure, you are going to do but, in the end, you need to find... just to release. Why am I saying this? Because in my first forensic case, was a big one, family there, crying, listening to the history, then working on the laboratory, analysing the remains.

So, I pass at least three months amongst this dead people, and I was emotionally affected. And what [did they do]? My boss, they expelled me from the laboratory. 'Go home, don't come back.' And in that moment, I feel frustrated but then I understood that because I was very emotionally affected, I was not very helpful in that moment. Because this was affecting me a lot.

His superior's advice to take a break from the laboratory served as a catalyst for introspection, prompting a shift in Maurice's approach to work and a transformative realisation regarding the significance of emotional labour but also care for himself. Maurice noted that now when he sees families crying, he takes the situation for what it is – a person crying – without trying to “go deeper” or analyse the underlying reasons. He stated: “When I saw people who [were] crying, I just saw people crying. I don't try to go deeper.” Yet, he applied what he had learned about how to provide support: offering practical assistance, such as “bringing water,” providing physical comfort, such as “rubbing the back or hugging,” or simply being present and “not saying anything.” Maurice further noted that he does not “feel pressure” in these situations: “I have to say just basically in those moments, I try to do this [offer comfort], but I keep working.”

During those “moments,” he is able to compartmentalise. However, as he has witnessed the grief and suffering of the families, afterwards, he needs to take time to process and reflect on the experience. Maurice put it this way: “Then for sure, because you observe this you need to release, you need to start speaking about this.”

Interestingly, Maurice spoke of *moments* in which it seems they have to do *emotional labour* (Hochschild 2012, 2003, 1983). In the sense that they have to compartmentalise their emotions to be what the families need – a professional who can give them answers. In a similar vein, Eduardo mentioned that one can feel the sadness of the families but that he must maintain a “pokerface in that moment.” He continued, “But after the moment, you can uncharge all these feelings, with your family, with the friends, with maybe the colleagues talking and talking about the situation and talking with my family about what is happening in the country with all this situation of violence, of disappeared people, missing people, it’s the way to uncharge the feelings. But all this [happens],” he stressed, “after the moment I have contact with the families.” Elena also noted that they must not openly express emotions of grief or sadness in the presence of the families. Liliana translated what Elena said as follows: “You cannot cry with the relatives of the disappeared people, definitely you cannot cry with them. If you feel bad, you stop, drink a glass of water and calm yourself first.” Yet, as Maurice stressed, having witnessed the grief of the families directly, forensic anthropologists also need to be able to speak about their own feelings. According to him, however, many forensic anthropologists hold that it is not necessary to do that. As he put it: “The forensic anthropologist, they don’t believe that we need this. I heard many colleagues say psychosocial support is for families. Not for us. But that’s not true because we also need this. Because mentally we are also affected. And if we are good, we are [cap]able to do anything.” What he meant was that emotional and psychological support was not incidental, but rather essential to doing a good job.

And yet, while Maurice was aware that his work affected him mentally, he could not fathom that he could have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He initially believed that only soldiers or people involved in a traumatic event would get diagnosed with this disorder. Maurice noted:



This is interesting, I have to say, five years ago I was working in close to Ukraine, and every day that I come back from my hotel I was feeling sad. And sometimes I was crying but with no reason. And I say, ‘what is going on with me?’ And then when I come [home] I decide to talk to a friend of mine, she is psychologist. And I was saying I’m feeling like this and this, and she was start making questions. And she said, ‘ok, I think that I know what you have but I will not tell you because I’m your friend so [...] I have to say go to a neutral person and he will evaluate and then come to me and tell me what this person say.’ So, I do that. And this psychologist evaluates me and he diagnoses, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder. And I said, ok, how come? Because at that time, I was thinking that this posttraumatic stress disorder just happens to people who work in war or being part of, I don’t know, earthquake or something violent. Not for working in this.

It might not be surprising that Maurice associates PTSD with only happening “to people who were in war” or involved in a traumatic event like a disaster. In the late 1970s, posttraumatic stress disorder emerged as an area of scientific interest informed by the political and social movement around the Vietnam War (Horwitz 2018; van der Kolk 2018; 2014; Boscarino and Boscarino 2015; Breslau 2004). It has been argued that it was a group of Vietnam Veterans who appealed to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) for the creation of the new diagnosis – giving the lived experiences of individuals devastated by “horror and helplessness” a name (van der Kolk 2014, 19; Breslau 2004; Young 2004, 1995; Kenny 1996). Consequently, PTSD appeared in the US-American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) as psychiatric diagnostic category in 1980, and thus PTSD had become institutionalised (Young 2004; van der Kolk 2000). In its infancy, combat-related PTSD and its treatment were intensely studied by anthropologist Allan Young (1995), who conducted ethnographic research among Vietnam Veterans at a psychiatric hospital. Following an approach highlighting the role of bodily and traumatic memory, Young (1996, 96 and 97) notes that what sets PTSD apart from “combinations of other, long established mental disorders” is its etiological characteristic of being “a disease of time.” Young (1996, 97) elaborates, “the pathology consists of the past invading the present in reexperiences and reenactments, and of the person’s efforts to defend himself from the consequences.” Therefore, it is not the event itself that causes suffering but the memory of it continuously haunting the individual. Since then, the clinical definition has evolved and has been extended to PTSD not only affecting military personnel but also ‘ordinary’ civilians.

After seeing a professional, Maurice told his friend that the therapist he saw was “totally wrong” and “crazy” because he had diagnosed him with PTSD and depression. Maurice’s friend, who is a psychologist, confirmed her colleague’s diagnosis: ““Yes, you have that,”” his friend told him. Maurice still disagreed, insisting that he was “not in a war.” As he told it, his psychologist friend then explained: ““but you were receiving a lot of input of traumatic events from people who was affected traumatic. And now you are traumatised of this. Because you didn’t release. And this is why I’m saying all the time you have to [do] to this.”” Maurice seemed to believe that one could only get trauma firsthand, and from directly experiencing war or other violent events. His friend, however, was trying to explain that trauma can be more than that. When she told him that he was “receiving a lot of input of traumatic events from people who were affected” she was referring to the idea of vicarious or second-hand trauma. In the humanitarian aid context, it has been described to be rooted in “[r]epeated exposure to stories of loss, suffering, and pain over a long period of time” (Mladina 2016, 180). As those are not one’s own stories but those of another affected person, this kind of trauma is also known as compassion fatigue (Ibid.). Interacting with victims or suffering family members, listening to their stories, can have a psychological impact on the forensic practitioner. Neyerlin (n.d., 8) reminds us that “Listening can irritate me, unsettle me or even radically change me. I never know exactly what will happen to me when I engage in encounters.”<sup>183</sup>

Maurice’s understanding of trauma was event-based, much like the still-dominant clinical category in the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-5), published in 2013, where PTSD is still defined as a “response to a specific trauma event” (Hinton and Good 2016, 5) and as such it does not account for prolonged trauma. For Maurice, there was no single event; rather, it seems that a chronic, prolonged condition prevailed. It was, then, a condition tied to the very conditions of the work that he did. In Maurice’s account, he quoted his friend as telling him: “You didn’t have this

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<sup>183</sup> Translation from German by me.

channel to release all your emotions. And you were accumulating, accumulating, accumulating.” This repeated sense of accumulation – and note the repetition in how he tells it – seems to speak of a continuous impact of stressors. This sense of repeating, accumulating impacts resonates with how Óscar spoke about feeling tired and exhausted. “I like the laboratory, to transmit my results, to talk with families, contact with the families,” Óscar noted, “but after that I feel demanding for my energy.” Feeling devoid of energy, he stated, might be the consequence of having worked as forensic anthropologist for over a decade. While there is no doubt that the work is hard and demanding, Óscar’s comment might also be thought of in relation to how the psychological and emotional impacts of secondary trauma present as bodily symptoms. This speaks to working in a prolonged condition in which one constantly encounters and is subjected to stressors, such as stories of pain and suffering.

Thinking about incrementality with regards to mental demands made me think of a statement by forensic pathologist Richard Shepherd. He notes about the psychological impact of his work:

You don’t notice it [...] because you think you’re good enough to do it without giving in. But, actually, it’s like little fish – nibble, nibble nibble – such tiny pieces go that you don’t notice the individual bites. And yet, when you look back, you realise it is having an effect. (Lea 2018, n.p.)

What the pathologist describes is reminiscent of what Kai Erikson (1976, 254) refers to as “chronic conditions” or a “chronic disaster [which] gathers force slowly and insidiously, creeping around one’s defences rather than smashing through them.” Maurice associated PTSD with being caused by “something violent,” yet Erikson’s work on disaster shows that to have an effect, stressors do not always have to be violent in the sense that they are characterised by one big blow. On the distinction between stress and trauma, it has been noted that “Trauma [...] refers to a violent event that injures in one sharp stab, while stress refers to a series of events or even to a chronic condition that erodes the spirit more gradually” (Erikson 1991, 457). In this distinction, it is only ‘trauma’ as the single event that leads to traumatisation. Erikson (1994; 1991; 1976) rejects this distinction noting that, for him, trauma has a place on both ‘sides.’ A gradual “wearing away” or “chronic conditions,” he (1991, 457) argues, can traumatise an

individual just as a sudden blow, or “acute events.” Thus, Erikson (1976) moves away from the suddenness of a traumatic event and the contention that trauma can only be caused by one specific occurrence, which characterised historically earlier perceptions. Indeed, it has been proposed, “As traumatic as single blow events may be, the traumatic experiences that result in the most serious psychiatric disorders are prolonged and repeated, sometimes extending over many years” (Allen 2005, 6). This goes against approaches that see trauma resulting from a single event. It is exactly this kind of chronic condition that Maurice seems to be describing when he talks about his work. As Shepherd and Erikson note, one may not notice the impact at first because it happens slowly, it creeps around your walls of defence. It builds and builds until: “Suddenly,” Maurice made the noise of a bubble bursting, “just blow. And this is heavy.”

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#### 6.4.1 Dealing with the Impacts

According to Liliana, Elena noted she has not received “any psychosocial training or support for this work, she does it alone by herself, not with a specialist to orientate her how to manage all of these feelings.” Moreover, Elena “is very involved with the relatives of the disappeared people, she cannot put this kind of space or coldness with them. What keeps her alive with no depression is because she is very optimistic.” While Elena did acknowledge the impacts of her work, she dealt with things on her own. She is very involved with working with the relatives of the disappeared, and she felt she had to find ways to manage her feelings. In particular, she felt it was important to not present a cold or dispassionate face to the families.

Recall that my informant César said that he thinks about his cases 24/7. When he told me that he felt the work was constant in his life, I asked César whether he gave himself a pep talk, saying something along the lines of ‘No! I have to stop thinking about this case. I have to move on?’ “Yeah,” he said. “But there is a problem. Some cases come back. When they are unsolved. Is a problem,” he chuckled. “Is better try to do that but sometimes is difficult and the case comes back! I don’t know why, but they are coming back sometimes.” This seemed to be another kind of repetition, not only the accumulation

of many cases, but the ways that any particular case might come back again and again. César said that the cases would come back into his mind, into his thoughts. Sue Black (2018) referred to this as a kind of *haunting*: “The bodies we cannot name – like the names of the missing whose bodies have never been found – are those that haunt forensic anthropologists” (Chapter 8: *Invenerunt Corpus* – Body Found!). This haunting could take different forms. For Black it is the names of the missing, those not found, that stand out for her. For César, it was specific cases that returned. For others, like Sofía, such cases did not just intrude into her mind; they returned to her as nightmares. Speaking of her experience, she told me how the work returned to her in dreams. “I have dreams, also, you know,” she stated, then she began to recall an incident in the field in which her colleagues had to wake her up from a nightmare. She looked at them as they stood next to her bed with a glass of water in their hands. They asked her if she was okay. She said yes and asked them why they were asking. They told her: “Because you were screaming. Why were you screaming? Yeah, you were screaming. ‘Noooo.’” When her colleagues mentioned that she had been screaming about something needing to be completed, Sofía remembered what her dream had been about. She tells of a real case where they were searching for dismembered bodies. In her dream, she would go through different rooms of a house where she would find the ‘incomplete’ bodies. That is why she would call out “no, no, no, no, complete, no.” She continued, “so all these dreams, all the things, it will pain you at one point, you know, emotionally.” Sometimes when her colleagues would go and talk with family members of the victims, she would not go because of the emotional connection. She stated, “also when you analyse bodies, you know. Because you want that body to have these specific things that the relative was telling you.<sup>184</sup> So I went but at one point I chose, you know, don’t want to continue.” The psychological impacts, for Sofía, were not only unconscious or confined to her dreams; Sofía also began to feel that it was difficult to work directly with the families of victims. When her colleagues would

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<sup>184</sup> Note: She seems to be referring to distinctive antemortem aspects she can observe on the bones which can help identifying the body, from information gathered in interviews with family members (e.g. a healed bone fracture).

talk with the families, she would often not join them because the emotional work was too much.

Elena described how the emotional aspects of forensic anthropological work took a physical toll on her body, with the stress she felt from the work manifesting as skeletal-muscular problems. She told me that the stress from her work gave her a strip of pain in her body. It got bad enough that she went to the hospital, but they told her there was nothing wrong. She also developed pain in her back. Elena said that as she continued to do forensic anthropological work, the pain would return to her body, and she began to associate the stress of the job with the physical pain. For her, the physical pain was a direct expression of the emotional stress she encountered in the course of her work. Her own account of the relation between emotional stress (or trauma) and physical pain is consistent with contemporary psychobiological models of trauma, such as that advanced by Bessel van der Kolk (2018; 2014), who argues that “the body keeps the score” and that the emotional and psychological effects of trauma are expressed in the body. Van der Kolk describes ‘trauma’ as a three-dimensional wound – it affects our psychological, biological and social *Dasein*. In van der Kolk’s words (2014, 1), traumatic experiences “leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even our body and immune system.”

Exploring the intricate web of mental health encompasses a spectrum of elements, from the nuanced terms individuals employ to articulate their experiences to the diverse manifestations these struggles can take. Understanding coping mechanisms, which the following section turns to, becomes pivotal in navigating these challenges, as individuals navigate a landscape where some may find solace in sharing with loved ones, while others may seek professional guidance through counselling despite initial resistance to a diagnosis. Additionally, the realm of self-medication emerges as a coping strategy for some, highlighting the multifaceted approaches individuals adopt.

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### 6.4.2 Encountering Various Ways of Coping

The psychological study by Aranguren Romero (2023) examines how forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru navigate the emotional aspects of their work. While Aranguren Romero's research highlights positive strategies through which forensic anthropologists deal with what they witness, my research also brings attention to self-destructive behaviour in response to the contexts and demands of their work. One of the author's interviewees seems to allude to such behaviour when stating: "In 2000, the institution I was working for at the time hired a psychologist who didn't do a good job. He spoke to us just before lunch and said, "it's important to eat well, take physical exercise, not drink to excess." But at that time, *everything that could be done to excess, we were doing it, looking for all the escape valves possible*" (687). Many of my informants reported colleagues who had turned to drinking as a way to cope, and in some cases, colleagues have even taken their own lives. Maurice told me of a colleague whose job included meeting families of women who were disappeared and murdered. As the job slowly took a toll on them, the colleague turned to alcohol to be able to sleep. Others told similar stories. "A lot of anthropologists, people, alcoholics," Sofía told me. "They drink a lot. Some of them. Some of them, other things. I know [a person] that worked with me that killed themselves at one point. It's hard. And nobody was really taking aware of that."

Bessel van der Kolk (2014) refers to these responses as *self-numbing* and notes that such behaviour is common for many traumatised individuals. Self-numbing techniques are used by some for "bracing against and neutralizing unwanted sensory experiences" (267). He argues that "At least half of all traumatized people try to dull their intolerable inner world with drugs or alcohol" (268). Of course, there are also healthy ways to cope, such as speaking to family members and friends, or seeking professional help. Anthropologist William W. Dressler (2011, 123) speaks of "'resistance resources' that support individuals' efforts to adapt to the demands placed on them" by stressors. The author argues, "Stressors and resistance resources interact in a buffering process" (Ibid.). Dressler notes that research has shown that "when an individual has social or personal resources to respond to a stressor, the impact of that stressor is reduced" (124). Yet, as

noted above, there were limited institutional resources for such coping mechanisms, and there were persistent norms within the field of forensic anthropological work that kept many from acknowledging the problem or from seeking help. What, then, did people do? How do forensic anthropologists deal with the stress of their work? The responses were varied. Interestingly, one informant counteracts their work with the dead by engaging in life-saving activities, working as an emergency brigadier volunteer. For them<sup>185</sup>, “it’s a way to make different things than working for the dead. Because in the rescue we are working for the life. We are trying to save lives. [...] I am trying to save another people.” Whereas in their regular work, they always see “skeletons, bodies, different things of dead.” This suggests that my informant finds their rescue work to be a meaningful and rewarding alternative to their regular work, which may be emotionally challenging or draining. They put it this way: Working in First Aid “is a way to escape from the emotional things of the work [as a forensic anthropologist] and it’s good, it’s good for me. It works.”

Others, like César, turned to their ethical sense of self and the idea of doing good to bolster himself and counteract the emotional effects of his work:

I try to be honest with the people and with me. I have clear [note: he understands, it is clear to him] that my work is helping people and [when] I have some kind of success to find a person, the person is identified, is enough for me. And everything and the bad things about the work disappear with those kind of moments. Because only, they are only moments, is not always. I try to think every moment that I can... I am doing something for the people. And it works for me. Maybe I’m crazy but that [is] the thing that works with me. Every day I think in the work in every moment, every time. I think I was normal? I am normal or not? What do you say?

In psychological terms, César was engaging in what is called *positive reframing*, which is described as “perceiv[ing] something previously viewed as negative in a positive light. For example, people might come to think about a seemingly negative experience as an opportunity, a chance to learn something new, a chance to gain a new skill, or to deepen a

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<sup>185</sup> I chose not to use the informant’s pseudonym in this context, as the nature of the work being discussed could potentially reveal the informant’s identity.



relationship” (Lambert et al. 2012, 617). While César did not change the meaning of the stressor per se (that is, the negative aspects of the work), it might be argued that he folded the negative into the positive. He stressed the meaning of his work as doing something positive, he helps people. These moments of positivity or success outshine the negative aspects of the work, at least for him.

César seemed able to reframe things on his own as a way to deal with the emotional impacts of his work. Others sought emotional support from people they trusted. For example, Eduardo’s family shows interest in his profession, and he talks with his family about what he does. “They know what I am doing. They understand my job. In different opportunities, they ask what I am for that people if I... *qué veo, qué estoy viendo, qué le pasó.*”<sup>186</sup> *E cuantas veces*, how many times, I can see these types of things and I talk with them about those things.” He added, “My family understand my job and they are interested in what I am doing. And they ask me, *qué pasa, qué veo. Pero sí, hablo con ellos.*”<sup>187</sup> Eduardo’s family offered him a kind of emotional support, which as Dressler (2011, 123) notes, can “take the form of reassurance and expressions of caring that lessen the sense of isolation an individual might feel under stress.”

While Eduardo talks about what he does with his family, for those who have experienced trauma, it is often the case that they keep silent and refuse to talk about it. As David Carless and Kitrina Douglas (2017, 375) note, writing of the case of soldiers and war experiences, such experiences often remain “shrouded in secrecy as – historically – war veterans rarely describe too closely what happens in the field of battle. [...] there may appear to be good reasons for such candor, such as shielding partners, wider family, and communities from the horrors of war.” In her widely influential account of forensic anthropological work, Sue Black (2018) seems to take a similar approach. She writes: “There are things [...] I have seen and done of which my family and friends simply do not need to know and should not know” (Chapter 12: Fate, Fear and Phobias). Black is a

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<sup>186</sup> English: “What do I see, what am I seeing, what happened to him/her.”

<sup>187</sup> English: “what is going on, what do I see. But yes, I talk to them.”

leading public figure in the world of forensic anthropology and anatomy. Her approach reiterates the prevailing norm that one ought not to talk too much about what one has seen (except in the context of expert witnessing). Her detachment is tied to her idea of scientific objectivity, but it also relates to how she, and others, might think about the emotional impacts of forensic anthropological work. To ensure clinical detachment, Black says she opens an “imaginary door into a detached, clinical box inside [her] head” (Ibid.). She stresses, “It is imperative that the door is kept locked and that I don’t let anyone else inside the box to poke around or in any way to allow one life to bleed into the other” (Ibid.). Similarly, Horacio noted that he, too, tries to keep his work and personal life apart from one another. “In my personal life,” he told me, he likes to “get out of the forensic” world and to travel, to meet with friends or socialise. “Is the best medicine. The best medicine, I try to don’t talk about my work with the people,” he said, preferring instead to talk about “other topics, but not forensic and not my work.” He keeps his personal life separate from his work life, having friends outside of the “forensic world” and the world of his workplace. He told me that if “I meet with other forensic [practitioners] I talk about forensic, forensic, forensic, forensic ... for days,” he laughed. “But this is the situation with my life.” Horacio’s statement emphasises the importance of separating social interactions that provide comfort outside of work from engaging in work-related conversations. He appears to regard the social aspect as beneficial but underscored the necessity to keep work talk limited to discussions with colleagues. This distinction is evident in his observation that when with colleagues, conversations revolve around “forensic, forensic, forensic, forensic.... For days,” emphasising the need to maintain a boundary between personal socialising and work-related discussions.

For others, talk about work needed to remain not only with colleagues but actually unsaid. Again, for Sue Black, this was because of the nature of forensic anthropological knowledge itself. Black does not only fear a “Pandora’s box-type meltdown” when opening up, but also compromising confidentiality:

I do not intend to ever release them [her experiences]. [...] I will never commit most of them to paper or record them in any way, other than in my forensic notes. In some instances, I am bound by confidentiality, but even when I am not, I hold

myself responsible for safeguarding the vulnerability of others, living or dead, and not betraying their secrets. (Chapter 12: Fate, Fear and Phobias)

It appears in Black's perspective, her experiences are deemed suitable only for documentation in "forensic notes," restricting their presentation to factual, non-personal, and non-emotional forms. The information seems to be reserved for contexts such as records, and court testimony, where adherence to forensic standards is paramount. This approach ensures that the information communicated stays within the boundaries of professionalism, but it also shows just how much forensic anthropological knowledge is associated with the role of *witnessing*, since, for Black, that knowledge can only be told in particular contexts as evidence. In other instances, she cannot talk about her experiences as she sees herself as responsible for protecting individuals (e.g. victims). Considering that there are experiences she might never talk about, it might be true that forensic anthropologists are, as she puts it, "sin-eaters of our day" – individuals who "eat" or witness or hold inside in mental boxes, the evils perpetrated by others. It might be argued that not talking about experiences can also reinforce norms (and stigma) of not talking about psychological struggles – which the next section will go into in more detail.

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While Maurice's colleague, who turned to self-destructive behaviour, did seek professional help, and saw a psychologist in the end, my informants discussed various barriers to seeking mental health support. Mike stated with regard to mental health struggles, "*we don't like to talk about it and we don't recognise it and when we recognise it, we don't like to admit it.*" Maurice noted that what happened to his colleague, "this is happening but people, [...] forensic anthropologists, most of us, we don't talk about this." He explained, "Because is like a taboo, they don't want to talk to say this. But for me is no problem saying this. Because at the end, we're human beings. We have emotions, we have feelings. We feel when people suffer." He believes that there are many forensic anthropologists "that are affected but they don't want to say." He wondered whether the reluctance to acknowledge the mental impact and talk about it is rooted in the assumption that it could be seen as "a sign of weakness. So weak. This person is weak. So, they cannot work with them. But it affects [us] so this is true."

Stephen P. Hinshaw (2007, ix) notes that although we have come a long way as far as the advancements in our scientific knowledge of mental illness and improvements of treatments are concerned, “emotional reactions to mental disorder are still dominated by fear, pity, and scorn; societal responses continue to be characterized by banishment, punishment, and neglect.” In short, individuals suffering from a mental illness are exposed to “extreme stigma”<sup>188</sup> (ix). Consequently, Hinshaw’s (2007, xi; x-xi) conclusion that “concealment remains a major means of coping” and that “a great many people with mental disorders delay seeking help for years, even decades” comes as no surprise. Medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1988, 55) holds, “In the human context of illness, experience is created out of the dialectic between cultural category and personal signification on the one side, and the brute materiality of disordered biological processes on the other.” In other words, whereas the physiological manifestation of trauma, as understood in Western society, is empirically proven, there is still the lived experience of the traumatised individual to account for. What may play into the lived experience is how ‘trauma’ is perceived in not only different cultures but in different social and historical contexts. Again, borrowing from Kleinman’s (1988, 8) notion of the lived experience of illness, he notes, “From an anthropological perspective and also a clinical one, illness is polysemic or multivocal; illness experiences and events usually radiate (or conceal) more than one meaning.” One such meaning for him is cultural significance, “insofar as particular symptoms and disorders are marked with cultural salience in different epochs and societies. These special symptoms and illness categories bring particularly powerful cultural significance with them, so to speak, often of a stigmatizing kind” (18).

Stigma around trauma has a particular history. During the First World War, ‘trauma’, as it was understood at the time, was not inflicted with prejudices as it was initially perceived to be physiological in origin. It was only when the etiology of ‘shell shock’ changed to a psychological explanation that suffering from ‘shell shock’ became

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<sup>188</sup> Also see Erving Goffman (1963, 3) who describes stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” – “a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap.”

stigmatised (van der Kolk 2018; Boehnlein and Hinton 2016; Jones et al. 2007). As Jones et al. (2007, 1644) note, “Shell shock was largely free from stigma when used in the early phase of World War I because it was perceived as a wound, or a neurological lesion. [...] Only in 1917, when the military authorities deliberately discouraged use of the term and suggested an association with malingering, did it become a controversial diagnosis.” Put differently, in British society around the time of the First World War, being traumatised was associated with “moral failure” (van der Kolk 2018, 03:52 mins) or cowardice. In contemporary Western society, it is PTSD describing the response to a specific, traumatic event, that has become stigmatised. A study by Fox et al. (2012) on mental health conditions and barriers to care among police officers, for instance, suggests a hierarchy of mental health stigma. It appears the fear of being stigmatised is greater in officers suffering from PTSD than in those suffering from depression, and least in those who do not suffer from either PTSD, depression or alcohol abuse. Their study found that only 46.7 percent of participants with mental health conditions ever accessed mental health services. Of those officers who sought help outside the department, 45 percent suffered from PTSD and 40 percent from an alcohol use disorder. Moreover, 46.6 percent of the officers with a mental health condition voiced a concern with accessing mental health services within the department. These concerns ranked the following: [1] confidentiality, [2] seeking help negatively impacting their career, [3] stigma related to accessing services.

While forensic anthropologists are not first responders, they may share similar experiences, and, interestingly, Maurice noted that forensic practitioners might think they are perceived as weak if they acknowledge that their work mentally impacts them. In relation to Kleinman’s (1988, 18) statement that certain “disorders are marked with cultural salience in different epochs and societies,” it needs to be noted that not talking about mental health has been a continuing issue in Latin America, one that we might see as a prevailing social or cultural norm. In a recent Saturday Night Live sketch, Chilean-born actor Pedro Pascal portrays a stereotypical Latin American mother. Along with storing sewing equipment in a Danish biscuit tin and doting on her son while simultaneously taking out the *chacla*, ‘she’ denies any mental health issues of her son. “*Mi hijo*,” his character notes, “does not have depression. He just like the dark. He tried

to get it when he was a kid. He said, ‘Mommy, I’m depressed.’ Then I said, ‘Don’t do that. Do something else!’” While this sketch plays with cultural stereotypes for comic effect, it is telling that the denial of mental health issues is highlighted along with other apparently stereotypical notions. Indeed, it has been noted that “mental health remains an undiscussed issue” and mental illness a stigma in Latin America (Guzman-Ruiz 2023; Sapag et al. 2018; Mascayano et al. 2016). This cultural context is amplified by the widespread taboo on talking about trauma in mental health among forensic anthropologists. As noted, this means that some are reluctant to discuss it. Others noted the lack of resources. I wondered, though, if my informants saw this in terms of stigma.

Although my Peruvian informant Valentina knew she had been affected by what she witnesses, she expressed reluctance to seek professional help. She noted, “I haven’t processed this stuff now. [...] I don’t like to go to psychologist, person that help me with that. I know [that] I should. But I don’t go to them. But I should go.” Valentina both acknowledged the need for such support, and yet still expressed a reluctance, or even a resistance to seeking help. She expressed it as an ought – I should go – and as a negation, “but I don’t go,” suggesting that she feels two ways about it at the same time. Valentina recognised the impacts that forensic anthropological work can have on practitioners, including herself, but she did not readily seek help. She deferred, said she was too busy, or just did not go. However, sometimes, the emotional impacts would intrude into her life, triggered by some little memory or scene. She opened up to me about one such incident that exemplifies the emotional impact her profession can cause:

Two weeks ago, I saw my kid, he is 9 years old, with a gun and he was playing with this gun, this fake gun, pointing to a doll and that triggered something in me. And I started crying and he said, ‘What happened, mommy?’ And I explained to him that I worked for many years in these cases where children were killed that way and it affected me to see my own kid playing with these things. Ok, I haven’t healed from all this stuff that I see, I read, so I need to go to some, I don’t know, psychologist, I guess. But I don’t have time. I don’t have time and I have let all these things to sink a little bit. But just tiny things like that can emerge those sad feelings in me.

Once again, it was child victims who marked an emotional extreme, and as noted above, the emotions emerged strongest when some aspects of the work seemed to resemble

something familiar in her own life – in this case, her own child, but for others the style of clothes, the age of a victim, or the place they had been from. When Valentina worked for EPAF, she did have an opportunity to get professional help once. “I felt so weird,” she stated. “It was like a group, a group thing. Everybody was happy but me. I’m a very defensive person so I don’t like to open [up] to a group. It was really bad for me. But in the Ministry of Justice, yes. They have to go to this psychosocial office every month to talk to them, to release some of the tension. That’s mandatory.”

Valentina found it difficult to open up about her feelings related to her work. While she seemed to acknowledge the need, she seemed ambivalent about it. At the Ministry of Justice, Valentina said “they were our friends so. I felt better with them because I was older too.” Valentina highlighted that it was the form of therapy she was uncomfortable with (group versus individual therapy), others highlighted how the psychological support was approached. Aranguren Romero’s study (2023, 687) reveals that in some cases therapeutic support was considered “decontextualized or standardized.” One of the study’s informants described the support as a “box-ticking exercise, allocated only in certain cases or for a particular number of hours” (Ibid.). Further, one of Aranguren Romero’s informants notes that “Back then, nobody had even considered the need for any kind of support” (687). The author does not address this statement. However, my research highlights the belief held by individuals that they do not need support and that this work does not affect them. This seems to especially pertain to their younger self. As Valentina noted, “When I worked with EPAF I was young, I was in my twenties. So, I felt that I doesn’t need that, ok. Other people need that I don’t. I’m the Iron Woman, I don’t need nothing. I’m indestructible. But with time, I realised that’s not the case, so I was better with them. And I was mature about that.” Her initial response, when she was younger, had been to deny the need at all, and to do it by converting that denial into a kind of virtue – a strength (Iron Woman), with the added implication that needing support might be a kind of weakness. As she got older, her attitude toward it shifted. Now, she is more willing to discuss it in terms of trauma. She told me that “when you talk to different forensic [anthropologists], you will know that many of us have PTSD. You will notice that a lot. And some people have severe cases.” Note that she tells this in a way that includes herself – “many of us.” She told me a story of a person who,

according to her, was in “really really bad psychological conditions.” It got bad enough that this person was removed from fieldwork and put to work “in other area with books and something like that.” Of course, simply removing people from the frontlines of work does not really address their personal issues. In some ways, it might be argued, it reinforces the stigma and denial. As she told me the story, she suggested that, thinking back on the situation, the lack of available psychological support might have been the problem. “The psychosocial thing is new,” she told me, only gaining the recognition it has now over the last ten years. “Ten, five years ago forensic [anthropology] in Latin America has realised that [it is] important. It’s really new here.”

Similarly, Julia noted that there was no professional psychological help when she was employed by the Peruvian Public Ministry, but that this might have been due to the team just starting out when she worked there. She told me, “In the Public Ministry we didn’t [have psychological support]. Maybe because we were in the first year of having this forensic team. I was in the first year of the team. The team was created in 2003. [...] But maybe [as] they were working they realised, also with help of other *ONGs* and the work that was going on in other countries, that not only the families need this psychological help but also the teams.”

Óscar, who worked for the Public Ministry in Ayacucho in Peru a decade later, told me they received psychological support from the ICRC, the International Committee of the Red Cross. “All the team of Ayacucho. Yes, we received that.” He added, “It helped, it helped but I think [...] it can solve personal things, personal meanings, personal significance, personal thinking, personal aspect it can solve by the psychological support.”

Now, at the Peruvian Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, workers are offered psychological support every month in the form of group sessions. Julia told me: “We have one or two sessions of some hours to tell what you are doing, what you are working on. If there is something that you are worried about or you are very stressed about. Basically, deal with the work and the pressure that we have to finish some cases and they are difficult.” She added that they would also talk amongst each other about the cases. As others have noted, such work talk is felt to be, by those who do forensic anthropological work, a helpful way to reduce tension or find support. However, the focus was usually on



talking about the cases in a scientific sense, rather than talking about the impact of those cases on one's emotional and psychological wellbeing. Julia continued:

Sometimes in the daily activity, we also gather together to talk about the cases. Also, to not put all the pressure on us because maybe the case is very difficult. And maybe the pressure on us trying to solve the case and we don't see we can do it. The other members help that. Maybe there are some things that you can't do and there is no chance to maybe to solve the case right now. [...] We are together. That helps to see that comes next and not to put all the pressure that we are not maybe doing the work right or that there is something that had to be maybe coming out with good information to solve the case or something like that. So, we have some meetings within the team. But also, we have one meeting in the month with psychologist that also gives you some clues how to manage some difficulties. Not only in the work space but also in your family. Also, space of interaction. Maybe in some cases [...] the family doesn't understand what you are doing and maybe they question 'what did you do? is so difficult, you are affecting yourself and your family and sometimes they don't understand. and we have some cases like that.

The situation is similar when working for governmental institutions in Colombia, where, Eduardo told me, they have "emotional support" at the Attorney's General Office. He added, "If we need it, they offer." When speaking of the Colombian National Police and the Medicolegal Institute Santiago noted, "I think you have the option [to seek psychological support], but, I mean is not like an obligation or something that you need to do, I mean. you could ask but is not like, there is not like a specific office for that or something like that." He stated using professional support would depend on whether he was "very impacted in the case." He added, "But if not, no. I think is not necessary." Sometimes, however, they would talk amongst each other about very impactful cases:

Yeah, sometimes we discuss. We can say 'ok, this case was very hard. I was very sad to see the family.' Or maybe, depends on the case, for instance I had a case, four sisters in the same mass grave. Three [were] underage. [...] Sometimes we talk but just for moments. We say 'ok, this was very sad, this was very upsetting. What is going on with this country? This violence.' But is not... we can discuss it but is not... it is not something that is going to be for several days. Is not. Just for a few moments.

As Santiago spoke about him and his colleagues talking about hard cases only for *moments*, I commented, "And then you have to go on."

Santiago chuckled, "Ja, we have more cases."

The non-governmental institution ICRC, Horacio noted, has debriefings after each mission so that team members can talk about their feelings. He added: “But additional, we have at the same a mental health team inside of the organisation. But have a partnership outside of ICRC. For example, here in Medellín, we have a psychologist team but is a [external] clinic. Is not, is not ICRC.” Horacio explained that if a team member wants to, they can simply fill out a form to get an appointment with the clinic. It is offered by the ICRC but outsourced to a separate clinic. “We have this mechanism. External and internal,” he said. Horacio noted that he only uses the external psychologist because the ICRC’s psychologist is one of his colleagues. “I think is no neutral or objective evaluation. I prefer the external and I only do this external consultation,” Horacio explained.

While Horacio told me that he would talk about work-related matters with the psychologist, it was not necessarily about “forensic issues” but about the physical aspects of his job. Horacio noted, “I am feeling comfortable with my work here in ICRC.” Rather, he talks about the physical aspects of the work, which involves a lot of travelling. He explained, “the movement inside the country in the rural areas is exhaustive.” He used an example to illustrate: “I need to take a plane one hour to Montería<sup>189</sup>, we have our office there. From Montería, nine hours by car to another town, and then Tuesday nine hours additional by boat. And we’re working [three?] days, 1 day working, and three days to return to my home. I sleep in very uncomfortable conditions, we don’t have a bathroom, we don’t have water, we need all of our food brought in from the city.” This was not an unusual aspect of his work. In fact, he noted that he “frequently” had to work like this. That is why, Horacio said, he tends to talk about the conditions of his work when he consults the psychologist, rather than, say, discussing the specifics of the forensic anthropological work he does with the families. “I really like my work here in Colombia with the families,” he told me. He likes the scientific aspects of it too, and he found his work recovering human remains to be important and rewarding. “I like the

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<sup>189</sup> a municipality and city in the North of Colombia

work. I like the work here. But,” he said, these kinds of hard trips occur “frequently.” He laughed: “It’s more a physical exhaustive thing. This is the issue here in Colombia.”

Eventually, after consultation with the psychologist, the ICRC team changed their guidelines to limit this to only one such trip a month. Horacio explained, “The psychologist and mental health professional, this person, the forensic team, we should work less and no pressure. One mission, one forensic mission per month. Yeah, we can have another kind of travel. For example, I’m going tomorrow to another city but is [for a] meeting, you are in a hotel, you have good food. [...] Is different. But on the mission for a humanitarian recovery of human remains is very hard. Is completely different. Is completely different,” he laughed. It appears the conditions of the work itself play a significant role in shaping the overall experience of working as a forensic anthropologist (in Colombia) and in the toll experienced, both physically and emotionally, on practitioners. Entering territories of armed groups and encountering members of guerrilla and paramilitary groups as an ICRC employee can perhaps intensify these pressures.

The Colombian non-governmental institution EQUITAS, Marie noted, receives psychological support from an organisation which specialises “in giving psychosocial assistance and to humanitarian organisations.” She added, “So they are the one who give us psychosocial support. Workshop on anxiety. The good thing about this organisation, it is a very horizontal organisation – you can talk with everyone like a peer. We are mostly women also. Then you can trust your team will take it up from there. We didn’t usually do that. This started since COVID. Psychosocial support from outsiders.” She continued:

in my personal experience, it is better [to have] someone from the outside to talk to. They also work with people that fight for the environment, with corruption cases so I feel like they have the capacity to understand even though they never they can understand the pressures, the feeling helpless. They don’t need to understand the specifics. That’s for your therapist. These are the tools for your job. It’s ok you can talk to them. I feel like we shouldn’t at least us, close our ranks, we are this group, and no one comes in. We are not in the battlefield. It’s not the same.

While Marie or Horacio preferred speaking to people from outside of their organisations, others felt it was important to talk to someone who understood the particularities of forensic anthropological work. For example, Sara feels that it is difficult to speak with

people from the outside about what she experiences during her work and the emotional challenges the work entails:

It's difficult because the people who were not part of the forensic work had not understand you. I mean it's not like you are coming back to home and you are going to talk with your dad or with your mum or with your sister about your work or how you feel. That kind of things you must speak with some specialist, or you have to speak with another person who understand you because it's part of the same work.

She explained further by using a PhD analogy, "It's like you do a PhD, some things from your thesis will only [be] understood [by] another person who is doing another PhD, no matter the topic but like I need to talk about my advisor, I need to talk about the scholarship, I need to talk about administrative work – so even if your mum and dad love you they don't take care about that." Whilst within the EPAF team they may have not talked about aspects that had an emotional effect on them, sometimes they would meet up at team members' houses. "As a family, BBQs, drink beer, drink wine, you know, just social meeting with us," she laughed. "You know, it's like it's not about office now, it's in the house of someone else." Joking played a part in relieving stress, she added.

Other informants told me too that they used jokes to deal with the pressure and emotional impact of their work. Mike told me that "jokes certainly happen and they're distasteful, like jokes at the expense of the remains and sort of flipping jokes about, you know, homicide victims, that happens and is very natural." By "natural," he seemed to mean commonplace. Of course, such dark jokes are often used by people who have to deal with difficult topics or difficult kinds of work. Mike continued: "But it is to a degree cultural, like, it is a way I think of distancing yourself emotionally. And it's stupid but we do it. But also, amongst ourselves... look, this is something that I have thought a lot about because in every context you see that people, practitioners, suffer emotionally because of it." With regard to jokes directed at human remains, Mike noted:

When people talk to the remains, there is going to be a variety. But my first thought is of people who do it in a sort of, not in an intimate way but in a sort of *blasé*, I want to say *laissez-faire*, but that's not even the right word, but they mean it almost jokingly. Almost in bad taste. You know, I have my anatomical skeleton in my office and I'm like 'hey, good morning, how are you?' You know, it's sort of a

stupid joke, right? And I'm certain, some forensic anthropologists will speak to the remains in that way. Sort of as a joke. But I don't discard that some of them speak to them in a very different way, a much more sort of caring way. But both of these things exist.

I asked Mike when he mentioned talking to the bones in a joking manner whether this might also be regarded as a coping mechanism. "I think so. I think so," he responded. "It's a way of... yeah, exactly what you were just saying. I think [...] it's somewhat exaggerating you're only inanimate bones, you're objects but I'm going to joke about it by pretending you're something else. But the truth is that I think it might be a sort of [inaudible] call it *defensive mechanism* to reinforce they're just bones and nothing more, right? And *I make that joke in a sarcastic way to demonstrate that I believe that they are just bones*, right? I think that's sort of a ritual performance, if you will." In Martin Buber's philosophical theory, we are warned that we should not stay in an I-It relation due to its alienating and distant character. The I-It relation is not principally bad. In fact, we need it to survive, according to Buber. Will Herberg (1956, 17) explains about Buber's theory:

Authentic human existence – the dialogic life – is existence in the I-Thou. But such is the world that one cannot remain permanently in the I-Thou relation. To survive, we need to know, control, and use things, and what is much more important, even human beings; in other words, to survive, we must engage in depersonalizing and dehumanizing our fellow men. This is a poignant expression of the 'wrongness,' of the "broken' character, of actual existence in this world. Yet, however inescapable, the I-It relation must remain subordinate; it is the predominance, not the mere existence, of the I-It that is the source of evil. "Without It," says Buber, "man cannot live; but he who lives with It alone is not a man [...] All real living is meeting."<sup>190</sup>

Applying this notion to the world of forensic anthropologists means that when analysing the remains of a fellow human, the person needs to become a distant *it* for the scientists to do their work, and not be impacted by feelings for the fate of a fellow human being. But the I-It relation must not dominate. It is when the I-It relation gains dominance that it can

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<sup>190</sup> On a discussion on the translation of *Begegnung* – meeting or encounter, see Kaufman (1970).

lead to evil, “The basic word I-It does not come from evil – any more than matter comes from evil,” Walter Kaufman (1970) states. “It comes from evil – like matter that presumes to be that which has being. When man lets it have its way, the relentlessly growing It-world grows over him like weeds, his own I loses its actuality, until the incubus over him and the phantom inside him exchange the whispered confession of their need for redemption” (95-96). Or as Neyerlin (n.y., 5) puts it “*Bliebe es bei dieser Entfremdung, wir würden unser Menschsein verfehlen*” – ‘If this alienation remained, we would miss our humanity.’ In other words, regarding human skeletal remains solely as objects, forensic anthropologists might run the risk of alienating themselves from their fellow human beings as well as their own humanity. While some degree of distance might be necessary, the It-relation must not gain dominance as it might lead to disrespectful behaviour.

Joking in the context of forensic anthropology must not, as my informants emphasised, drift into the disrespectful. Yet, studies have consistently demonstrated the powerful stress-reducing effects of humour on individuals. Humour, through its ability to induce laughter and positive emotions, can act as a natural stress reliever by triggering the release of endorphins, the body’s ‘feel-good’ chemicals. It has further been reported that jokes are a common way for some forensic practitioners and emergency responders to deal with the pressures and emotional impacts of their work (see for instance studies on investigators of sexual violence Craun and Bourke 2014; crime scene investigators Vivona 2013; emergency responders Rowe and Regehr 2010).

Mike turned from acknowledging jokes in the context of forensic anthropological work to a critique of the working conditions and the lack of resources and support, noting that even when it is there, it is reactive, not proactive. He stated:

There are million stories about it. And that institutions that they work for, unfailingly provide grossly inadequate means to protect and care for their employees. That is universal. It’s changing slightly but this example I gave of a colleague who after watching a documentary totally broke down. I mentioned it to the organisation, it was a company that had been sub-contracted by a government for the work. And I mentioned it to the company, I said ‘look, people, colleagues are experiencing psychological, emotional problems, and you need to respond. You need to take care of them.’ Now that was with an American investigation and in the

U.S., they are so litigious, suddenly the company is on high alert because they're afraid they gonna get sued, right? They are afraid of a lawsuit. So of course they respond, they respond in a reactionary way, they are not proactive. They didn't foresee this, but it happened. And they responded adequately I would say but for the wrong reasons. I mean we should just care about people. We shouldn't do it because we are afraid, we gonna get sued. But I know of no organisation that adequately cares for their employees in these terms.

In his critique, Mike emphasised that “we should just care about people” and that with his broad experience, he doesn't know of any organisation that “adequately cares for their employees.” It was only after he explained that lack that he returned to the topic of jokes, which he saw as natural reactions that operates like “a natural defence mechanism amongst workers.” For Mike, such jokes were not just about releasing tension; they were also about providing “amazing social solidarity among teams. I mean that's accompanied sometimes by excessive drinking and risky behaviours. For sure. For sure. But they also create some social bonds that are really, really strong amongst practitioners. And I say this, I mean, people that I have met and worked with twenty years ago are still very dear friends because of that. You become the sort of protective unit.” There are examples of this protective unit in which help from outsiders, although well intended, is not welcome. Sue Black (2018) did not speak favourably of outside counsellors coming to speak to them in Kosovo. She noted:

We had been in Kosovo for eight weeks solid by then. Living cheek-by-jowl with your colleagues for that length of time, you get to know each other incredibly well and the team becomes a second family. Forged into a close unit by our common purpose and experience, we supported each other when the need arose, and the intervention of outsiders, though well intended, was not welcome [...]. They were the ones who didn't know who we were, and neither could they ever comprehend our shared experience. We had lived with each other, fought with each other and cried with each other; we had drunk together and worked ourselves into exhaustion. (Chapter 10: Kosovo)

Black (2019) compares their comradeship to that found in the military, “you make friends [on investigations of cases of political violence, who] understand something that you don't, you can't talk to anybody else about [...]. The military talk about it, it's this camaraderie.” (44:44 mins). Similarly, Clea Koff (2004, 104) holds, “I feel better looking around me and seeing my teammates, [...] people who have just gone through everything

I've just gone through. Even if we never talk about it, we understand one another's experiences that day as no one else could."

Close, protective social bonds, Mike noted, are sometimes born out of necessity. "Because the institutions are not adequately protecting you," he argued. "This is something I talk about a lot because I try to convince organisations that they [do] better in that respect. But the default mechanism is you find solace and solidarity amongst your colleagues." I told Mike that the bond, forensic practitioners tell of existing between themselves reminds me of that of soldiers. "Right. Yeah, that's a good analogy," Mike said. "That's a good analogy." He stressed, "we've created these strong social bonds because nothing else existed. And so, the problem is the implementation" of psychological support. "Look," he explained, "psychologists are subject matter experts. And they generally are great at what they do. So, I would argue, the proper model is that they are there from the beginning." What adds to the problematic of being hesitant to seek mental health care, my informants noted, is that some support may be offered by the very institutions the forensic anthropologists are employed by. Horacio noted that he prefers the external psychologist because his employer's psychologist is one of his colleagues, which for him impedes a neutral or objective evaluation. Mike is aware that forensic anthropologists might not want to see a specialist employed by the intuitions they work for reasons of trustworthiness. Mike stated, "I also recognise that there are barriers when it's an institutionalised, or institutional psychologist, right? Because maybe I'm wary of sharing very kind of personal, intimate emotions with someone who works for an organisation that I'm an employee of because I don't trust them. That's a problem."

The bonds noted above come from shared experience among colleagues; but even within an organisation, a psychologist is viewed as an outsider, because they have not shared the same experiences. At the same time, they are not *enough* of an outsider because they work for the same organisation. Thus, they are neither close enough to be a 'comrade' nor distant enough for people to feel comfortable disclosing things to them. Mike explained the problem by drawing a comparison to Human Resources Departments, although he was clear to acknowledge that he was not speaking from his own personal



experience. In this sense, his analogy speaks more to how he imagines and explains the issue of psychological support than it does to the specific ways that sexual harassment in a workplace is dealt with. Mike put it this way:

People who are victims of sexual harassment or sexual assault in the work place, it's very difficult for them to go to Human Resources because Human Resources, although we might perceive of them as a mediator, and as representative of employees, they often become the sort of bulldog of the executive of the organisation, right? So, there's a perception or it's a fact that Human Resources in the end is just defending the company. And I think that's the fear of institutional psychologists, that they are there and can help you, but you are not sure if they are going to give you messages or help you in a way that helps the company first or the organisation first.

The psychologist not being fully trusted because they might be on the side of the organisation, not the team, is analogous to what Eduardo said about forensic anthropologists working for government institutions in Colombia, such as the Attorney General's Office, who need to be careful of how they are perceived by the families of the missing because they do not want to be seen as working *for* the state.

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Speaking about the bond between forensic practitioners and sharing the experiences of their work and its impact, I would like to briefly go into a statement by Kai Erikson (1994, 232) which reads, "Trauma has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies." Bessel van der Kolk (2018; 2014) acknowledges the impact of trauma beyond the psychophysiological by suggesting that it can lead to social isolation. He elaborates, "being traumatised means that you're all by yourself [...]. There's nobody there who can [...] understand what's going on with [you]" (42:29 mins). He (2014, 18) further notes, "After trauma the world becomes sharply divided between those who know and those who don't. People who do not share the traumatic experience cannot be trusted, because they can't understand it." The conception of trauma having social implications is echoed by sociologist Kai Erikson (1994; 1991; 1976). Having done extensive research on mass disasters in the context of their communal repercussions, Erikson (1976, 155) contends, "One must look for scars, [...] not only in the survivors' minds but in the tissues of their

social life as well.” Erikson (1994, 231) notes that trauma can lead to social isolation as “traumatic conditions [...] give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special.” However, this feeling of alienation may also create opportunity as “people are drawn to others similarly marked” (Ibid.).

In that sense, for Erikson (1994), trauma has the ability to push affected individuals away from their community while simultaneously pulling them back toward it. For example, some of my informants spoke of a bond between colleagues as only people in their work-related inner circle could truly understand their experiences and what they are going through. On the other hand, the stress, they told me, they experience in relation to their work at times led them to push people away. Sometimes, this resulted in conflicts in their professional or personal lives. Reflecting on how her work impacted her personal relations, Sara spoke of it in terms of a circle. She explained that “this kind of job affects your personal life. You don’t have so much time with your family, with your friends, by yourself. So, you need psychological support to deal with everything. You cannot be alone by yourself.” Sara continued: “it’s a circle, you know. You are stressed because you don’t have time to relax yourself, and also you came back to the work stressed so you don’t always [act] in a good way to your colleagues, who are also stressed people. So that makes conflict,” she laughed. Laughter often punctuated people’s interviews about difficult topics, perhaps working to relieve tension. For Sara, though, the circular movement meant that the stress was never resolved, it just continued, leading to conflicts. She said: “Because you are stressed and the other people are stressed, not all the people express their stress in the same way. And you will have the relative of the victims say that they want to talk with you about what happened in the past.” It appears the stress within the teams and working conditions, for Sara, is compounded by the added stress of interacting with the families.

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Additionally, what forensic anthropologists witness, and experience can impact wider aspects of their personal life. Ferllini (2013, 7) argues that interaction with the families of the missing results in a “modified outlook with respect to various aspects of their own

lives” for forensic anthropologists. This was evident among some of my informants as well, although I would expand this argument beyond just the aspect of working with the families of the missing, even while noting that that is a key defining characteristic of forensic anthropological work in Latin America. Yet, I argue that it is the *entire context* of forensic anthropological work that shapes forensic anthropologists – all the things that they witness, the knowledge they produce, the sociopolitical context characterised by violence and precarity as well as encountering the families and perpetrators. That entire context also shaped how they thought about their personal lives. For example, working in these conditions led two of my informants to say they did not want children of their own (recall that children were frequently mentioned when my informants discussed the impacts of their work). For Santiago, this decision was rooted in what he witnessed in his work and the present state of Colombia. Santiago noted that “one of the things that I have... maybe it’s personal, is that I don’t feel like having children. Or something like that. I don’t have kids. Maybe all this violence that I see, all this lack of opportunities, all this mess, is contribut[ing] to my decision to not have a son.” Note that it is not just the work with families, then, but *all this mess*, as he called it, that Santiago connects to his decision not to have children. Interestingly, he mentioned specifically not having a ‘son.’

When talking about the impacts of her work as a forensic anthropologist, Ana also spoke about her decision not to have children. Her decision seemed to be rooted in similar reasons to Santiago’s, though she also spoke of the demands of the job. She noted that being a forensic anthropologist in Colombia was difficult and demanding work and she described it as “a sacrifice.” She continued: “For me, it worked, working for the family. I don’t care so much about myself. Because I think that this kind of work in humanitarian [...] or just like [being an] anthropologist gives you tools for helping people. And that is the reason why, I study this career [...] and I don’t mind, *I don’t mind which kind of sacrifices I have to do*. But some people mind but also [...] I don’t know I respect that, of course. And they have families etc. I am so glad about that, but I can’t. I can’t. For example, our work is challenging, so much. And I couldn’t. I couldn’t have a child and live by [with?] my mom something like that and be peace in my heart. [...] For me is easier.” The idea of sacrifice relates to the earlier discussion of being a forensic anthropologist as a vocation. While their job can contribute to doing good (contributing

to justice, the truth, providing answers to the families), embracing a job as a vocation often involves making sacrifices, whether it be in terms of time, personal pursuits, or comfort.

Ana's decision not to have children came up as we were discussing the potential risks of forensic anthropological work. Ana seemed relatively young and had just finished her Master's Degree. I was curious about how younger forensic anthropologists thought about their work. Were the risks of the job a topic of conversation among young forensic anthropologists? Was she and others aware of the risks? She agreed, saying: "Yeah, I think that we are." Then she gave a little laugh and switched to speaking in the first person: "Yeah, I'm aware. For example, I don't have kids. I don't want to. I don't want to marry, also. Some of my friends are forensic also, doesn't want to make a family because of that, you know. I think is something that we know that everything could happen. Yeah, we know that when we are at work maybe we can't go back home. But yeah. [...] For me, it's something complicated." I asked her if her decision to not want a family was specifically about the work she does as a forensic anthropologist, or if it was more broadly about the violence in Colombia. She chuckled. "Both. Both. [...] Yeah, so much people. So much young people. And my friends, for example. They don't have kids, that's because of the violence, the economic problems, and yeah. We know exactly what happened with the families that grow up in Colombia in this kind of ... how do you say? ... yeah, violence framework. We have not so much choices, you know. Yeah, but I think most of the young people understand [that] growing [up] in Colombia, growing [up] in a conflict country is a problem. And they don't want to have roots."

In relation to Ferllini's statement above, Ana's and Santiago's statements suggest that forensic anthropologists may encounter impacts that extend beyond just working with the families of the missing, and that what they witness also comes to influence how they think of themselves as persons, both in terms of their intimate relations with potential family, and even in a sense as a generation or in national terms – as Ana links growing up in Colombia, and the effects of the violence on her generation to not wanting "roots."

## 6.5 Concluding Remarks on PTSD, Moral Injury, and Coping Mechanisms

Some forensic scientists have taken up the category of trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to describe the impacts of their work. Forensic pathologist Richard Shepherd (2018) speaks candidly of the emotional repercussions of his job and his diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder. Renowned forensic anthropologist Sue Black (2018) recounted an unsettling experience that affected her and led to uncharacteristic behaviour, prompting her to wonder whether she might have experienced symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dealing with the aftermath of identifying those killed during the attacks of September 11, 2001, and nearly losing her life that day, forensic anthropologist Amy Mundorff (Checker et al. 2011) discloses suffering from survivor's guilt and PTSD. My informants have spoken about PTSD when framing the impact of their experiences through a psychological lens. They either received the diagnosis themselves or reported that their fellow forensic practitioners had it. My informant Maurice spoke candidly of having been diagnosed with PTSD, Valentina noted that PTSD can be found among forensic anthropologists, and Elena spoke of stress having manifested as skeletal-muscular problems.

Aranguren Romero and Fernández Miranda (2021) noted that there have been relatively few studies that have examined the emotional experiences of forensic practitioners in contexts of armed conflict and political violence. At the same time, most of the studies that have been done interpreted the personal experience of forensic professionals through the clinical category of PTSD (Ibid.). Regarded in its historical frame, the clinical discourse on psychological trauma gained momentum when observed in the suffering of soldiers. It was with the Vietnam War that psychological trauma attracted enough attention to enter the clinical discourse outside the battlefield. Posttraumatic stress disorder as clinical diagnosis and psychiatric category has gained great popularity since its emergence in the 1970s, bordering on the "totemic" (Summerfield 2001, 95; Boscarino and Boscarino 2015). In their own work and collectively, Aranguren Romero (2023) and Fernández Miranda (2019; with Aranguren Romero 2021) have both sought to bring new attention to forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru, focusing especially

on how they deal with witnessing the grief and pain of the families of the missing. These responses can include a variety of management and coping strategies (Aranguren Romero 2023) as well as the experience of frustration (Fernández Miranda 2019; with Aranguren Romero 2021). Their works suggest that the clinical category of PTSD *pathologises* the experience of forensic practitioners, is too narrow and does not fully account for the complex relationships between forensic practitioners and the contexts in which they work.

Building on the work of psychologist Konstantinos Papazoglou and sociologist Brian Chopko (2017), I suggest that another way to think about the impact of what forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru witness can be through the analytic category of *moral injury*. Papazoglou and Chopko (2017) propose the notion of *moral suffering* in their research on the experiences of first responders. The authors note that two distinct forms of moral suffering may result in traumatisation: *moral distress* and *moral injury*. The notion *moral distress*, which describes facing moral conundrums, was developed primarily from studies with healthcare workers (Ibid.). Dilemmas putting the individual in moral distress include not being able to make the apparent morally right decision “usually as a result, of various hurdles: institution policy, lack of time, protocol, and so forth” (Ibid., 2). In what follows, I would like to discuss *moral injury* in more detail.

This notion emerged primarily from clinical work and studies with service personnel and former soldiers (Papazoglou and Chopko 2017). Within a military context, moral injury is defined by psychologists Litz et al. (2009, 705) as:

the inability to contextualize or justify personal actions or *the actions of others and the unsuccessful accommodation of these potentially morally challenging experiences into pre-existing moral schemas*, resulting in concomitant emotional responses (e.g. shame and guilt) and dysfunctional behaviors (e.g. withdrawal).  
(emphasis added)

Building on this definition, Papazoglou and Chopko (2017, 2) note, “Moral injury refers to unprecedented traumatic life events that refer to perpetrating, failing to prevent, or *bearing witness to actions that “transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”* (Litz et al., 2009, 1)” (emphasis added). Moral injury presupposes posttraumatic stress

disorder. It does not assume a direct trauma, but a shock to one's sense of self and one's moral beliefs of what is good.

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Yet, my informants did not only speak of the negative ways that their work impacted their sense of self. They also spoke of responsibility, or articulated a sense of a calling, or noted that it felt “good” to help the families or to search for the truth. How might we also think of these aspects as part of the moral experience of forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru? I suggest we can see them as the other side of moral injury, as a form or *moral repair*.

Margaret Urban Walker (2006, 6) defines the notion of *moral repair* as the restoration or creation of trust and hope, which wrongdoing often weakens or destroys. She acknowledges that “in the cases of serious, violent, traumatic, and shattering harm that most concern me here, it is a simple and poignant fact that no wrong is ever undone” (7). Similarly, my informant Maurice stated that there simply is “no way to repair” because “reparation means [...] to give you back the same thing that I destroy.” For Walker (2006, 28), moral repair includes several tasks. The first two read:

1. Moral repair is served by placing responsibility on wrongdoers and others who share responsibility for wrongs.
2. Moral repair is served by acknowledging and addressing wrong, harm, affront, or threat to victims and communities.

It might be argued that forensic anthropology can set the stage for *moral repair* by providing evidence that atrocities have been committed in the first place (which includes locating and identifying the victim) and providing information on what happened to the individual (circumstances of death). Further, forensic anthropology can provide certainty to surviving family members about what happened to their loved ones, and the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce is crucial in contributing to truth and justice. However, doing this kind of work is precisely what leaves forensic anthropologists open to moral injury. The two categories – moral repair and moral injury – are, in fact, intimately related.

Statements made by my informants strongly indicate the presence of moral injury, particularly when they talk about how they rationalise what they bear witness to. For instance, Sofia's observations of physical trauma on human remains do not align with her understanding of war. This suggests a discrepancy between what she has observed on human remains, and what she expects to see in the context of war. "We were in a war," she noted. "People died in a war but you working or being or seeing you know kids from one or two years killed in that manner?! Why? Are they also a part of a war? No. no." While some people might argue, Sofia noted, that the death of children is a part of war, she disagrees. She stated:

Some people say – also relatives – ‘well, but some people must die, you know, in [a war]. You know [this] is just what happens.’ I say: ‘Well, if your kid [had been] there, you’re not gonna telling me that.’ But because it is in a community and is far away, it’s easy to say that. But no! No! A *mujer* or a woman pregnant? Also been killed?! In that manner?! No, no, no! Ten or fourteen bullet lesions in the body? No. Forty-five in a kid of eleven years old? No. That’s not part of the war. That’s another thing.

What she appears to be addressing are the questions of *When are deaths deemed 'justified' as a part of war, or 'collateral damage' so to speak?* and *When do these deaths, due to their extreme cruel and inhumane nature, become something else altogether?* That is, human rights violations or, as informants pointed out, the result of evil or the monster? Sofia asking herself the question of how someone can do what she witnessed on the remains, or the fact that children had been killed, speaks to the difficulties of forensic anthropological work as a kind of moral experience. As previously shown, children are a key theme in the narratives of my informants. Children are referenced in discussions about the limits of understanding the atrocities committed, maintaining scientific detachment, and the psychological impacts of this kind of work. Due to the sociopolitical environment in Colombia, Santiago, like Ana, does not plan to have children. This observation leads to another characteristic of moral injuries. Papazoglou and Chopko (2017, 2) note, "Morally injured individuals [...] often alter their beliefs that the world is a safe and benevolent place and human beings trustworthy." My informants Santiago's and Ana's decision of not wanting to marry or have children may be an indication of moral injury. As outlined previously, the reasons for this are attributed



to Colombia's long-standing sociopolitical context of continuous conflict and precarity as well as the demands of being a forensic anthropologist. As such, Colombia is not considered as offering a secure and prosperous future for children. Consequently, their reasons went beyond their work as forensic anthropologists, as they both also referred to the wider social and political context of violence in Colombia as well as issues of economic and institutional precarity. This is why it is useful to think with the analytic category of moral injury, rather than a narrower one like the clinical diagnostic category of trauma and PTSD. Their response was shaped by both the specific aspects of their work and by how their work experience informed their broader personal experiences of trust, risk, danger, and uncertainty.

Litz et al. (2009, 705) note that not being able “to contextualize or justify personal actions or the actions of others and the unsuccessful accommodation of these potentially morally challenging experiences into pre-existing moral schemas” might result in shame or guilt. Although my informant Santiago did not explicitly express shame towards Colombia, when asked about how he makes sense of what he witnesses, he mentioned that he does not feel much pride towards his home country. He further noted:

But I have this just like small feeling of hope that sometimes this is going to change but I don't see a change in decades. This is going to be the same because if the *narco*-traffic continues, if the drugs continues to be illegal, this is going to continue as it is. Because this is, in my opinion, this is just for the drugs money control. This is a huuuge amount of money. This money is in the hands of the illegal groups. Or in the mafia. So, if this is not changed, things are going to continue. If you can see the history of Colombia, we have like eight or I don't know how many peace agreements, and we can continue with the same problems, we continue with the same deaths. So, if *narco*-traffic still is in the Colombian economy as an illegal way, the violence is gonna continue. *So, a way to cope with all this disaster is like trying to do a better way, [...] trying to be a better citizen and trying to contribute with the small pieces to the change.*

Walker (2006, 6) suggests: “As human beings, we need, over and over, to decide how to respond to wrongdoing and wrongful harm in our midst, whether we are the victims, offending parties, or others.” Santiago's statement reflects a positive and proactive approach towards coping with disaster and contributing to positive change. “Trying to be a better citizen” appears to emphasise the importance of individual responsibility and

civic duty. At the same time, however, it may imply that individual actions, no matter how small, can collectively lead to meaningful change.

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Forensic anthropological work in the contexts outlined throughout this dissertation opens up potentially traumatising aspects that forensic anthropologists experience in all their complexity. To understand their experiences, we need to think beyond the forensic anthropological work narrowly, to ‘the world of forensics’ as a moral world, and thus as the key context in which forensic anthropologists dwell. Encountering this world is what potentially makes forensic anthropologists suffer, or be harmed, may it be framed as stress, moral injury or posttraumatic stress disorder. Aranguren Romero’s study (2023) found that his interviewed forensic anthropologists deal with the psychological impact of their work through various strategies. These include, “acknowledging the strength and resilience of victims and communities, and taking a break, distancing oneself, or even leaving forensic work entirely [and] specialist therapeutic support” (687). As I have shown in this dissertation, these strategies were prevalent among my informants. Here, I want to highlight a key aspect of these strategies – the particular relationship the strategies themselves have to the meaning and practice of forensic anthropology itself. What I mean is this: Forensic anthropological work creates the conditions for certain kinds of encounters – encounters with human remains and the legacies of political violence, encounters with the families of the missing and with perpetrators, and encounters with a precarious institutional landscape. Those encounters shape the moral experience of forensic anthropologists, making them *unwanted witnesses* and exposing them to specific kinds of risks, dangers, stressors, and emotional difficulties. In short, the conditions in which forensic anthropologists work can lead to moral injury. At the same time, these same conditions and contexts provide the very discourses and practices on which forensic anthropologists draw to manage their experiences, cope with the impacts, and navigate the challenges of their work. In the following, I will provide some examples to illustrate.

Some practitioners engage in what may be called *positive reframing* by leaning back on what forensic anthropological work is and what it can do. They are anchoring it in the way it works in Latin America. Recall that César, for instance, counters the demands of his profession with its positive impact of finding and identifying a disappeared loved one:

I'm trying to make a better world. And try to help that people. If I feel something strong about the problems that the people have, I try to put it in perspective. I have to do this because is important for the people of the country, for the society in general.

[...]

[If] I have some kind success to find a person, the person is identified, is enough for me. And everything and the bad things about the work disappear with that kind of moments. Because only they are only moments, is not always. I try to think every moment that I can... I am doing something for the people. And it works for me. Maybe I'm crazy but that [is] the thing that works with me.

For Santiago, the ability of forensic anthropology to contribute to uncovering the truth seems to help mitigate the challenging encounter with the grief and pain of families. He noted:

You have a lot of feelings in that moment when you are with the families. But the good thing is that [...] I mean you feel fine is because you are contributing to the truth. To the families, I mean, you are giving a contribution to them. So you feel like [...] *recompensado* [translation: rewarded].

For Julia, while forensic anthropology can be psychologically stressful, she too highlighted that it can contribute to helping people. When I asked her what she misses about forensic anthropology, she stated:

I miss the sense of being helpful for my people. That's the thing. And with bioarchaeology, yeah, is interesting, yeah, good stuff, but I don't have that feeling of making a change on the living of someone. And when I am doing forensic anthropology, is all the stress, the sad things, I know. When I want to be in a safer place, I return to bioarchaeology.

Ana too stressed the positive aspect of being able to help people through forensic anthropology:

I think [I studied forensic anthropology] because I'm from Colombia. And we have the largest war in our continent, maybe. Perhaps in the world. And we have a few

anthropologists that work in that field. And we have a huge problem with the missing people. And because of the violence. And *I thought it will be nice to contribute and work to help the victims of the war, in the conflict.*

While she mentioned that working in the field “is so beautiful” for her, it is also “so so so hard. So hard. In the cases that I worked emotionally was shocking for me.” Yet, later she noted, “But I want to work for my country. That is my goal.” Ana’s statement appears to reflect a progression of thought from a general altruistic desire to help war victims to a patriotic aspiration to work for her country. Her commitment seems so strong that she is willing to make sacrifices:

Yeah, for sure is a sacrifice. [...] For me, it worked, working for the family. I don’t care so much about myself. Because I think that this kind of work in humanitarian [inaudible] or just like anthropologist give you tools for helping people. And that is the reason why, I study this career and [...] I don’t mind which kind of sacrifices I have to do. But some people mind but [...] I respect that, of course.

In other cases, the ways that they sought to come to terms with the moral experience of forensic anthropological work was through activities that they felt were, in some way, the direct opposite of forensic anthropological work. For example, one informant volunteers as a paramedic in their free time, administering life-saving measures to strangers, something that stands as a kind of symbolic negation of forensic work, which deals with death. Others sought to separate the world of forensics and its moral experience from other aspects of their lives, seeking ways to build firm barriers between their professional and personal lives. Some spoke about avoiding discussions about their work and experiences with friends, or about the importance of socialising with friends who are not colleagues – that is, with people outside of the world of forensics. Still others recounted stories of colleagues leaving emotionally charged situations, thus seeking a physical separation, however, momentary, from the “scene” of forensic anthropological work. While most spoke of temporary breaks as moments of escape, some, like Sara, left forensic anthropology entirely, opting instead to focus her career on bioarchaeology. I want to highlight how it is the moral experience of forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru that both created ethical dilemmas and moral injuries and set the terms of the strategies used to navigate those ethical demands and moral injuries. In other

words, anthropological research shows that ‘forensic anthropology’ itself provides the language of those coping mechanisms for the forensic practitioner.

Above all the other aspects that define the world of forensic anthropology in Latin America, it is the presence of the families of the missing that is key. And it is not just the physical presence of family members, or the fact that there are families, but the way in which forensic anthropology in Colombia and Peru has developed as a professional practice in relation to the families of the missing and the larger national projects of reconciliation. As Luis Fondebrider (2016), a leading figure in forensic anthropology in Latin America, has noted, the families of the missing play a pivotal role in forensic anthropological work. When it comes to how people thought about coping strategies or dealing with moral injury, it should be no surprise then that the families were also mentioned. For example, Marie talked about finding the inspiration to continue her work from the resilience, as she calls it, of the families. She noted:

So, I feel like even though the stories are heartbreaking, the conflict, the whole context around what’s happening is very, very nerve-wrecking. I try to focus on the... yes, I think the resilience is the main thing. People never stop fighting or searching. Even when they are faced with it might not happen. Even if they lose a bit of that hope there are support groups around them. There is a close-knit of people that have gone through the same or something similar and they are always there with each other. So that’s why these organisations of families are so important because they give you this circle of protection around. So, if one of them just like falls, they try to pick them up and carry on the fight.

In other words, the families do not give up and neither does she. For Marie, this was a positive way to think about her experience. But for some, reflecting on their relation to the families could lead to negative outcomes, especially a sense of the weight of obligation. Fernández Miranda (2019, 72) found that “Forensic anthropologists feel that, if family members are capable of continuing searching, despite obstacles, pain, institutional obstacles, limited resources, etc., they as professionals have no right to give up either.”<sup>191</sup> In the words of one person Fernández Miranda interviewed: “if they haven't

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<sup>191</sup> Translation from Spanish by me.

tired of searching, why, that is, I haven't been looking for it for so long, why am I going to be like this?" (Ibid.). Another version of this might say 'I cannot give up because I have a professional responsibility to the truth.' Perhaps it is a form of coping mechanism, perhaps the forensic anthropologist is not paying attention to their own trauma, but if the forensic anthropologist cannot give up because there is a particular family that has not had an answer yet about what happened, or if it is all of the families, it seems it sets up an intersubjective relationship that is different from not giving up for reasons rooted in more abstract notions such as finding the truth or contributing to justice.

As mentioned previously, in the Western context, many forensic anthropologists speak of finding the truth and giving a voice to the dead, but the families standing at the exhumation side crying, telling you their stories of pain and in some cases putting pressure on you to find answers, this reality changes a lot. The emotional stakes may be higher and the application of coping mechanisms more difficult as the professional responsibility has now become to the families, or to the nation (Ana noted she wants to work for her country Colombia), or even the world (César stated he wants to make a better world) to do this work. It changes the conditions of work, and that changes the experiences, and it changes how people think about that work (e.g. it is a vocation rather than just a job) and it changes the complexities of closeness, empathy and scientific detachment forensic anthropologists need to navigate.<sup>192</sup> In part, because, as mentioned earlier, the contexts of Colombia and Peru do not provide the ability to have the social and emotional separation that other paradigms have. That is, the separate entrance to the building allowing the forensic anthropologist to avoid the families, and a cordon around the investigation side, or it happens in the laboratory without the forensic anthropologist knowing or interacting with the families. As Sofía noted, their problems are not like for those "working with FBI cases or whatever. These are human rights violations."

The more *forensic anthropology* gets stretched to what they are doing in Colombia and Peru, the more the category gets expanded to defend against the harms from that work

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<sup>192</sup> Impact might still be the same, as in PTSD.

and their encounters. Consequently, forensic anthropology takes on more meanings for practitioners the more they must appeal to it — is it a method to contribute to justice and truth, does it imply detachment, is it commitment to the families, is it witnessing? All of those aspects become different ways the idea of forensic anthropology can be used to narrate their experiences and defend against or work to repair the moral injuries that come from it. Surely some forensic anthropologists have suffered primary and/or secondary trauma. Some of my informants noted they had sought professional counselling, or even used the term PTSD<sup>193</sup>. But overall, when they talked about their work, their experiences, and themselves, they did not use the language of trauma nearly as much as they used the language of *forensics* itself – expanding the language of *forensics* to help reframe their experiences. My ethnographic research shows that forensic anthropology itself provides the language of coping mechanisms for forensic anthropologists.

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<sup>193</sup> The psychiatric term PTSD might be an important term for some people as it allows them to explain to themselves in clinical terms what they are experiencing. For instance, the traumatised individual might think, ‘Although I might be experiencing a flashback, it is alright because my brain is simply unable to put the traumatic event where it belongs – in the past. I’m not ‘crazy,’ there is a clinical foundation for what I am experiencing.’ For some people, those terms might be alienating.

## Chapter 7

### 7 Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the lived experience of forensic anthropologists investigating cases of political violence in Colombia and Peru. I have framed my analysis by the notions of *encounters* and *witnessing*. In thinking about their experiences this way, I was inspired by my informant Miguel's comment that forensic anthropology is "not a science isolated in a bubble. Is science active and in relation with the people." The encounters faced by forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru extend far beyond the exhumation and analysis of human remains. These professionals engage with a diverse array of entities, including grieving families, guerrilla and paramilitary groups, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and enduring historical legacies. I have argued that acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these encounters allows us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the moral complexities of forensic anthropological work and the ways that such work shapes the sense of self of forensic anthropologists.

In the narrowest, technical sense, the term *forensic* is an adjective that qualifies its related subject as being related to or suited for a court. Yet, as I have shown, there are many practices that are named forensic work that are not specifically related to legal or juridical contexts, notably the expanding use of forensic anthropology for *humanitarian* investigations. Thus, the concept of witnessing that I use in this dissertation extends beyond the confines of the courtroom, particularly in the context of Latin America. Forensic anthropologists in Colombia and Peru face a multitude of encounters that shape their moral experience as witnesses. These encounters go beyond the presentation of evidence in legal settings and encompass witnessing human rights violations, the grief and suffering of families of the missing, and the direct experience of conflict and violence. This expanded understanding of witnessing allows for a shift in perspective, where forensic anthropologists are not merely unwanted witnesses, but also moral witnesses. This broader conceptualisation of witnessing highlights the profound impact



that their encounters can have on their sense of self, shaping the moral experience of those who bear witness to the consequences of political violence and human rights abuses.

The research presented here suggests that the entire context of forensic anthropological work can potentially shape forensic anthropologists in profound ways. It is not just the specific tasks they perform, such as working with families and encountering perpetrators that can profoundly affect the professionals, but also the broader sociopolitical environment characterised by violence and precarity. My findings indicate that the knowledge forensic anthropologists produce, the things they witness, and the sociopolitical context they operate in all contribute to shaping their personal lives and decisions. For example, two of my informants explicitly stated that they did not want to have children of their own, citing the violence and lack of opportunities they observe in their work as contributing factors. Notably, one informant, Santiago, connected his decision not to have children to the “mess” he sees in his country Colombia, suggesting that it is not just the immediate work with families that shapes these choices, but the broader societal context. Overall, this research underscores the profound and multifaceted ways in which the entire context of forensic anthropological work, from the tasks performed to the sociopolitical landscape, shapes the personal lives and decisions of forensic anthropologists. It is a sobering reminder of the heavy toll this critical work can take on those who dedicate themselves to it.

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## 7.1 Emotional Detachment

A key theme explored in this dissertation is the management of emotions and scientific detachment. Detachment is multi-faceted. In the Western medicolegal context, emotional detachment is often framed as a defining feature of scientific neutrality and the associated claims of objectivity and unbiasedness. “The forensic anthropological imagination,” Zoë Crossland (2022, xvii) notes, “of the mid- to late twentieth century was formed around an ethos of objectivity that tied the work of science to an affective demeanor that fostered a refusal or dampening down of strong emotions.” This form of emotional

detachment is not only connected to particular ideas about ‘forensic science’ but also to particular settings and contexts in which forensic anthropologists work, including, notably, social and spatial forms of separation. There is, for instance, the isolated space of the laboratory, or the social and emotional separation that comes from not interacting directly with the family of the deceased and not having them physically present at the exhumation site. As outlined in Chapter 2, forensic anthropologist Clea Koff tells of actively avoiding the families of the deceased by using two different entrances when collecting human remains from the medical examiner’s office. Further, as Mike suggested, in the Western context, forensic scientists “put up the yellow tape and it’s a physical barrier, meant to keep people out. But it also serves as a sort of a social and a psychological barrier. And you’re protecting the scene but you’re protecting yourself.”

This work of emotional detachment is made possible by the context where forensic anthropologists get to speak in court as expert witnesses, where emotional detachment supports the claim of objectivity, and both are connected to the broader medical and legal framework. In this framework, forensic anthropologists as scientists and expert witnesses are expected to be unbiased and accurate (The Law Commission 2011; Michell and Mandhane 2005; Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service n.d.). “And yet,” Crossland (2022, xvii) adds to her statement about the “ethos of objectivity” prevalent in forensic anthropology, “it could be productively challenged and rethought.” Forensic anthropological work in Colombia and Peru shows this very well as the contexts differ in many ways. To begin with, there is an underlying cultural difference in the social expression of emotions in Latin America. Mike noted that in Latin America, “there is a cultural tendency simply to be more open in general terms in relations [...] From day one they are much more adept about being open, about feelings and exchange. Sort of a more intimate emotional exchange with other people.” This stands in stark contrast to the Western “Anglo” context. Mike highlighted that as being “super Anglo [...] the idea of the stiff upper lip, the expression of the stiff upper lip, of keeping these things under wraps, under cover, that’s the default.” And my informant Hugo noted about North Americans that they are very “individual people. Everybody in their box.” Put differently, the basic emotive framework is different in both contexts.

Beyond these cultural differences in the public life of emotions, there is the fundamental fact that in Latin America forensic anthropological investigations happen with the families as protagonists. This is complicated in a different way. Even in a cultural context of emotive repression perhaps, the impulse might be to comfort the family member, who told their painful story, not just through subtle gestures like bringing water but also by embracing them. Yet, while such forms of affective or emotional labour are considered to be part of forensic anthropological work, my informants also noted that there remains a felt sense that forensic anthropologists should not excessively display emotions when they are with the families of the missing in their role as scientists. In relation to the problematic of detachment, a recurring theme is the mentioning of *moments*. Eduardo referred to moments when he discussed speaking to the families of the missing in his capacity as an expert. He said that while he feels the pain and suffering of the families – *Es muy difícil no sentir*. – he puts on a “pokerface.” This pokerface, he stressed, is for “that moment.” He added: “But after the moment, you can uncharge all these feelings, with your family, with the friends, with maybe the colleagues talking and talking about the situation and talking with my family about what is happening in the country with all this situation of violence, of disappeared people, missing people, it’s the way to uncharge the feelings. But all this is after the moment I have contact with the families.”

This moment he speaks of is when talking to the families in his role as a scientific expert, when explaining to them what happened to their loved ones. Sofía and Elena too speak of those moments, noting that displays of emotions are unacceptable. Liliana translated what Elena said as follows: “You cannot cry with the relatives of the disappeared people, definitely you cannot cry with them.” In these moments, when acting in their role as experts, they need to be present as scientists. As mentioned previously, the families strive for answers and sometimes the forensic anthropologist is their only hope to receive those. As such, the forensic anthropologist needs to fulfil the role of the emotionally composed scientist. Sofía told of an incident where a relative of the missing cried when they learned how their loved one died. Sofía needed to leave the room. “Of course,” she stated, “I have to leave the place because you don’t wanna see. You are the scientific there. You can cry, but not there! You have to emotionally help the relatives, you are the one that are gonna be emotional? So difficult.” Here, Sofía added another role of the forensic anthropologist

– the scientific expert, who not only provides scientific answers but also emotional comfort. My informant Maurice, it seems, allows empathetic gestures towards the families. However, only to a certain degree “in that moment” to not get too emotionally involved. When he became so emotionally affected that he was banned from the laboratory, he created some distance: “When I saw people who was crying, I just saw people crying. I don’t try to go deeper [...] I try to do something, what I learned, how to support. Bringing water or not saying anything. Rubbing the back, hugging, just this. But I don’t feel pressure, I have to say. I have to say just basically in that moments, I try to do this but I keep working. Then for sure, because you observe this you need to release, you need to start speaking about this.” Santiago spoke of moments when he and his colleagues seemed to allow themselves to take a break from their work routine to reflect on challenging cases or the state of Colombia. However, again only for “moments.” They do not linger on these conversations as they need to move on.

It is crucial to emphasise that it is difficult to narrate and navigate, the problematic of detachment – for my informants as well as for me. There are multiple aspects to detachment. One might argue that there is a general disposition that empathy should be practised in the moment of the families telling the forensic anthropologist their story. However, it is more nuanced and complex than that. What the above statements by my informants show is that it is precisely the moment when speaking with the families that forensic anthropologists feel they should not excessively display emotions – you cannot cry with the relatives. There needs to be a balance, as Sofía noted. While subtle gestures of empathy, it can be argued, are essential as the forensic anthropologist needs to demonstrate that they support the families and to build trust with them, they also need to fulfil the role of the scientist. In that moment, the forensic anthropologist needs to use particular skills of practicing detachment, or put differently, needs to practice emotional labour. It seems that when speaking to the families in their capacity as forensic experts they cannot lose themselves in whatever they might feel for the victims and their fate. At the same time, the scale of practicing detachment must not tip to the other extreme; that is, of losing their empathy. This was suggested when stating earlier that if we lingered in alienation from others and the world around us, we would miss our humanity (Neyerlin n.d.). Alexa Hagerty (2023, 129) alludes to the balance between emotion and detachment,

stating: “If a forensic anthropologist cries and runs away while exhuming a skull, she will do her job poorly. But if she cares so little that she shovels the bones like sticks, she will also do her job poorly.”

At the same time, my informants told of instances where they did allow closeness and embraced the relatives. This, in turn, can give rise to additional issues because of existing stigmatisation and racism. Sofía told of an instant where the families were present when her team exhumed *senderistas* – members of the Peruvian guerrilla group ‘the Shining Path.’ The mother of one of the killed guerrillas fainted in her arms. Sofía expressed sympathy towards her when she told Sofía, “I know what he did do, and it was not right but he is my son. And I am a mother, and I have feelings.” The press, however, took pictures of the scene and accused Sofía of not being “a *perito*” [translation: expert, expert witness]. Friends too started to shun her: “My friends, they didn’t want to talk with me. I was talking with terrorist family and bla blah blah. Uff.” If detachment means physical and emotional forms of separation such as cordoning oneself off from the families and their suffering or the context in which one works, these separations seem to not ever be possible in Colombia and Peru. Except when it comes to emotional detachment and those moments, as my informants narrated it, when they have to find the ability to detach or try to perform detachment. This is its own kind of struggle, and this bubble of detachment can burst, for instance, when the forensic anthropologist gets asked questions like ‘Did it hurt when they died?’ as Sofía noted, or ‘Did they suffer?’, as stated by forensic pathologist Richard Shepherd. My dissertation shows that the larger context in which forensic anthropological work happens in Latin America both *forecloses* those kinds of emotional and social separations and *requires* different kinds of connections because of this. Emotions are not considered as a negative element to be blocked or repressed, but rather they are understood to be a vital aspect in forensic anthropological work (although one that must be *managed* in proper ways). Their absence, for instance, is considered an indicator that something is not right. Maurice noted, “We’re human beings. We have emotions, we have feelings. We feel when people suffer.” A colleague advised him that he needs to leave the profession because he is emotionally affected by what he experiences and witnesses: “You cannot work in this because you are not helpful because cases affect you a lot. And this is not good.”

Maurice disagreed: “The day that I can’t feel anything about this, this is the day that I will say I will not work in this anymore.”

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## 7.2 Contributions – My Informants’ Perspectives

By bridging sociocultural anthropology and ‘forensic science,’ this research project offers valuable insights into the sociocultural dimensions of forensic anthropological work in complex local contexts. This is an important contribution as the unique cultural, and sociopolitical factors in Colombia and Peru require not only encounters of various kinds to be navigated but also that forensic anthropologists navigate the impact of those encounters on their sense of self.

My informant forensic anthropologist Mike emphasised the importance of an interdisciplinary approach when writing about forensic anthropology. He highlighted that in North America, forensic anthropology goes beyond just “natural” and “biological sciences,” and engages with social sciences. He put it this way: “We are in touch with social sciences so we are trained and conceive of things differently and that is by some perceived as a limitation, a weakness but I think most anthropologists really come to terms with it and say ‘aha,’ because as I said our real problems are not methodological, they are not biological in terms of, you know, ‘how do I get a more precise age estimate on this skeleton.’ *Our real problems, I would argue, are structural and political and maybe psychological.*” He further noted that: “When I think of the representation of forensic anthropology one of my biggest complaints is [that] we don’t write... forensic anthropologists don’t write well. We’re bad communicators so we abandon the social science and the humanities part of us when we write so that we write in this very sort of rigid scientific structure because we want to play the role of the scientist. So, it’s [...]: introduction, methods and materials, results, discussion, or interpretation, whatever.” For him, some of the “best representations of forensic anthropology” come from those who can communicate in a “meaningful, deep, comprehensive way” like the work of cultural anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz on civil war exhumations in Spain. Mike concluded:

So, your research is just one example, I think, of the way forensic anthropology is broadening and is really sort of exciting, and I'm sure [it will have a] productive line of inquiry that will have an impact not just forensic anthropology but forensic science in general. It will bridge, I think, this idea that... or break the division of hard, quote-on-quote sciences or natural sciences and social sciences and understand that our work can't be decontextualised.

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Many of my informants highlighted the importance of approaching forensic anthropological work with a humble and empathetic mindset towards the victims and the families, rather than one driven by ego or the desire to make definitive claims. This means establishing trust with the families, working on their behalf, and approaching the investigation with a sense of professional ethical disposition. The key point is that forensic anthropologists should avoid making promises about finding missing persons or determining fully what happened. Acknowledging this uncertainty in their interaction with the families of the missing is crucial, as it prevents the creation of false expectations and the potential for disappointment. The emphasis on empathy and emotional connection shapes the very nature of the forensic anthropological work itself. It means that the practice of forensic anthropology in Colombia and Peru must go beyond a purely technical or detached approach. Instead, it requires a more human-centred perspective, where the needs and experiences of the families are central to the investigation process.

My informant Sofia hoped that my findings benefit the overall approach to forensic anthropological investigations. She noted:

I think it's very interesting your work and I hope it helps in a good way at the moment. I know that not many people read theses. But after your thesis, I hope with all this information that you're having, you can or we can at one time, if you want, can work and letting all the things outside and think of some keys of things that *we can work on to try and see how we can do all this search of the missing in a good way, in a good manner*. Organised and everything for the of course objective that it's letting the people know what happens to the relatives and give [the remains of their loved ones] to them if we can so they can have proper burial and everything. So I hope that helps. That's why I wanted to talk, and I really wanted to give you my side.

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My informants' narratives in this dissertation provide not only valuable insights into their lived experiences as forensic anthropologists but also into the social, political and economic conditions in Colombia and Peru. Their personal stories and experiences serve as a window into the challenges, inequalities, and systemic issues present in these countries, such as income inequality, racism, human rights abuses, and the marginalisation of certain groups. My Colombian informant Ana stated:

It sounds crazy but some people don't believe in the problems that we have [in Colombia]. Because they don't hear about that, you know. In the news, you don't hear about that, how many are killed or disappeared. They don't hear about that, you know. Don't read about that. So, they cannot wholly understand how deep is the problem, yeah. Very difficult for us, I think.

[...]

Thank you for your investigation. Is important that another part of the world look at this problem and maybe help us to understand or find a solution.

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This research project is primarily intended to benefit forensic anthropologists themselves, even though it may also contribute to other related aspects. I hope that my dissertation will prove to be as insightful and beneficial for individual forensic anthropologists as it may be for the field more broadly. Forensic anthropologists have been hailed as “modern-day heroes striving to restore meaning where meaning has been erased” (Gatti 2014, 64). On television series they are celebrated as “gods” (Bass and Jefferson 2003, 72), identifying a person from their skeletal remains in under an hour. They also have been described as gifted individuals who speak a “secret language that helps condemn the wicked and free those who have done no wrong” (Patricia Cornwell in Bass and Jefferson 2003, xii). Prospective students of forensic anthropology must not get blindsided by an overly glamourised media portrayal. This profession is not about heroism and trumpets.

Gabriel Gatti (2014, 59) explores moral aspects of forensic anthropology; that is, “what the work done by these professionals reveals in terms of ethics, the militant commitment they assume in *working to undo evil*. They *repair*, *recompose*, *restore*. They *remake* what has been unmade by evil; in sum, they *reconstruct the good* [...]” In that sense, forensic anthropology is portrayed as a moral pursuit where the scientists' actions are infused with



an ethical purpose of ‘undoing evil’ and ‘reconstructing the good.’ My research too looked at forensic anthropological work as a moral endeavour. However, rather than exploring the ethical contributions of forensic anthropological work itself, I was interested in exploring what ethical implications this kind of work has for the practitioners. It delved into the question: *What impact does witnessing ‘evil’ have on their (moral) selves?* There are some things, simply so complex and horrendous, they cannot be unmade. Rather, they cross over, infiltrating the dreams and lives of forensic anthropologists as witnesses, potentially leaving them morally injured and traumatised. With my research, I aimed to highlight the forensic anthropologist as a human being. As human beings, they do not exist in isolation – nor do they operate in isolation as forensic anthropologists. Again, to return to Miguel: forensic anthropology is “not a science isolated in a bubble. Is science active and in relation to the people.” Their encounters can be wonderful, but they can also be complex and messy – having an emotional, psychological and moral impact on their selves. My study aimed to shed light on the complexity of forensic anthropological work and how forensic anthropologists, who are not only experts providing specialised knowledge but moral agents, navigate those complexities.

My informant Horacio expressed that interviews such as the one he did with me “are always very beneficial” to him. He noted: “It’s sometimes a bit therapeutic or very therapeutic, I don’t know. So, I go in with the [aim] of being helpful in terms of research and developing the discipline but it’s really all self-serving, it’s just very egocentric and cathartic, so I thank you.” Speaking about mental health is still generally considered a taboo in the forensic anthropology community. Shedding light on the experiences of forensic scientists and the relationship between forensic anthropological work and trauma may be of interest to teachers and policymakers alike as the project will call attention to the importance of a trauma-informed approach to teaching and training practices in forensic anthropology. While policy changes can have significant impacts, my research takes a more personalised approach, seeking to understand the lived experience and perspectives of the people at the heart of the discipline – the forensic practitioners themselves. It gives voice to human stories, allowing for a deeper exploration of the moral, emotional, and psychological aspects of their work. The focus was on creating an

impactful, human-centred exploration of this field. If even just one forensic anthropologist finds themselves reflected in this research project, if it resonates with them for whatever reason, then the aim of this work has been fulfilled.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Initial REB Approval 2021



**Date:** 29 June 2021

**To:** Professor Greg Beckett

**Project ID:** 119225

**Study Title:** Pursuing Justice in the Face of Lingering Trauma and Pervasive Violence:  
An Ethnographic Portrait of Forensic Anthropology in Latin America

**Short Title:** Forensic Anthropology in Latin America

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** July 9 2021

**Date Approval Issued:** 29/Jun/2021 18:12

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 29/Jun/2022

Dear Professor Greg Beckett

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Verbal Recruitment Script	Oral Script	10/May/2021	1
Email Recruitment Script	Recruitment Materials	10/May/2021	1
Participant Observation Guide	Participant Observation Guide	17/May/2021	1
Interview Guide	Interview Guide	18/May/2021	1
Verbal Consent Script	Verbal Consent/Assent	18/May/2021	1
Letter of Information and Consent – Interview Participants Stage 1 Version 2 Clean	Written Consent/Assent	18/Jun/2021	2
Letter of Information and Consent – Interview Participants Stage 2 Version 2 Clean	Written Consent/Assent	18/Jun/2021	2

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix B: Continuing REB Approval 2022



**Date:** 28 June 2022

**To:** Professor Greg Beckett

**Project ID:** 119225

**Study Title:** Pursuing Justice in the Face of Lingering Trauma and Pervasive Violence:  
An Ethnographic Portrait of Forensic Anthropology in Latin America

**Application Type:** Continuing Ethics Review (CER) Form

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Meeting Date:** July 8 2022

**Date Approval Issued:** 28/Jun/2022 13:35

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 29/Jun/2023

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Dear Professor Greg Beckett,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board has reviewed this application. This study, including all currently approved documents, has been re-approved until the expiry date noted above.

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

The Office of Human Research Ethics

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix C: Continuing REB Approval 2023



**Date:** 23 June 2023

**To:** Professor Greg Beckett

**Project ID:** 119225

**Study Title:** Pursuing Justice in the Face of Lingerin Trauma and Pervasive Violence:  
An Ethnographic Portrait of Forensic Anthropology in Latin America

**Application Type:** Continuing Ethics Review (CER) Form

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Date Approval Issued:** 23/Jun/2023 11:02

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 29/Jun/2024

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Dear Professor Greg Beckett,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board has reviewed this application. This study, including all currently approved documents, has been re-approved until the expiry date noted above.

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

**Electronically signed by:**

Mr. Joshua Hatherley, Ethics Coordinator on behalf of Dr. R. Graham, NMREB Chair 23/Jun/2023 11:02

**Reason:** I am approving this document

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Curriculum Vitae

<b>Name:</b>	Franziska Albrecht
<b>Post-secondary Education and Degrees:</b>	<p>National University of Ireland, Maynooth Maynooth, Republic of Ireland 2005-2008 B.A. in Anthropology and Sociology</p> <p>Centre for Anatomy and Human Identification University of Dundee Dundee, Scotland, United Kingdom 2016-2017 M.Sc. in Forensic Archaeology and Forensic Anthropology</p> <p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2019-2024 Ph.D. in Sociocultural Anthropology</p>
<b>Honours and Awards:</b>	<p>Sigma Xi Grant in Aid of Research (GIAR) Fund of Canada 2021</p> <p>Faculty of Social Science Graduate Research Awards Fund The University of Western Ontario 2021</p> <p>Regna Darnell Graduate Award For Fieldwork in Sociocultural Anthropology The University of Western Ontario 2021, 2022, 2023</p> <p>Western Graduate Scholarship The University of Western Ontario 2019-2023</p>
<b>Related Work Experience</b>	<p>Teaching Assistant Department of Anthropology The University of Western Ontario 2019-2023</p>