The Immeasurability of Horror: classification and distinction in experiences of banishment and exile[1]

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ABSTRACT

Based on different ethnographic and political scenarios linked to the Colombian conflict and, specifically to the forced displacement and exile that it provoked, the text seeks to analyse the classifications and distinctions of the experiences of suffering in a scenario of terror. I argue that the demands formulated by the victims to distinguish experiences of suffering are inscribed in bordering or overlapping terrains, but not completely coinciding with those of the programmes that classify and manage the displacements. To this end, I suggest observing the relationships between banished people and the everyday manifestations of the state, in their magical and ghostly qualities, in order to analyse how they achieve the possibility of rebuilding a sense of home in exile.

KEYWORDS

Exile, Terror, Home, Classification.

A incomensurabilidade do horror: classificação e distinção nas experiências de desterro e exílio

RESUMO Com base em diferentes cenários etnográficos e políticos vinculados ao conflito colombiano, especificamente ao deslocamento forçado e ao exílio por ele provocados, o texto se propõe a analisar as classificações e distinções das experiências de sofrimento num cenário de terror. Argumenta que as demandas formuladas pelas vítimas para a distinção das experiências de sofrimento se inscrevem em terrenos fronteiriços ou superpostos, mas não completamente coincidentes com os dos programas estatais que classificam e administram os deslocamentos. Para tanto, o artigo propõe observar as relações entre pessoas desterradas e as manifestações cotidianas do estado, nas suas qualidades mágicas e fantasmagóricas, para analisar como elas atingem a possibilidade de reconstrução de um senso de lar no exílio.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Exílio, Terror, Lar.

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Introduction

The reflections presented in this text originated in different historical and ethnographic situations that in turn mark different periods of social, political and armed conflict in Colombia. Some of the scenes and conversations evoked throughout the text form part of the research for a Master's degree that I elaborated between 2005 and 2006 in Bogotá and the metropolitan region, together with organisations of people who had been forcibly displaced from their territories. The period corresponds to the decades following the resurgence of the paramilitary strategy in the country and the consequent state of persecution and unrest among social leaders, political opponents, and communities in coveted territories. This was also a period marked by massacres that intensified the massive displacement of populations – particularly ethnic and peasant communities – and the implementation of government plans and actions to combat so-called narco-terrorism, with the participation of the United States. Another important fact that should be understood in the context of some of the situations presented herein is the legal recognition, through Law 387 of 1997[2], of the existence of displaced persons and the regulation of their social assistance.

During the second period, from 2011 to 2013, I conducted doctoral research on the recognition processes of Colombian refugees and on the *Programa de Reassentamento Solidário* [Solidarity Resettlement Programme] that transferred some people to Brazil who were previously refugees in Ecuador. At that time, the drama of forced displacement was no longer solely an internal Colombian issue, it loudly and defiantly manifested in a significant number of refugees, victims of the conflict, which drove international humanitarian responses. From this period, I also retrieved several ethnographic situations, together with scenes experienced in the aftermath of the research, when interactions with certain people turned into encounters of friendship or political articulation.

Finally, other materials woven into the text appeared in different scenarios linked to the work of the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición*[3] [Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition], which was unprecedented in its work with victims abroad. Truth Commission activities in Brazil were conducted in person in the second half of 2019, virtually during 2020 and 2021, and resumed in person from 2022 onwards. I helped to form the network in Brazil, I supported the collection of some testimonies and accompanied several moments and meetings involving technical training, political articulation, and the discussion and presentation of results in Brazil and other countries. Unlike the two previous periods, for this one I do not mention conversations or interviews with people or their individual information, rather I rely on an analysis of the elements that both facilitated and tensioned the political moment. Although the ex-

istence of a process of truth and reparation may suggest that the conflict has been overcome, the Commission's work was carried out amidst the escalation of the war.

It is important to highlight that this article does not intend to present an overview of the Colombian conflict, but rather to analyse the classifications of and distinctions among experiences of suffering in a scenario of terror. To this end, the text is divided into three parts that do not follow a specific chronological order. Each of them includes information from different historical and ethnographic situations. The first presents an overview of the arguments critical to state classifications that attempt to differentiate economic migrants and refugees. In the second, the tensions to which these critiques are subjected are analysed in light of the desire of victims for their stories and experiences to be distinguished from other forms of migration and displacement. Lastly, in the third part, I propose a reading key to resolve this apparent contradiction, arguing that the demands formulated by victims for distinguishing experiences of suffering fall into bordering or overlapping terrain, but are not fully coincident with those of state programmes that classify and administer displacements. The article seeks to observe the relationships between banished persons and the everyday manifestations of the state, in their magical and ghostly qualities, in order to analyse how they achieve the possibility of rebuilding a sense of home in exile.

CLASSIFICATIONS

During the years dedicated to conducting research on forced displacement and exile, I have met many different people, in terms of age, sexuality, profession, racial identity, regional origin, musical tastes, religious practices, militancy, trajectories as social leaders and/or housewives. At the beginning of the research, when I was studying my Master's degree, the only elements in common with the people I met in Bogotá, who later became my interlocutors, were their rural origin, the experience of banishment and the arduous fight against the poverty, the stigma, and the irrelevance into which they were thrown when forced – in some cases more than once – to give up their homes, their lands and, for some of them, even their families.

Years later, following the movements of people who crossed Colombia's international borders and began living in Brazil, the differences became even more significant. Educated, middle-class, urban individuals shared refugee administration with small traders from small towns, a few peasants and many young people from popular urban sectors who came to fill the *rebusques* [gigs] of emigrated relatives or 'try their luck' in the past when Brazil promised to be '*a bola de vez*' [the hot ticket], as described by one of the social workers who welcomed them in São Paulo. With some of these many people, I bonded more strongly, I made friends, sometimes becoming

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entangled by chance and sometimes purposely weaving myself into their lives and they into mine. In contrast, I spoke only once or twice to others, as well as losing track of a few who were close for a while.

The differences between the people and the type of relationship, conversations or interviews, or even the purposes of these meetings, also meant differences in what I was told concerning the experience of being displaced or a refugee, and the way in which this was communicated to me. I do not know the details of the persecutions or the types of violence they suffered or witnessed for all of these people. I am not even sure if all of them witnessed or experienced any of the countless moments of horror that have characterised the conflict in Colombia. To borrow from Fassin's reflections, not all the effects of domination in these people's lives had been expressed through suffering. However, I can say that they all subsequently participated in 'construction processes of which suffering is the object' (Fassin, 2010:9).

I was interested in these processes as a research topic, specifically those that concerned the dynamics of recognising the condition of internally displaced persons (in research in Colombia) and refugees (in research in Brazil). Despite the temporal distance and the particularities of each local context, there are elements common to both that can be expressed in the idea of the politics of suffering (Fassin, 2010:10). Determining who was a displaced person at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Colombia involved distinguishing between the 'true displaced persons' and those who, according to officials, official documents and public opinion mobilised in newspapers, were taking advantage of the situation to obtain undue benefits. Likewise, the recognition of refugee status in Brazil, in the second decade, occurred through meticulous bureaucratic meetings that intended to differentiate refugees from economic migrants, the latter equally seen as illegitimate beneficiaries of the protection of the state (Facundo, 2017).

'True displaced persons and true refugees' were combined in both cases with the notion of 'true victims' and these, in turn, with the idea of those who actually suffered proven threats, persecution, torture or cruel or degrading treatment. The inquiry into suffering, in both cases carried out in a psychologised and individualised manner[4], revealed the presumption that all horrors could be narrated and that anyone was in a position to do so. Furthermore, it was assumed that the narrative should be articulated primarily at the level of the self and that, even if the individual had speech difficulties, the body would exhibit signs. If not physical scars, marks in a traumatised psychic space in which not only memories (including those erased) inhabit, but also the fears inherent to a specific type of suffering.

It is worth remembering that the report required from the individuals is not restricted to a narration of the facts that caused their departure, but also requires a detailed, and sometimes intimate, account of life before and after their escape. Applicants must produce a discourse that is, at once, a surrender of themselves and

[4] According to Fassin, 'this dual movement of psychologisation and individuation corresponds to what could be described as a *pathosisation of the world*, that is, a pathetic representation of social inequalities and the introduction of *pathos* into the political' (Fassin, 1999:33).

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the loss of the property of their intimacy that becomes part of a public discourse. From then on, the power to determine the veracity of the narrated experiences is no longer under the control of the individual. This demand for surrender and the externalisation of intimacy, in turn, is based on the supposed correspondence between words, memory and experience, between intimacy and authenticity, and between the individual and their testimony.

Over the course of the century, far from ending, the extraordinary violence of war, bombings, football matches with human heads, the dismemberment of sexual and political dissidents and the bodies of peasants that flowed down rivers, became ever more perniciously mixed with the ordinary violence of hunger, homelessness, unemployment and dispossession. The *casas de pique*[5] were not only intended to tear apart corpses and the memory of political opponents, but also became mechanisms for collecting debts from micro-trafficking and the imposition of moral and economic projects through the force of horror. Extortions were no longer aimed solely at farmers, local economies were becoming militarised and para-militarised, straining marital relations, stirring up old family fights over inheritances, affections and disaffections, igniting conflicts between neighbours over animals and fences, linking members of the same kinship group to rival armed groups. A tormented state of affairs that made the inglorious task of the agents and agencies who had to separate the wheat from the chaff even more difficult.

Moreover, as if the complex plot that configures forced displacements (national or international) was not difficult enough, the twenty-first century has also brought with it the haunting scale of the social phenomenon of migration. As Said rightly pointed out in the twentieth century, our era of modern war and imperialism 'is indeed the era of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration' (Said, 1984). However, the massive nature of internal displacement and the significant increase in asylum seekers in Brazil did not translate into changes in the classification of migrants and refugees, at least for the processes studied. Individualised analyses continued to be performed in the precarious, parsimonious administration of social affairs. Meanwhile, the infinite hallucinatory imagination of horror (Taussig, 1986) and its ability to reach more and more people increased demands on the level of violence expected to achieve the unequal exchange of the individual's traumatised interior, for the condition of displacement or refugee to be recognised.

I suggest that this assessment included some measurement, even if unstated, of not only the type but also the level of violence suffered. Moreover, this level, although manifested in an individualising process, was also based on the assessment of the times and places in which the 'facts' occurred (Khosravi, 2010). Threatened individuals in 'threatening places' were more likely to be recognised than those who were tortured in 'not so violent' periods and places. This happened to José Alberto[6], who carried with him old press clippings that reported his father's murder and who

5 | *Casas de pique* were the name given to places intended for the torture, dismemberment and disappearance of individuals and their corpses. The practice was referenced in Southwest Colombia, at the beginning of the 2020s.

6 | To preserve the anonymity and privacy of the interlocutors, pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

repeated the details of the attack he himself had suffered years ago, showing the scar that one of the bullets left on his leg. However, he was unable to convince the people who were evaluating his request for refuge in Brazil that his story was not that of one more lowly economic migrant in the gigantic *monsteropolis* of São Paulo and that the presumed improvements in his region of origin in Colombia would not protect him from retaliations.

According to the agents in charge of refuge interviews in Brazil, their analysis of the place where 'the facts' occurred and the alleged knowledge of the violent dynamics in each location referenced, presumed to be objective information, enabled them to evade the emotion and guarantee a process supported by expertise professional experience and the technologies that support that, and not due to an emotive appeal to sad, poignant listening. What recent research indicates (Facundo, 2021; Mahler & Pessar, 2001; Ribeiro, 2021) is that through this exercise, gendered and racialised geographies of violence are produced – or reinforced – that contribute to the imaginary separation of the world between centres as safe spaces, where the ideal of the modern nation-state and the civilisational pact have worked, and margins or borders, that are left to chance and barbarity. Regions of projection (Serje, 2011:177) marked not only by geographical distances, but by temporal separations. Regions that, as suggested since the 1970s by Sayad (1998), produce migrants not tourists. Places hidden in the woods or mountains, immemorial wars, barbaric violence and failed governments (including on the national scale).

The anxiety to classify the types and intensities of violence is related to the capture of the social meanings of suffering through the pedagogies and administrative logics of the state. Allen Feldman (2003) denominated this as the production of organic links between trauma-tropism and nomo-tropism. According to the author, it is possible to identify 'a set of ethical and governmental prerequisites [...] in the transnational discourse of human rights' (Feldman, 2003:236) that cause the relocation of trauma, injury and pain in institutionalised memory, in legal institutions and in legal reparation procedures. 'A curvature towards the law' that expects persons and groups who have been the victims of human rights violations to 'overcome historical trauma through a repose in lawfulness' (Idem).

Considering that the majority of people exiled on the planet are unable to even activate state bureaucracies to initiate a refugee request process, over the years of research, inquiring about the political relevance of these classification processes became inevitable. How important are such distinctions of type and degree? Are these distinctions, so beloved by administration programmes, equally pertinent to individuals who frequently struggle to be successful in the recognition process? In particular, the distinction between economic migrants and refugees seemed politically unsustainable to me, not only because 'wars – including the economic wars of the current system of capital – engender and create horrors and subject people

to extreme situations' (Facundo, 2016:207), but also because, in the interlocutors' stories, economic life cannot be separated from life, much as political persecution aimed to eliminate the enemies of predatory economic projects and models was evident.

In addition, some of the forcibly displaced people I met in Bogotá were never able to benefit from land restitution or compensation programmes. Their inclusion in the databases of displaced persons occurred in exchange for an emergency kit, while the list, sometimes disclosed to the army, served more to persecute people than include them in public policies. Was the symbolic recognition of suffering in the lives of individuals ripped 'from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography' (Said, 1984) as significant as defending their own recognition as proof of the benevolence of the classification process, despite the exclusion of so many others? If every classification in these state processes results in hierarchisation, can we think of a non-exclusive distinction that goes beyond the classificatory principles of nationalised administration and, for instance, is put to the service of creating emotional communities that, as Jimeno (2010) proposed, progress towards a civil ethics of recognising the suffering engendered by the violence in Colombia?

Attempts at distinction

The concerns I formulate have not emerged recently. They were provoked by some of the people I have had relationships with over the years. It has been a long time since I heard the initial questioning made by Juliana, a young displaced woman, mother of two children, who I met on the outskirts of Bogotá in 2005. At the time, the attempts at distinction that appeared in a dialogue with her echoed statements made during the same period by Francisco and Gabriel, two leaders of one of the largest associations of displaced persons in Colombia, concerning the need and their ability to identify the 'true displaced persons'. Years later, in 2021, during events promoted by the Truth Commission, the insistence of a refugee scholar and social leader on the political importance of not confusing economic migrants with victims of political violence exiled in other countries disturbed me again, enough to want to return to the issue.

Francisco and Gabriel are two black men with rural origins, but from different regions of Colombia. When I met them, the former was in his forties and the latter in his thirties. Both shared management positions in an association that operated in a municipality neighbouring the capital, where rents were cheaper and where the majority of the residents were people who arrived in the town having fled the violence in rural areas, which worsened in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the time, the association was one of the government's strongest interlocutors in matters of

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forced displacement. One day, after having interviewed some employees of the *Sistema Único de Registro* (SUR)[7] – the system that registered the displaced population at the time –, I expressed my indignation at the fact that the government questioned people's suffering in order to include them in the registry. Gabriel's response not only confronted my indignation, but also reinforced the need for the distinction. He made it clear, however, that the distinction was not important because it came from the state, but because it was made by the people themselves:

> It's different when you had to run to save your skin. I confess that sometimes I even feel angry at people who had time to pack their bags, gather their things and bring everything; [angry] at the people who were not directly threatened, but who, when they began to see that the town was becoming deserted, that there was no one left or they saw the risk of being swept away, decided to leave, but with time to even bring the chickens, while we didn't even have time to put on a shirt.

In an interview with Francisco that I recorded in 2005, the topic came up again. It was a common topic in our conversations, since the association did its own work recording displaced people arriving in Bogotá and one of its objectives was to contrast these records with official data produced by the government.

> They can't come here and say anything. We know the regions, we know the actors, we know who's here and who's there. We also have the means to carry out our checks. I can tell exactly when I'm talking to people who are making up a story. Look: when you've been there, you learn what you can say and what you should keep to yourself. But there are people who speak without paying attention, who think that just mentioning the guerrillas is enough to convince everyone; well maybe government officials, but not us. They [government officials] prefer to listen to cases of displacement by the guerrillas, because that way they can balance the statistics a little and then come out and say that the paramilitaries are not the ones who displace the most. But we can tell who is lying.

At the time, I considered that this distinction had to do with Gabriel and Francisco's belonging to left-wing political organisations that were the favourite target of paramilitary actions, mainly responsible for forced displacement in the country (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, p. 175). Organisations that already considered the state as an adversary and as the perpetrator[8]. Moreover, the moment in which I was conducting my research coincided with the controversial process of demobilising the *Autodefensas Unidas da Colombia*[9], which resulted in the presence of former soldiers from these far-right groups competing for municipal social benefits in Bogotá

7 | Later, the system changed to the *Registro Único de Víctimas* (RUV) [Single Registry of Victims] linked to the *Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas* [Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation to the Victims], created in January 2012 by Law 1,448 concerning victims and land restitution, linked to the *Sistema Nacional de Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas* (SNARIV) [National System for Comprehensive Care and Reparation to the Victims].

8 | On Colombia, the term 'state terrorism' only began to gain strength among the public in the 1990s, in particular due to the activities of the *Colombia Nunca Más* [Never Again] project and the subsequent creation of the *Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado* (MOVICE) [National Movement of Victims of State Crimes] in 2005. However, there is an important precedent linked to the work of the *Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos* (ASFADDES) [Association of Relatives of Detained-Disappeared Persons] founded in 1983, whose street demonstrations were a milestone in the fight to achieve state accountability for the crimes of forced disappearance and the imprisonment of political opponents.

See: https://asfaddes.org/category/institucional/ and https://movimientodevictimas.org/historia/

9 | During his first presidential term, President Uribe Vélez carried out a process to demobilise the *Autodefensas Unidas da Colombia* (AUC) [United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia], one of the largest paramilitary structures in the country. The process was supported by the so-called 'law of justice and peace', which was harshly criticised for encouraging impunity, enabling merely symbolic reparation for victims, and for its lack of guarantees to achieve its goal. The process itself was denounced as being a media montage that sought to legalise the existence of paramilitary leaders, while not truly dismantling the structures that supported their existence.

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– scarce resources that displaced people had difficulty accessing. I considered that this cruel, contentious approach – between the victims and the foot soldiers who were their perpetrators – exacerbated the need for such a distinction as a means to denounce an unjust order and as a limit to the moral communities that they strived to defend.

Indeed, the idea of moral communities (Segato, 2006:225), many of them derived from the human capacity to transform pain into suffering and suffering into belonging (Das, 1997; Herzfeld, 1992), made more sense when reflecting on my dialogue with Juliana or the public statements that Yolanda made years later when working with the Truth Commission. Juliana had not been recognised as a displaced person and did not even receive the emergency kit when she hurriedly left where she was living. She and her family were afraid of registering in the displaced population databases and being located through them. Later, while living in Bogotá, she realised that displaced people were heavily stigmatised and preferred to integrate into the neighbourhood without mentioning the issue so as not to be harassed by her neighbours. Unlike racialised people who were perceived as outsiders, Juliana did not possess features that might transform her into an outsider, based on the racial imagination of the capital's residents. She had also never participated in political organisations that increased the risk of being stigmatised and criminalised or that motivated her to articulate her situation in the language of public, collective denunciation. Thus, being another poor family in the neighbourhood with her children seemed like a better strategy. However, after hearing me talking to some people who used the local association where she worked, she wanted to tell me what she had been through. My conversation with women at the association formed part of a workshop on public policies regarding displaced populations that I had given at the request of the organisation's director, as part of an agreed exchange for permission to do research. At the end of the workshop, when people were already leaving, Juliana approached me to resolve a question that had arisen while listening to me as she tidied up the kitchen. She wanted to know whether, after many years, someone could be recognised as displaced. I did not have time to articulate my response when Juliana amended her story which, I now see, was accompanied by an anger similar to that which Gabriel had expressed.

Juliana told me the name of the country town where she and her family were born. With both of them were transported there, and once she was sure that I knew the area, she then recounted the house where they lived: 'the most beautiful in the town', everyone said. She claimed that it was because the house was the most beautiful that they killed her father. With no time to react to the death I had just learned about, I made an effort to carefully follow her memory, wherein she listed the family's animals: 'we had pigs, cattle, a farm and even the biggest store in town. We had a lot of money and now...'. Her gaze followed the descending dirt road, which revealed

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the improvised roofs of the small, fragile, unplastered brick houses, ill-prepared for the cold of the hills, their pale orange contrasting against the grey, polluted sky of the city: 'See how I live, here, in a shack with my children, and they got everything'.

The memory also came with an explanation. Juliana said that sometimes the guerrillas bought food from her father's store and that on one of these occasions, they asked about the price of a cow or a pig. To avoid problems, her father let them take the animal without charging them. When the *paracos*[10] arrived, Juliana's father had to do the same thing, let them take the animals without paying. However, out of jealousy, out of envy of everything the family had, people told the paramilitaries that Juliana's father was supporting the guerrillas. From that moment on, motivated by the envy of people who knew about the family's wealth, the interrogations and threats began. The explanations that her father gave the paramilitaries regarding the impossibility of denying the attentions of another powerful, armed group were of no use.

Then came the day when the *paracos* returned and inside the home, the most beautiful in the city, they forcibly knelt Juliana's mother. In front of her terrified, kneeling mother, they laid down her son and two of her grandchildren (Juliana's brother and cousins), one of whom was merely spending holidays with her grand-parents. Juliana asked me to imagine what her mother felt looking at her son lying on the floor while the men shot the three boys in the head. Next, narrated by Juliana with an 'immediacy' that left me no time to react to these other deaths, the paramil-itaries ordered the family to leave under the threat of killing the rest of them. Juliana and her family did not take anything with them and were not even able to stay in the state capital. New threats and the certainty that they had been located, due to a phone call, led Juliana to set out on the road to Bogotá, far from the killers, but also far from her parents who remained closer to the region. She said that her father was never the same; the doctors' diagnosis was a stroke, but she claims that his death was caused by everything he went through. This is why Juliana claimed that they (the paramilitaries) killed her father. The fourth death from the massacre, however, was not included in the records of either the massacres or the displacements. Until the moment of our dialogue, no one in the family wanted to ask for '*la carta de despla-zados*'[11] [the letter of displaced persons].

Following her account and explanation of why things happened, Juliana told me that there are people who take advantage, saying that they are displaced when they have never had to go through a similar experience and will never know what it is like to suffer in this manner. She tells me that among the group of association users for whom I gave the workshop, there were those who were not displaced, but claimed to be so as to obtain benefits. These young women, as she called them, 'don't know what it's like to play with other people's pain'. According to Juliana, they wanted to go to Bogotá and so they went, and they decided to say that they were

10 | *Paracos* is the pejorative form that many of the interlocutors used to refer to the paramilitary groups that resurfaced with force in the final decades of the twentieth century in Colombia.

11 | At the time, '*la carta de desplazado*' was the official document issued by state authorities to people recognised as victims of the crime of forced displacement due to the armed conflict and a requirement for claiming the rights derived from said situation.

displaced because they knew what information was requested in the declaration for registration: they knew who the mayor was, who the priest was, and who was in one group or another. That is why people believed them, but 'they shouldn't joke about it; if they knew what it was like to go through this pain, they wouldn't dare do that'.

In line with other authors (Piscitelli, 2013; Piscitelli and Lowenkron, 2022; Padovani, 2018), in the migratory contexts studied, I have insisted that the social production of the victim has been characterised by the idea of a subject devoid of agency or political capabilities. In political terms, the image of the displaced person/refugee as a being on the verge of death – who must conform to any offer in the name of saving their life – has contributed to the denial of their desirous dimensions and their constructive potential, while in the era of financial capital, this has aided the mischaracterisation of large economic enterprises responsible for the horror that leads to the forced displacement of increasing numbers of people on a planetary scale. Aspects like the choice of destination, the planned nature of the escapes (especially when they involve international travel) and the economic motivation for leaving the territories, among others, are evaluated as evidence of the voluntary nature of the displacement and are often the reason given for non-recognition.

However, when revisiting the moments and dialogues that I reconstructed for this text, this explanation does not consider the dimension assumed by the categories of victim and suffering expressed in the accounts of the people who evoked their experiences. It seems to me that they are inscribed in bordering or overlapping terrain, but not completely coinciding with those of the programmes that regulate and manage displacement and its horrors in the name of national order. As discussed in the works of Jelin (2007) and Jimeno (2010), the category of victim, though understood from different ethnographic contexts, is far from the notion of political emptying. Indeed, given it is displayed with a power that is difficult to describe, the social figure of victims in Latin America has been transformed into a prism of confluence of the political strength of the dead and the living in the public terrain of the courts, squares and streets. For Jimeno, victim is a 'category of negotiation vis-à-vis institutionality' that feeds on the civic capacity to recognise the suffering of others (Jimeno, 2010:104). For Jelin (2007), it is a category whose strength to demand reparation and justice changes subject to the political clashes and grammars mobilised in public processes of recognition; but, in any case, it is central to the construction of legitimacy in claims for justice, reparation and non-repetition.

Likewise, the search for recognition of suffering as part of the processes of restoring social and community bonds broken in times of extreme violence and precarity can be reinforced by Honneth's (1995) proposal. In both Juliana's demands and those of Gabriel and Francisco, there is a struggle for intersubjective recognition not only in the form of love/friendship, but also in legal and moral forms (Honneth, 1995: 129). In addition to the rights associated with legal processes, the manner of

recognising the social esteem of neighbours, comrades in struggle, and the range of NGO and state agents who have become a permanent and significant presence in their existence, is fundamental to maintaining life, transformed into misery and irrelevance due to displacement and the way in which it is administered. However, there are also complaints regarding the form of recognition related to the search for cognitive respect, to considerations of their capacity to understand – better than the state – what really happened in the regions, who is who in the neighbourhoods, and what the chaos and incompetence of displacement administration has to do with the disregard of their in-depth knowledge of the situation. In the case of Gabriel and Francisco, this included the lack of knowledge regarding their organisational capacity, which led them to mimetically dispute with the state the classification and administration of the victims.

I consider that Yolanda has also disputed this form of cognitive recognition that Honneth speaks of. She has been a very important figure in the recent process of national memory construction led by the Truth Commission. Active in national Colombian political organisations and in the diaspora, she was a fundamental player in the development of the Commission's research with victims abroad, in some Latin American countries. In discussions concerning the chapter on exile of the final report and in preparatory events, she vigorously defended the need not to mischaracterise exile for political motives. One of her concerns is that it could be ranked at the same level as economic migration. Her insistence included the recognition of exile as political punishment, specifically devoted to punishing people for thinking and organising collectively. This differentiation is important for her and other exiles who were part of the process, since it would enable them to highlight the existence of a systematic project of illegal state repression that sought to attack and extinguish spaces for the participation and action of those in opposition. As a technology of war, political exile was one of the repressive practices that contributed to the execution of the plan.

However, one thing that does not appear in Yolanda's accounts is the idea that migrants are being illegitimately favoured with social and economic benefits that intended solely for exiles. On the contrary, she has insisted on the need to recognise the different modes of expulsion derived from the state of prolonged violence in the country. The distinctions she defends include political exile, forced cross-border displacement, and the migration of victims as a result of the state's inability to re-establish their rights and ensure full reparation. Each of these phenomena requires a distinct collective response in terms of material solutions and symbolic reparations. I argue that, in addition to a rational characterisation of modalities and responses for victims and an informed perception of the unique forms and densities of the experience of suffering, the differentiation claimed for this time is closely related to the characteristic of exile that calls into question the idea of home.

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Drawing on her own experience as an Indian feminist in the United States, Chandra Mohanty (2003) examines the notions of nation, family, and home. She asks whether home is a geographical space, an historical space, or an emotional or sensorial space (Mohanty, 2003:126). For those who have divided the experience of inhabiting the world between different places, she suggests that its meaning is not that of a 'stable, inherited, and familiar space', but rather an 'imaginative, politically charged space in which the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment lay in the shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as in a vision of radical transformation' (Idem, p .127). It is here that I locate Yolanda and her demands for distinction and, moreover, where I find myself sharing a home with her, and where I believe that her public discourses impelled me to return to the suffering that my interlocutors handed to me, so many years ago, together with Juliana's request that people not play with others pain.

Deepening the re-examination of the meanings attributed to home in communities of origin, as Mohanty proposes, what you choose to claim from the homeland or nation is often not the same story for all displaced, exiled, emigrated or expatriated persons. A person does not exist in the empty, homogeneous time of the nation (Anderson, 2006), but rather in the heterogeneous, unequal times proposed by Partha Chatterjee (2008). In the same manner that geographical expulsion does not situate everyone in the same period of exile, people choose and claim certain stories and projects as their own. According to Mohanty (2003:129), 'partial, interested stories/histories […] about our past(s)' determine the logic of our present and, inspired by Vianna (2020), the imaginative possibilities of our future[12]. The punishment of exile that Yolanda suffered is an open wound, projected onto a time haunted by the idea of never recovering her home or of being expelled from the one she has been rebuilding at a distance, in case it becomes merely a disfigured shadow of poverty and penury. The act of being registered in the official memory of the conflict in the same category as migrants is a continuation of the violence that promised to erase her voice and her thoughts, that removed her from the instigating, formative coexistence of political organisation, from places known, from food partaken, from laughter and fears shared with comrades, from the daily solidarity that promised to transform the future.

Thus, provoked by Yolanda's reiterations, I began to feel that the calls for attention from Juliana and Gabriel and the distinction narrated in painful detail of the objects that were left behind, contributed to an understanding of 'how the event is anchored in the everyday' (Vianna, 2020:3), as proposed by Das (2007). The detailed references to the accelerated narrowing of their existence within the coordinates of space and time, provoked by the departure, delineated the concretisation of the horror within the intimate. In Gabriel's naked torso during his escape, in the absence of bags and animals that Juliana laments, in the sadness of the capital's tasteless

12 | Mohanty's reading is in line with certain proposals for reflections on exile in the case of Colombia. For example, Andrés Salcedo suggests that reconstruction processes in exile can be understood as a struggle by exiled persons and populations to find a political and social space in the places where they went to live. The author points out that within this struggle there are ties that creatively bring together the places that were once home and the multiple new ties in the current places of residence (Salcedo, 2008).

food that Francisco often complained about, in the haste and lack of time to leave, and in the ever-current anger about those who managed to bring their chickens or who kept everything that was once theirs. These vital elements of recreated history also fulfilled the role of questioning me concerning the everyday of lives marked by departure originating in contexts of terror, and questioning me again regarding the state and its administration, not as some distant institutionality, but as a concrete incarnation and co-participation in this redesigning of intimacy and home (or the intimacy of home) in displacement.

Transfigurations, pollution and dullness

One day, several years ago, I asked a friend who lived in Brazil about the process of another mutual Colombian friend, also a refugee, who was trying to pass the exam to revalidate her professional diploma. She told me about her difficulties in finding time to study. In addition to working, she had to take care of the home, prepare food for her husband and son, and travel long distances from home to work. With a fierce feminist spirit, I then asked whether her husband did not take care of the food and the home. She responded positively, said yes, but reminded me that there are things he cannot do. For example, supporting the weight of a pan full of water or holding some utensils tightly. These remain the after-effects of torture, she said, and reminded me that I knew this. I did know about the kidnapping, the martyrdom he suffered in an army battalion and the military relative who, despite having always disagreed with him politically, risked their career to free him from the interrogation from which he had to be carried out; wrapped in the man's arms like a baby. I simply did not realise that despite his incredible recovery, after so many years, his daily routine was the actualisation of the events that led him to leave the country, as soon as he was able to walk again.

The perception of this reality, which I had not noted in my conversations, highlighted not only the impactful capacity of terror to reverberate far beyond the time and place in which the violent events occurred, but also the uncomfortable mixing it causes between elements that we wish to keep separate. It highlighted the ability of terror to confuse, intertwine and transfigure times, things and people. There is a legal location that belongs to the state: a barracks; and there is an interrogation that is also torture (because it crossed a line?), which years later connects with a kitchen in another country, and with a pot that has to be filled little by little. The man who carries the body like a child is an agent of the state, but he appears as a relative in uniform and puts an end to the path of death that, at that point, was desired by the cousin who allowed himself be carried away. Likewise, Gabriel and Juliana's anger is directed against the groups of armed killers and their masterminds, but, at the

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same time, against the similarly terrified village neighbours who managed to keep their belongings or against the poor women who look for ways to dribble through the hunger and misery of the hills where the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) distributes meals.

'I don't like the gringos at USAID', Gabriel told me in 2005. They receive money from the gringo (American) government, he says. Then, he questioned me with his look, 'the same people who give money for the meal are the ones who give money to *Plan Colombia*[13], and *Plan Colombia* poisons the food we already had. And then what?' he insists on asking me. 'If they didn't fumigate our crops, they wouldn't need to come and give us food. But for now, we can't refuse food, so: [we] eat in silence'. Gabriel can see the devil kneading the bread, even when transfigured into a humanitarian agency. Even so, you cannot refuse the food it distributes, you can only attempt to warn other people, unmask the appearance that now guarantees you thanks and praise. Gratitude like that of the organisation where Juliana and other women work, in which a boat made of cardboard, which represents them, retains the Global Food Fund of that very agency as a support stage in their approach. But, as Francisco has already said, 'the food has no taste'. 'And it's food that doesn't nourish children' added another companion who was present during our conversation one day. The tasteless food that does not nourish, the food of those who poisoned the food is also an agent of terror. 'Things become agents of terror' states Taussig (1986:6); sometimes because we do not know where they come from, sometimes even when this is known, they cannot be refused despite their malignant potential. Just as distrust concerning their nature or origin cannot always be expressed, and all that remains is to 'eat in silence' like Gabriel had to.

Reports of disparate processes of memory that, at different times, have attempted to characterise and describe the so-called 'Colombian internal conflict' indicate that one of the reasons for the rupture in the social fabric is distrust. Analyses expose practices like the infiltration of spies inside armed groups, especially among the guerrillas, but also inside unions, political organisations, student organisations, cultural organisations, and so on. Thus, the presence of infiltrators is not restricted to places of political discussion or moments of planning tactical operations by armed groups, but had extended to the daily life of small municipalities, poor neighbourhoods in cities, universities and union headquarters, marches and events, collective celebrations. Combatants occasionally 'switched sides', taking and selling important information to the opposite side. The reports also described how members of the same family group formed part of enemy militias, especially in impoverished regions where participation in armed groups was not only a source of income and prestige, but of anticipatory defence against their own exile and that of relatives.

The image of *Operación Orión* became famous: hooded men wearing armed forces uniforms, with no identification, pointing out the houses and people who

13 | *Plan Colombia* was the short name used to popularise the controversial agreement between the governments of the United States and Colombia called *Plan para la Paz y el Fortalecimiento del Estado* [Plan for Peace and Strengthening of the State], approved in 2000. The agreement announced the fight against drug trafficking as one of its objectives, and one of the strategies used was the intensification of aerial spraying of crops with glyphosate. Fumigation with the chemical agent was responsible for serious health problems, the destruction of ecosystems, the poisoning of land and rivers and, consequently, forced displacement. It is this context that Gabriel refers to in his account.

should be taken away (CNRR – Grupo de Memória Histórica, 2011). Examples of this multiplied throughout the country. Former neighbours, sometimes without hoods, also pointed out suspects or those previously convicted, who were then caught by the army, the police or paramilitaries, when they were not killed on the spot. The guerrillas left posters on some bodies that warned of the reason for their deaths: *un soplón* [a snitch]. Mariane Ferme (2018) described this ambivalent character in the actions of armies, agencies and governments during the war in Sierra Leone, and the post-war period. The author mobilises the figures of *Sobel* (a soldier who is simultaneously a rebel) and Rebel Cross (a combination of rebel and Red Cross) as a production of the national imagination to encapsulate the rumours and suspicions of populations regarding the dual role of the humanitarian organisation and the official army in war (Ferme, 2018, p. 78-89). Linguistic creation expresses people's difficulty in differentiating the agents and agencies of war and peace, of terror and humanitarianism, and even the before and after of armed conflicts.

I agree with the explanation that the practices described in the official reports produce distrust and rupture the ties of social solidarity. However, following Ferme (2018), I disagree with the view of certain institutional readings of the conflict that suggest that there are discrete units, like the state, civil society, armed actors, and humanitarian agencies, with clearly differentiated limits, contours and functions. According to this argument, which is supported by some academic works, the groups that are usually called 'violent' are those that attack civil society or the state, while the state has to defend itself against enemies, which unfortunately produces collateral damage along the way; or, as mentioned by Feldman in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, that contaminating practices that bring together legal state agents and illegal torture practices are merely the product of 'bad apples' (Feldman, 2003:240) in these institutions.

Such arguments reinforce the idea of the state's rationality and intrinsic goodness that are contrary to the madness and evil of war, but which precede them and which – as a promising, imaginative projection –, offer both a post-war future in which they are restored and the need for state action in the present to combat confusion and fight for its survival. Hence their classificatory angst, which 'forms part of the statistical apparatus of capture of the state and humanitarian business, erasing the possibility of perceiving other less evident marks of violence and other forms of suffering and death that are terribly similar to how they occur in "times of peace"' (Facundo, 2020), as Ferme has discussed. Inspired again by Taussig, I argue that this illusory rationality – and as part of the terror, hallucinatory – obscures 'our understanding of the way business can transform terror from a means to an end in itself' (Taussig, 1986:53).

In the case of exiled persons who have suffered persecution by the state, this ambivalence also manifests itself in the experience of succumbing to its irresistible

power, while simultaneously recognising the danger of doing so, as proposed by Das (2007:162). Just as Juliana and her family were afraid of registering in the refugee population databases and, consequently, being located by paramilitaries, refugees in Brazil expressed their fear when the Colombian government wanted to conduct a census of the victim population abroad, in 2016. In both cases, people wanted recognition derived from the law, but feared the effects that activating this legal dimension could trigger new persecutions, in some unknown form. This is a perception of things that is consistent with the oscillation between the rational mode and the magical mode in which the state acts. For Das, the authority of the state as a rational entity is present in the regulations incorporated in the law and in the institutions that implement it, but this power 'is brought into the framework of everyday life by the representation and performance of its rules in modes of rumour, gossip, mockery, and mimetic representation' (Das, 2007:162).

The fearful desire of Juliana and her exiled fellow countrymen highlights the fact that the state does not appear to them solely as a malignant, repressive force. It also holds a promise of future, of restoration, of welcome and kindness, in the name of which data are provided, stories are told, scars are displayed, tears are left to fall in desperate tiredness and abandonment. However, this belief in a kind quality of the state – embodied in programmes and policies of protection, recognition, memory production or social investment – and concomitantly in a malignant quality – that persecutes, criminalises and expels – reinforces the dulling of the senses characteristic of critical moments that, in the case of exile, entangle the space-time coordinates of existence.

Somehow, from the hands of the concrete people who distribute benefits, who register, stamp and determine who is a refugee or displaced person and who is a migrant, the information passes into the hands of agents who exile and torture. They are perceived as part of these poorly transparent forces that are necessary for performing the state's magic which restores this belonging to the nation, which delivers emergency kits, which makes lists of victims appear in the hands of perpetrators, and which transforms stolen lands into mining and energy enterprises. Indicators that the country is doing well, that the economy is growing, and that tourism, now booming, is evidence of the pacification of the nation.

The similarities in the way in which both qualities of the state operate are also a source of disquiet, particularly for people who suffered state persecution and subsequently activated processes of recognition of their displaced or refugee status. The mechanisms for demanding the truth through an interview/interrogation gain prominence in both cases. Information was demanded from people, about themselves, their loved ones, their relationships, their homes and offices, presenting the names of parties and organisations and colleagues, dates, addresses, details that proved that the story was true. This mechanism shared by the kind and malignant

qualities of the state provoked people's distrust. In these interviews/interrogations, belonging to the nation was at stake in either case, through loss due to displacement or exile, or through gain due to recognition as displaced persons or refugees. In both scenarios, suffering was administered to certify belonging to the community or to put this to the test.

'And what if they find out that you know so much about so many people?' one interlocutor asked me, simultaneously worried about my safety while leaving the malignant power in the air, which I had constructed over myself during the course of my doctoral research. Someone, perceived as a force with no fixed body, could end up knowing that I knew many things, and we do not know exactly how; we were also not sure what kind of things these might be. This suspicious proximity to those who 'help' but know too much forms part of the ghostly presence of the state and recalls Gabriel's reflection on USAID food or the figure of the 'humanitarian' transfigured into the 'soldier'. A mechanism of dullness and fear through transfiguration that this double manifestation of the state engenders in imaginations produced by terror. This is also a product of the uncertainty regarding who is who, and the impossibility of anticipating the origin of the danger.

It is not solely the excessive cruelty in chainsaw-based massacres that shapes and characterises state terror in contexts in which people are forced to reconstruct a place, to reconstruct a sense of home after violent experiences. If the metaphor is filmic, it is not only the terror of films of blood and carnage, but the terror that Ignácio Rodó's short *Tuck Me In*[14] (2014) knew how to encapsulate. In his short, a boy pleasantly lies in the cosy environment of a comfortable room and, as a nightly ritual, asks his father to look under the bed to check that there is nothing that could harm him. Responding to the request, the father looks under the bed and finds his son, frightened by the presence of someone who had taken his place and is lying in the bed.

I understand the proposal for a civic ethics, like that suggested by Jimeno (2010), and I share the idea that the recognition of suffering can create mechanisms for political dialogue and social healing. However, I believe that to understand some of the more elusive dimensions of the war in Colombia, we have to contemplate not only the abstract possibilities of building these emotional communities as a civic-political exercise, but also interrogating the everyday ways in which people reconstruct an idea of home and how they compete with others who have the potential to take their place and disrupt their physical, emotional, moral and spiritual meanings. The daily, concrete and difficult exercise of reconstruction is related to the size and intensity of the devastation. For some people, banishment and exile occurred with a profound narrowing of the time-space coordinates of existence, reaching not only geographical and political territories, but the corporal territory in its multiple individual, familial, physical, emotional, spiritual and psychic dimensions. Such intensi-

14 | Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYJBS28YLkA. Acesso em 30-12-2023

ty, which in part motivates the desire for distinction, also marks the differential effort and duration of reconstruction, not only of the important physical location that ensures the maintenance of life and dignity, but of a political and emotional place of enunciation.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this text, the people I met are very, very different. Their desires, their experiences of love, their professions, and youth or more experienced steps, their experience of racial marks, the forms and importance of their sexuality, their political exercise, the density and colours of life, demand from them unique exercises of reconstruction and depollution of themselves and their desired home, which must be examined carefully. At the same time, they share the experience of having various state institutions and exercises marking this vital process. Likewise, many of them share the desire to distinguish the forms, densities and experiences of pain. This desire, though sometimes expressed in the mimetic reproduction of the state's forms of classification, is not limited to the claim of being able to do it better than the state. I sense that this is a good part of it, but it is also about disputing the representation of the events and the actors that marked their existence and, to some extent, trying to reverse the mysterious, malignant amalgam that entangles the most accurate elements of life with the brutal agenda of destruction and that pollutes the intimate spaces of existence. These are endeavours to rebuild and clean up the home amid mechanisms of terror that change the image of things, of people, of agencies; and whose manifestation is possible not only due to the distrust engendered in war tactics and practices, but due to the ambiguous nature of the state itself which, even in 'times and spaces of peace', acts in a magical, ghostly and malignant manner.

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