

Testimonial narratives, truth commissions, and counter-pedagogies of violence in Colombia and Peru

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ABSTRACT

Truth Commissions (TCs) have become a vital instrument of global transitional justice, where testimonial narratives play a central role in truth-seeking and collective memory. While these processes contribute to the recognition of victims' experiences, the way TCs engage with testimonial narratives reveals significant limitations: trapping communities in cycles of re-telling, deploying reductive categories, and flattening the temporal complexities of violence. This paper argues that by exploring how local communities work with testimonial narratives, we can see alternative pedagogies of memory and violence that challenge these institutional constraints. Drawing on a local museum in Putumayo, Colombia, and the HIJXS de Perú collective (originally an acronym translated to 'Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice, against Oblivion and Silence'), we argue that these practices become powerful counter-pedagogies of violence that foster nuanced understandings through creativity, community-making, and new modes of re-existence.

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Introduction

Truth Commissions (TCs) have been the cornerstone of transitional justice processes since the mid-1980s, with testimonial narratives playing a central role in their truth-seeking and the construction of collective memory. This centrality has legitimised victims' experiences and fostered public acknowledgement of the effects of human rights violations. However, alongside their crucial purpose, TCs also produce a particular public pedagogy of violence, one that often reinforces cycles of harm, oversimplifies complex experiences, and neglects the long-term and structural dimensions of violence. This article, while sitting at the intersection of TCs and education, moves away from the traditional focus on how TCs are taught and learnt within the schooling system or national museums to explore an 'expansive' view of pedagogy (Paulson 2023). Here, pedagogy is understood as a set of teaching and learning relationships embedded in formal and informal sites that are educational as well as in broader social relations. This perspective provides a critical tool for examining practices of freedom, social meaning-making, reparative dimensions, and/or social contestation of power relations (Freire 2017; Giroux 2011). We critically examine said limitations of TCs in terms of what we call their resulting pedagogy of violence, and explore through two case studies how

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testimonial narratives can be reimagined as counter-pedagogies of violence that challenge such constraints.

In Latin America, TCs have been a primary strategy for accountability during and after transitions from dictatorships, in countries like Argentina and Brazil, or from internal armed conflicts, as in Guatemala and El Salvador. Yet, despite their importance, TCs often work with testimonial narratives in ways that fail to understand the multiple dimensions and interconnectedness of violence, as complex lived experiences are distilled into legible and established transitional justice categories. Drawing on Segato's (2018) concept of a 'pedagogy of violence', we see violence as a societal process through which hierarchies of power are normalised and learned in everyday life. By shifting our focus to these broader public pedagogies, we move to identify 'counter-pedagogies of violence' that challenge the lessons of cruelty and objectification characterising systemic violence.

We argue that by being rooted in the communal, testimonial narratives can be reimagined as counter-pedagogies of violence that move beyond the institutional boundaries of TCs. This grounding allows communities to continuously revisit and rewrite their narratives, offering new paths for creative social transformation. These pedagogical practices emphasise multiplicity, creativity, and the interconnectedness of past, present, and future, resulting in more nuanced understandings of violence that transcend the TCs' constraints. Here, we analyse two case studies: a local museum in Putumayo, Colombia, and the HIJXS collective in Peru. These initiatives exemplify alternative pedagogies grounded in local epistemologies that embrace complexity and long-term perspectives. Through their practices, they render visible the social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of violence. In doing so, they invite other communities, and their own, to engage with questions about the present and future by deploying multiple ways of knowing and building deep connections to counteract stigma and exclusion (Gill 2014).

Truth commissions as pedagogical institutions: the problem with the TC approach

Before exploring these counter-pedagogies of violence, we first unpack the institutional limitations they are pushing against. This section functions as a critical review of a dominant TC approach to testimonial narratives with examples from Colombia and Peru. To this end, we consider that TCs actively function as pedagogical institutions: by determining whose suffering is legible and what counts as harm, as well as how timelines are constructed, TCs 'learn' about violence in a particular way and end up 'teaching' the public specific, often reductive, 'lessons' about violence and victimhood.

While TCs are transformative milestones, they operate through extractive listening mechanisms that seek to move societies forward, which is evident in the recommendations of institutional political reforms and other initiatives, including memory policies (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2013). This institutional focus together with the political context generates particular ways of understanding violence that result in a series of limitations. For the purposes of this article, we elaborate on three specific limitations related to the use of testimonial narratives. First, TC processes contribute to keeping communities in cycles of re-telling, creating a sort of 'testimonial trap' thus restricting testimonial potential. Second, they can reify moral dichotomies, oversimplifying lived experiences of both individuals and collectives, and views on victims, perpetrators, and structural actors (Lawther 2018; Rudling 2019). Third, by focusing on events of violence, they run the risk of flattening the temporal dimensions of violence. By administering voices through highly specialised mechanisms of categorisation and mapping, TCs prioritise what their frameworks conceive as intelligible forms of violence: those anchored in physical harm to the body (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2023), while more systemic types of racialised and economic violence remain elusive (Evans 2016; Lambourne 2026; Nwogu 2010).

We examine these limitations through the existing literature on the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR, for its acronym in Spanish), two decades after its 2003 report was published, alongside the Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-

Repetition (CEV, for its acronym in Spanish), and its recently published report (2022). The temporal distance allows for a clearer assessment of unfulfilled expectations of the CVR, while for the CEV our observations remain more exploratory given its recent conclusion and ongoing dissemination.

The spiral of re-telling and the testimonial trap

The institutional logic of TCs often assumes that truth-telling is a self-evident path to closure. However, Hamber (2009) suggests that focusing strictly on the act of recounting can inadvertently trap communities in a spiral of re-living the past, making the future a redundant continuation of violent trauma. Castillejo-Cuéllar (2023) and Laplante and Theidon (2007) argue that this 'transitional promise of transformation' frequently falls short because it fails to change the structures of daily life experience for those scarred by historical injuries. Instead, transformative change is often deferred to a future liberal peacebuilding or development agenda, leaving survivors in a state of 'domesticated' pain where their experiences are rendered inaudible by the very workings of institutional language (Castillejo-Cuéllar 2013). This is visible in both countries; even Colombia's recent process signals similar frustrations regarding the 'exhaustion' of testimony.

The 'trap' was poignantly articulated during the 2022 dissemination of the CEV Final Report in Putumayo. A young woman, confronting a commission's team, remarked that while the report was good, her greatest fear was being forced to return in five or ten years to give the same testimony again because the underlying violence in her community had never actually ceased. For her, the CEV's narrative offered a 'closure' that felt like a recurring prologue to ongoing harm, illustrating how official truth-seeking can fail to contain the 'violence of everyday experience' that exceeds the boundaries of the institutional report.

The reification of the 'Innocent Victim' and the violence of categorisation

A second limitation lies in the institutional attempt to establish categories of victims and perpetrators. As scholars like Coxshall (2005) and Theidon (2010) argue, these neat dichotomies rarely conform to the complexities of lived experience during internal conflict. There is an institutional pressure to construct and reify the 'innocent victim', a subject whose suffering is rendered legible only when it remains depoliticised. Castillejo-Cuéllar (2023) notes that these 'technologies of transition' function as artefacts that consolidate vast amounts of information into a single corpus, often selecting fragments of testimony to fit a careful, consistent editing process that reinforces war-related silences.

Friedman (2017; 2018) further argues that the Peruvian CVR struggled to navigate the tensions between its various constituencies and eventually scaled down its inclusive platform to favour a survivor and accountability-centred agenda. This shift effectively prioritised pre-existent ideas of the 'innocent victim' while sidelining engagement with ex-combatants (and ways of understanding political violence from their protagonists), many of whom were victims of state violence and deep-seated socio-economic exclusion. By creating a hierarchy where only those considered 'innocent' are recognised as victims, the CVR failed to address the complexity of violence, the impunity of state violence, and the drivers of conflict that persist at the national and community level. This exclusionary categorisation is not merely a procedural oversight but a form of institutional erasure that prevents a truly restorative or transformative peace. It mirrors the editing of testimony to fit national meta-narratives where the state positions itself as the sole guarantor of peace (meaning security) while erasing its own historical role as a violent actor.

In Peru, this exclusion is evident in the treatment of former members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA)¹ and their children, as denounced by the HIJXS de Peru collective. Despite proven cases of state-sponsored torture or extrajudicial killings, legislation developed post-CVR refuses to recognise armed group members or their relatives as victims (Congreso de

la República del Perú 2005²; Salgado Olivera 2022). This institutionalised refusal of victimhood excludes these lived experiences from the category of ‘audible’ suffering, and from the protection of their rights. Their parents’ militancy acts as a permanent barrier to recognition, reinforcing the very hierarchies of suffering that fuelled the violence in the first place and creating an ‘identity trap’ for the next generation. Similar problems are emerging in Colombia’s Unidad de Víctimas, where the complexity of these ‘grey zones’ threatens to further marginalise those whose lives do not conform to the state-sanctioned moral narrative.

Flattening time: violence as discrete events

Finally, the institutional approach of the TCs collects testimonials with a clear beginning, middle, and end. This assumes experiences are linear and manageable in timelines. However, memory is ‘an amalgam of experiences and temporalities that are knotted and superimposed’ (del Pino 2021). Therefore, such a ‘categorical fragmentation’ of stories ignores their multiplicity and the complexity of the sociocultural contexts in which violence occurs (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). Furthermore, as scholars of memory and violence have argued (Das 2007; Hirsch 2008; Jelin 2017), narratives of violence and trauma traverse past, present, and future simultaneously, so institutional simplifications actively limit a comprehensive understanding of violence and its enduring legacies. Crucial to this critique is Rivera Cusicanqui’s concept of ‘*memoria larga*’ (long memory) (2010), which reveals a type of deep historical consciousness connecting contemporary violence to colonial roots, a continuity of dispossession often ignored by institutional post-conflict (or post-agreement) frameworks. Similarly, Castillejo-Cuéllar (2023) reflects that violence, such as a Colombian woman’s lifelong experience of dispossession and displacement, cannot be represented in a single event on a timeline. Instead, it is violence as a ‘slow process’ rooted in historical racism and colonial mappings that continue into the present.

Conceptual framework: testimonial narratives, public pedagogy and counter-pedagogy of violence

Among the multiple angles from which TCs and their relevance have been studied, those related to the intersections between education and TCs are of particular relevance for this article. Such studies can be about TCs’ work *on* education or TCs’ work *with* education (Bellino, Paulson, and Worden 2017; Paulson and Bellino 2017), as well as studies on new pedagogical approaches and the proliferation of activities seeking to integrate elements of reparation and justice into education, notable examples are the Education Justice and Memory Network (EdJAM 2020) or more recently the pedagogical section of the CEV platform (CEV 2022).

Public pedagogies and the pedagogy of violence

The concept of pedagogy beyond the conventional and school-based definition pays attention to how learning and teaching occur in diverse spaces beyond formal educational institutions (Foley 1999; Novelli 2010). This understanding is rooted in the tradition of critical pedagogy, which, as championed by Paulo Freire, examines how education can either perpetuate or challenge relations of power and oppression. Building on this, Giroux (2011) points out that pedagogy has a public dimension. Learning is not confined to classrooms, but it is a ubiquitous feature of all social relations and institutional domains, from media to political discourse, where citizens make sense of their relationship with the state and society. But hegemonic ways of understanding those relationships need unpacking and challenging. Paulson (2023) notes that public spaces such as museums, community centres, and artistic performances are sites where active pedagogical practices around memory are enacted. They circulate knowledge about marginalised experiences, silenced voices, and alternative ways of making sense of the social world. Only rarely, however,

do institutionalised accounts of violence provide a sense of the intricate connections between communities and armed actors, or inter/intracommunal conflicts and their developments in light of survival, institutional absences or responsibilities. There are ways of working with testimonial narratives that have the potential to contest dominant versions of the past where underprivileged groups have been portrayed with stigmatising connotations. Within this understanding, we view TCs not merely as judicial or historical bodies but as powerful pedagogical sites that actively shape public understandings of violence.

By drawing together Freire's foundations of critical pedagogy, Giroux's public pedagogy dimension, and Paulson's pedagogical practices of memory sites, we trace approaches to learning (and teaching) as a socio-political phenomenon enmeshed in relations of power and violence. Building on this expansive understanding of pedagogy, we adopt and adapt Segato's (2018) concept of a 'pedagogy of cruelty'.

While Segato's original formulation focuses on cruelty to highlight the ultimate objectification of life, we employ the broader concept of 'pedagogy of violence' to encompass the wider spectrum of these dynamics. Within this perspective, violence is not merely a series of discrete acts but a societal process through which norms, values, and hierarchies of power are learned and enacted. Such pedagogy operates in both public and private spheres, shaping how individuals, communities, and institutions understand, rationalise, accept, and reproduce violence in their daily lives. This includes institutions which are designed to counter or address violence. Crucially, violence, particularly against feminised and marginalised bodies, functions as a public spectacle with a 'central lesson' that 'teach[es], habituate[s], and programme[s] subjects to transmute life into objects' in a process that actively forges our ways of living 'in this age of ownership and mastery' (Segato 2018, 11). We focus on the pedagogical dimension here to explain that the ways in which violence is learned and enacted inevitably permeate the forms of explaining it. Segato's work highlights how state violence and extrajudicial executions against poor, non-white bodies become normalised, demonstrating that violence is not merely a consequence of conflict but a deliberate, normalised form of social control. Such normalisation can lead to preconceived ways of (mis)understanding violence and its intricacies. Therefore, a pedagogical move that counters a pedagogy of violence, one that allows for complexity and the erosion of imposed silences, is essential to unpacking histories of violence and their legacies, and prompting alternative ways of making sense of relationships with communities, the state and society.

This is particularly relevant in the Peruvian and Colombian TCs as we have briefly accounted for in the previous section. In Peru, the state continues to enforce a binary of 'innocent victims' versus terrorists through post-CVR legislation that actively excludes and silences armed militants. In Colombia, the CEV mandate unfolded alongside state-sponsored extractivism and everyday violence in regions like Putumayo. These concrete realities reveal a fundamental tension: how can a state-sanctioned institution effectively challenge the very 'lessons' the state itself embodies and continues to teach about violence? (Gómez Correal 2024) And how can the pursuit of truth escape binaries and adopt complex ways of thinking about violence? Our case studies show how counter-pedagogies of violence create alternative avenues through which such tensions can be dealt with when working with testimonial narratives.

Testimonial narratives' dual nature and potential as counter-pedagogies of violence

Testimonial narratives have a dual nature. They can be harnessed for reductive purposes within institutional frameworks or, alternatively, for transformative social change. Within the framework of transitional justice, testimonial narratives are primarily treated as evidence to establish facts, timelines, and legal accountability (Hayner 2001). They serve as the raw material for the truth-seeking mission, often catalogued and archived in formal, written reports, which is a vital function that validates victims' experiences and provides a public record. However, we argue that this is a limited and often reductive use of testimonial narratives.

Testimonial narratives are not static accounts of the past but dynamic, creative, and relational acts with profound pedagogical potential. The work of scholars such as Riaño Alcalá and Uribe (2016) and Gómez Correal (2024) has demonstrated that these narratives operate beyond the judicial, revealing that memory is not confined to written documents; instead, it is 'profound', inscribed 'in place and body' and a mobilising force communicated through 'informal, nonverbal and embodied ways' like poetry, cookery, and songs (Brown et al. 2023; MEMPAZ 2019; Wilson 2020). Concepts such as 'living archives' and 'emplaced witnessing' challenge the 'categorical fragmentation' of official records and provide an alternative, culturally sensitive means of documentation in settings of chronic insecurity (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). Similarly, Gómez Correal, Bueno-Hansen, and Mantilla Falcón (2023) highlight how these narratives can be a tool for 'collective reparations' and 're-storying' as a form of feminist and decolonial knowledge production.

While we acknowledge the importance of TCs, we argue that community-based initiatives that work with testimonial narratives differently constitute forms of counter-pedagogies of violence that provide a rich soil for memory work that challenges and contests dominant accounts and understandings of violence, dismantles stigmatisation, and opens discussions about national and local responsibilities and implications. These processes do not oppose but rather unfold separately (with only brief contact moments) to address challenges emerging when dealing with accounts of violence. Thus, to move in a better direction means opening to other forms of truth-telling that embrace diversity and move beyond a restrictive view of violence and political determinisms. It is within this broader pedagogical potential that we place the contribution of our case studies, exploring how testimonial narratives can become powerful tools for social change.

Navigating the field: a reflexive account

This article is the result of a series of conversations about our ethnographic experience and the sticky dilemmas surrounding transitional justice efforts over time, especially dynamic notions of memory and its scope, and their frictions with initiatives like the TCs. Rather than a traditional comparison, we developed a transversal dialogue about the two distinct fieldwork sites. We interrogated notions of memory from an institutional standpoint as well as the work of communities and victims of state violence over time, both in Peru and Colombia.

The first site is Putumayo, Colombia. This ethnographic journey took place in 2019 and 2024. I [Paez] obtained ethical approval as part of my PhD and a HEQR funding seed, respectively. I focused on peacebuilding initiatives in formal and informal education, which led me to explore the local museum of memory. This local initiative started before the CEV and received sporadic support from state funding and international NGOs. I had access to a wider network of education agents and social leaders, including men, women, young people, and children. I engaged with 15 education agents from the local library and the museum. This involved participant observation, interviews/conversations and activities with 8 library members and 7 volunteers at the museum. The conversational exchanges lasted between 30 and 45 min, and Spanish was the language used. Conversations/interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Consent was always sought early in the interaction. At the museum, artefacts and poems were photographed and talked through by the museum members. This facilitated the interpretation of the artefacts and the narratives embedded in the museum. As a Colombian national and researcher, my positionality was that of a learner researcher. This allowed me to interact with community members and have conversations about their experiences. I have built trust with this community through my engagement over a period of five years since 2019. Since then, I have visited Putumayo on two more occasions to follow up on my research and work on other projects.

The second site relates to Peru, where I [Wilson Vásquez] conducted a personal, decade-long longitudinal ethnography (2007–2016) tracing the lived experiences of 15 young adults from the HIJXS de Perú collective.³ Formed in Cuba in 2005, just two years after the Peruvian CVR final report, these scholarship students shared the stigma, state repression, and forced silences related

to their parents' former militancy in the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA). The research, which later became part of my doctoral studies at the University of Bristol, unfolded in two phases. An initial six-month phase in Cuba (2007) yielded 40 h of recorded, Spanish-language conversations (between two and four hours each) with the original cohort. During a follow-up phase in Peru (2012–2013) to 'revisit' these recordings, our methods shifted to unstructured, activity-led interactions ('doing and being-in-place') to navigate safety risks and accommodate their lives, alongside ongoing digital communications until 2016. Ultimately, six core testimonial narratives were selected for the research to ensure participant safety and ongoing consent. All interactions upheld a dual ethical framework: protocols co-designed with the HIJXS in 2007, and my 2010 university ethics approval. My positionality as the daughter of political exiles fostered a collaborative standpoint beyond the extractive logic of traditional research; I slowly became part of the same collective I was researching, and the participants, turned protagonists, became co-researchers.

We, the authors of this article, acknowledge the substantial differences and asymmetry between our two cases. One study concerns a locally situated museum and its associated educational actors over a five-year period. The other concerns a mobile, relational collective linked by familial ties to an armed organisation, researched through face-to-face and digital interactions over a decade. Because of this asymmetry, we do not treat these sites as directly equivalent units of analysis. Rather than comparing the organisations themselves, our transversal dialogue compares the underlying memory practices, testimonial processes, and community responses to institutional histories. To move from these differently structured field engagements to our principal analytical claims, we bridged these two sites through iterative, dialogic engagements rather than traditional cross-case triangulation. We returned to our field notes and interviews, reviewing each other's primary interpretations to generate the shared metathemes that cut across both contexts (Wutich 2021). By focusing on the content of the stories, how people positioned themselves, and their use of storytelling to (re)construct meaning, our dialogic process directly identified threads detailed in the next section. We also paid attention to where stories differed based on local histories, institutional settings, and the available scripts in each place (Riessman 2008), ultimately highlighting the ways localised memory-work often resists the boundaries and categories of official reports.

Weaving the threads

Through this dialogue, we identified shared conceptual threads that cut across both cases, which we wove together as: the ownership of creative testimonial narratives, the re-membering of community, the shifting temporalities of memory, and the complex frictions with state institutions.

Creative and embodied forms of testimonial narratives

The process of constructing testimonial narratives with the HIJXS collective shows how memory-work can function as a transformative counter-pedagogy of violence. By moving beyond the rigid, evidentiary frameworks of TCs, this case study illuminates three key dimensions of memory as a creative and political practice: the relational struggle over meaning and identity, a poetics of memory that brings imagination as a response to violence, and a pedagogical power of the process itself.

Testimonial narratives in this context are characterised by a profound ambivalence and complexity. While they serve as essential tools for countering the silencing effects of dominant state discourses, they also carry the inherent risk of reproducing the very violence they seek to denounce. Testimonial narratives are therefore understood not as a static, 'realist' record of the past, but as a dynamic and relational act. The struggles over memory, which Jelin (2012) identifies in the public sphere, also occur within the internal lives of individuals as they attempt to make sense of silenced childhood experiences and fractured family histories. This meaning-making exercise is

fundamentally relational; it requires both a safe context and the presence of others to transform a violent past into a sense-making narrative of the present.

A critical dimension of this counter-pedagogy is the integration of imagination and creativity into the testimonial process as a response to the violence of loss and erasure. Their memory-work cannot be only anchored in material facts or discrete events of violence, as the state's repressive actions and their experiences as children living under the (semi)clandestine lives of their parents often created 'difficult knowledges' (such as the unmarked location of a father's grave).

Iris, one of the HIJXS protagonists, grew up with several unanswered (and even unformulated) questions about her father, who was killed when she was a young child. In the face of such absence, she relied on her dreams to create memories, recalling how she dreamt with him throughout her childhood, particularly his return and the impossibility of seeing his face. Later in life, she actively deployed creative writing to rewrite his death, explicitly crafting a story about his final moments based on some newly acquired fragments of knowledge and emotional truths: 'This is the story I wanted to write; it is not what I THINK/BELIEVE that my father felt in his last minutes of life but instead it is what I WANT him to have thought'. (Wilson Vásquez 2025, 120). And from there, by travelling to the rural highlands where he died, she engaged in spatial memory practices that allowed her to forge new connections and 'create memories of her own with a father she did not remember before' (121).

In these 'labyrinths of memory', dreams and imagined conversations become constitutive elements of their testimonial narratives, allowing them to address the enduring effects of violent absence and stigma. This movement into the poetics of memory enables the shift from a truth-seeking mission designed for public institutional consumption to a practice of 're-storying' that serves the emotional and political needs of the protagonists themselves (Wilson Vásquez 2025).

In the case of the memory museum in Putumayo, an abandoned school now serves as a space to remember the conflict, reflect and deliver a message of change. At the entrance, the wall facing the main road has a message that reads, 'Making memory is the path to non-repetition'. This local museum has three main rooms addressing the past, present and future of the community. It shows a wide variety of artefacts, posters, photographs, and didactic messages. However, it exceeds this single-topic issue and focuses on the territory, its people and the collaborative endeavours of the community to move forward despite the conflict and its legacy. This moves beyond the factual evidence and fixed categories of victims and perpetrators, embracing diverse forms of constructing meaning. For example, poetry, mural paintings depicting state violence (e.g. fumigation with glyphosate), photographs, themes and space organisations attest to a multiplicity of ways in which fact and meaning interact in safe environments that escape the rigidities of persistent political conflicts (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011):

Juan Guerrero, my family and I,
On a journey from afar, got here
From Nariño to Putumayo
And we founded El Placer
Putumayo is a majestic jungle
Beautifully rich nature
Where jaguars, serpents and Macaws
live by the fast-flowing river
(Poem on display, my translation)

Here, too, poetry becomes a creative way to re-story past events that go beyond institutionalised accounts of the conflict. Local museums like this contain nuanced histories of violence, from everyday life to conflict with armed groups, and from the rich natural scenery to collective endeavours. For example, internal migration is a fundamental element of the ethnic makeup of Putumayo. Nevertheless, internal colonisation, economic activities and the conflict itself have been detrimental to wildlife and natural resources conservation. The killing [*la matanza*] is one of the factors that have influenced the sociocultural conditions of the region, but there is more to this. In the museum,

we find creative examples of testimonial narratives that offer intertwined personal, political and social realities at once (Rodríguez-Campo 2021; Wilson Vásquez 2025).

Re-membering the community

There is a wide variety of topics on display at the museum. Poems describe a past connected to the experience of *colonos*, their encounter with local communities and their settlement process. The exuberant nature of the region is a protagonist in the stanzas and the themes of the museum rooms. Whereas official accounts are interested in describing the conflict, the causes and its periods (CNMH 2019), the museum curates its artefacts and organises themes that recount the collective experiences of inhabitants before, during and after the conflict—or post-agreement. Such individual and collective arrangements allow the public to understand localised nuances and particularities of the region, e.g. family portraits, individual pictures, images of gatherings—*mingas*—, and messages from inhabitants. A poster shows a member of the community, Campo Elias, whose message reads, ‘You should learn to walk, you should learn a bit more’. This is a fundamental opposition to the easy money logic brought by the quick profitability of coca crops. In the region, lack of infrastructure makes agriculture a difficult and slow economic activity (Paez 2023). It opposes dominant views on fast economic growth at any cost and recognises the value of learning and working (with others), which intends to contribute to the moral improvement of the spectator (Fischer-Lichte 2018).

We want to show people that we are not stuck in the past, in the pain and the conflict. We are resilient and we want to move forward because our territory is a space of peace and progress, full of fertile lands. We have people who work in livestock farming, others work in agriculture growing cacao, pepper ... So we want to show that in this room, that we are resilient people full of courage. (Community leader, interview 1, 2024)

The curation of artefacts goes beyond a single issue or a timeline and traverses a wide range of topics. The theme ‘past-present-future’ is more a metaphorical device than a chronological commitment. The territory is a recurring element in three rooms; sometimes as a victim, other times as a source of life. Rocks with labels providing information about the region’s geological formation are on display, which serve a continuation of the landscape rather than an encyclopaedic task. Everyday objects that recount routines in the private and public sphere of the community appear inadvertently. Visitors encounter typewriters, old telephones, gas cylinders, and images of the first community leaders as well as numerous images of hands holding grains, pepper, cocoa, and other fruits. A message reads, ‘our hands build, our hands cultivate peace and reap wealth’. This display invites the spectator to see relational and community processes that exceed and overcome the stories of violence sustained by national media outlets and ingrained in the nation’s imaginaries. Here, too, reflection is present:

This museum seeks to tell our stories. We’ve had good and bad times, so those who do not know [about this] will learn and reflect ... In the past, there was money but there was suffering too (...) So, if people say, “This is a territory for coca production” Well, yes, but coca has brought up good and bad things, so we should know that where there is coca there is suffering too. (Community leader, interview 2, 2024)

Female community leaders’ poems tell their stories of the conflict; their stanzas denounce injustice and structural violence and envisage ways to overcome the impact of the war. While the CEV provided a platform to recount (and hopefully interrogate) violent events and their perpetrators in the pursuit of justice, local spaces like museums of memory contain and produce narratives that are collectively gathered, negotiated, re-shaped, and updated. This allows reconceptualisations of the events, decisions about what to remember and what to forget, making room for possibilities of moving forward, overcoming victimhood, and exploring forms of peacebuilding:

Here we are, organised women!

We are to change our region,

And imprint that change in history

For the world to share this vision

(Poem on display, my translation)

A close look at the rooms would reveal a striking contrast. The realm of poetry and creative expression remains feminine, whereas the exhibit of war memorabilia is predominantly masculine. But this is not to say male community leaders do not exist. Instead, these roles have been reinforced by the fact that mostly men (but not exclusively) have died in the conflict. Thus, male voices or their existence are reconstructed through survivors' female poetic expression or curated images. Some displays remember victims of massacres or praise the efforts of some male leaders in the foundation of the town – first *colonos*. Female-led testimonial narratives can also be found in national institutional processes, such as the collection of stories produced by the Centre for historical memory where women – not men – from Putumayo tell their experience of the war and the role of coca crops (CNMH 2012).

For the HIJXS collective, their testimonial narratives push back against enforced silences by deliberately complicating the history of the violence. Rather than accepting the state's narrative of 'terrorism' and senseless violence and criminality,⁴ they recontextualize their parents' political militancy by including in their accounts the structural injustices that drove their parents' actions. For example, they highlight the extreme poverty and systematic abuses their parents experienced, witnessed, and struggled against, thereby politicising their choices and the entangled socio-economic roots of the conflict. By taking ownership of their experiences and reclaiming their authorial voice, they openly negotiate space to make decisions regarding necessary silences and the political intentions of their narratives. The extract below shows how Miguel, one of the protagonists negotiates the tensions that arose between the desire to 'break the silences' and the boundaries of the tellable. Even more, it shows an explicit decision regarding the direction of the narrative, and an awareness of how their testimonial narratives could be used against them.

Miguel at 20

Havana, Cuba, 2007

I'm going to tell you my story, but some things I cannot talk about, because it's not my story, you know ... it's my parents', and many more. I can talk about my dad; he's public ... imprisoned ... but not Elena. You learn these things but now it's weird, because WE want to tell our stories but we can't tell everything. It's not safe ... and it's not about me. I don't know.

It's hard ... if you want to hear about me, still I won't tell you the bad parts. I mean not how it has affected me personally. I don't want to talk about that; I don't want to give them something so they can say I am damaged because my parents were in the MRTA.⁵ (Wilson Vásquez 2025, 131)

By treating research participants as protagonists and collaborators in this research, we created a space for 're-storying' lives fractured by war. This positioned them as active co-producers of knowledge who directly reviewed, contested, and shaped the interpretations. As a result, central to the process of constructing testimonial narratives was reclaiming the agency to name oneself in the face of institutional erasure and limited spaces to understand the legacies of violence and the inheritance of stigma.

Furthermore, their collective memory-work actively re-members the community by connecting individuals through their parents' lives and their own shared experiences. They manage this by centring life, affection, and resilience rather than violence and trauma alone. First, they explicitly include stories of how their family lives in the midst of war were highly affective, forging strong bonds through the hardships of their (semi)clandestine lives, and holding conversations about love, hope, ideals, and family that transcended mere politics. Second, through the shared hardships of navigating the maximum-security penal system and visiting their imprisoned relatives, the families of MRTA militants built solidarity networks, effectively becoming an extended family. They focus on the joy found in their survival and the importance of being there for each other as a political and affective collective.

Temporalities of violence and memory

The longitudinal nature of the HIJXS de Perú ethnographic inquiry reveals that testimonial narratives are not static records frozen in time, but highly unstable and dependent on their spatial, cultural, and temporal contexts. During the initial recordings in Cuba (2007), the narratives were shaped by a supportive environment where words like ‘armed struggle’ and ‘revolution’ carried heroic meanings. This distance from Peru produced accounts filled with urgency and focused on denouncing state repression and reclaiming their parents’ political lives.

However, when we ‘revisited’ the recordings with the protagonists back in Peru (2012; 2013), they and their narratives had changed. Returning to the Peruvian landscape and re-searching for their own histories through their relatives’ lives exposed the collective to multiple co-existing experiences of violence. Some silenced, some hushed, but all living in a temporality of ‘unfinished pasts’ (Rojas-Perez 2013), where the violence of the war continues actively through political stigmatisation, state surveillance, and anti-terrorist legislation. This proximity to the ongoing consequences of the conflict altered their previous certainties and vocabularies for their own experiences, expanding their understanding and forcing them to re-evaluate their previous framings of their own testimonial narratives.

Iris at 25

Cusco, Peru, 2013

I fantasized with that; perhaps I was a bit too idealistic, but that’s what I wanted to be, like my dad and like my mom, you know ... that mix of commitment and adventure. But once I came here, the wound opened. [...] Since I found him here [the father’s grave], the wound opened.

And I thought that after all that we lived, after all that suffering, after all that pain ... a pain that didn’t happen only to me, or only to us, but a pain that happened to many, many people, many people ... and I think we’re still living it even today, because this isn’t over, it doesn’t end. How it affects us and those around us, how it goes on, like domino pieces falling one after the other ... and that, in many, many lives, is what happened to the country. (Wilson Vásquez 2025, 119)

These shifting narratives also revealed silences and secrets that are continuously renegotiated over time. The act of narrating across different times and spaces allowed the HIJXS to explore the ongoing impacts of violence in their present lives, rather than treating them merely as a childhood memory. As they moved through these different realities, they remembered new details and developed more nuanced, complex understandings of the violence, allowing their lives and those of others to continuously leak into and reshape their testimonial narratives.

The work of the museum of memory is the result of collective efforts in the community. Story-telling seeks to make sense of both past and current socio-political challenges faced in the region. However, the displays show nuanced stories of the conflict and diverge from a single-issue or strict temporalities, traversing other spheres of the community, their environment and collective understandings and desires. They want to change their region and their history, which opens a pedagogical praxis where spectators are invited to embody their local knowledge and act as change agents. This form of testimonial narrative works as counter-stories by not abandoning the conflict but living with it, and despite it (Andrews 2002).

Another pedagogical alternative is a library within the museum. This collective endeavour forms part of a wider network coordinated by the central library in town (the urban centre), whose work has been a recognised local and national peacebuilding referent (Paez 2026). It relies on the work of a librarian and volunteers who work on different initiatives:

“We do activities with parents, we do handcrafts with mothers. There are also activities in other nearby towns with the travel bag (full of activities)” We encourage children to express their views. Not like in the past, where we would only talk about violence, but now it is more than that. (Library museum volunteer, interview 4).

This gives birth to new ways of making sense of the region and the country’s historical and political challenges. By decentring the conflict, children and adults participate in relational spaces where

they explore their interests and listen to each other. This contributes to community-building beyond the trammels of the conflict.

Relationships with state institutions

Rather than a simplifying binary perspective of Peru and Colombia, the juxtaposition reveals that the spectrum of frictions between the state and the communities is complex. Nowhere is this clearer than in the hope of communities and groups in the action of the state.

The HIJXS collective remains invested in some form of acknowledgement from the state, to redress years of stigmatisation and targeted violence, even when their relationship is defined by profound friction. The collective has been grappling with a democratic transition they consider 'fraught' or even 'failed', as their experiences of growing up were tied to their parents' political history, which meant carrying the stigma of being labelled the 'children of terrorists'. Their testimonial memory-work was marked by navigating between two heavy narratives, the official discourse of 'terrorists' and a counter-narrative of 'revolutionaries'.

From their perspective, the state remains the architect of their marginalisation and stigmatisation, as well as an agent of the violence against their families. For example, the post-CVR legislation for the creation of the Victims Register Unit specifically excluded armed group members and their relatives from the official category of 'victim' (even in instances of state-sponsored torture or extrajudicial killings). Post-transition governments have continued to enforce anti-terrorist laws that make it extremely difficult to seek justice for the crimes against their relatives. Despite long-standing forms of violence and the mobilisation of a politics of fear, individuals in the collective engage in legal and political battles for state recognition. This ambivalence can be seen in Rafael's story, one of the HIJXS protagonists, whose father was killed under torture while in police detention. The case was included in the CVR and then added to the Register, only to be later removed due to the father's militancy (Salgado Olivera 2022). Ultimately, their activism represents an ongoing struggle for recognition within the very framework that seeks to exclude them. Their demand for justice and representation simultaneously challenge the state's continued violence, showing that memory work from marginalised communities is deeply relational and invested in transforming the state rather than ignoring it.

Communities in Putumayo, on their part, also know the state as bearing responsibility for the violence in their region. Nevertheless, in the case of Colombia, these complications are all the more nuanced; the CEV operated on the basis of the collection of testimonials, but other institutions have provided support even before the CEV. The organised work of some communities (museums, testimonials, and memory projects) has been the result of a mix of local groups and state entities that provide sporadic financial support. It is this tension that explains both the challenge to, and the hope in the state (Gómez Correal 2022). The state is viewed as a potential supporter who should take responsibility in the form of reparations. However, their hopeful practices are for a non-violent and responsive state, a (yet) non-existent one.

The relationship between the State and Putumayo has been marked by neglect and an extractive approach. The region has been exploited, but its inhabitants have not benefited, remaining marginalised. This has created social and economic pressures, capitalised on by illegal groups. Thus, coca crops became a fast alternative to economic income, creating a culture of illicit economies and excess. Massacres, armed confrontations, and fights over territorial control became part and parcel of everyday life in these communities (Sánchez Meertens 2017). Such configurations reinforce modes of existence where violence, exclusion and self-interest are the core values. An ethos of violence has been installed in the public and private spheres, altering the views on the community, gender relations, education, family and social ties (Segato 2018). However, such depictions constitute a partial picture of Putumayo, its peoples and lives.

The museum of memory has been part of the community before the CEV started. This has allowed the community to communicate with each other and others. As it reads at the museum

entrance, their work has been supported –although sporadically– by the Centre for Historical Memory and international NGOs. The relationship with the CEV has been somewhat problematic for several reasons; first, there has been mistrust on the part of the community based on their previous experience with the Centre for Historical Memory⁶ where women expected remuneration for telling their stories, which was not within the institutional remit. Second, some participants in the CEV process reported relationships based on hierarchies, where the community's long experience on memory work was dismissed. Third, truth-telling has over time become a repetitive process at the expense of participants' wellbeing, particularly women. Ongoing everyday experiences of violence in the Putumayo could be contained in the report and rather exceed it. Localised Museums, on the other hand, by being rooted in the communities that keep them alive, have the possibility of re-editing and re-constructing alternative histories of violence, adding what has been previously excluded, re-interpreting past events according to more recent developments.

Tightening the threads

TCs do much needed and valuable work, which facilitates legal mechanisms to consolidate stable paths to truth and reparation. However, TCs do not always account for the complexities of violence or the multiple dimensions of conflicts experienced by communities and individuals. Therefore, the work outside the reports offers valuable lessons. Nowhere is this clearer than in the two cases examined here. The ways in which HIJXS and the Museum of Memory tell their stories reveal rich meaning-making processes, negotiations, tensions and new directions in the act of (re)telling, which can complement accounts of violence from an institutional standpoint. In both cases, (re)telling stands for nothing less than an opening to possibilities. We encounter processes of personal and collective voices historically marginalised, making sense of their oppression (Rodriguez-Campo 2021) and contesting the legacy of the conflict. The act of (re)telling happens within communities and groups experiencing similar conflicts, without homogenising the stories. The juxtaposition of events, experiences, personal histories, descriptions of everyday life and geographies reveals that violence is a part, not the whole. Thus, re(telling) resorts to imagination and creative strategies to resist becoming a single being or story. This is too powerful and radical a choice taking place in relational spaces and has a pedagogical dimension – these acts provide learning experiences for the community and the spectators, readers, or visitors.

Testimonial narratives constitute forms of counter-histories that challenge dominant and institutional accounts of communities and geographies (Andrews 2002; Anzaldúa 1987). HIJXS tell their stories and reveal struggles, anxieties, creative responses, and understandings of violence that institutional accounts have been unable to grasp. They also serve as mechanisms to (re)interpret violence, (re)define their evolving identities, and take responsibility as individuals and as communities. What is more, testimonial narratives operate under the banner of playful temporalities, decentring violence and allowing labyrinthine connections to occur. The local museum contains nuanced understandings and ethical positions that reveal individual and collective consciousness, serving as counter-pedagogies of violence, offering valuable learnings about communities, their struggle, and their efforts during and after violent episodes.

The creative processes of these communities reveal that authorship plays a fundamental role. These community processes allow them to (re)create and circulate their narratives through curated artefacts, poetry, creative writing, and their changing interpretations of the entanglements of present-past-future. Of course, there are some ambiguities at work. We have encountered tensions revealed by the up and down movements of human experiences. The museum has had disagreements over the artefacts and the extent to which they promote reflection or hinder moving forward. Sometimes, some members of the community have been excluded from institutional processes, which in turn diminishes the legitimacy of the museum. For the HIJXS, tensions emerged about using and reclaiming the victim category, as well as the internal differences regarding their parents' militancy and role within the war. Such disagreements have changed their working mechanisms

leading to less collective actions and statements, and more individually driven actions that seek and receive collective support.

The Peruvian case allows for an in-depth exploration of the problematic effects and the unfulfilled expectations of the CVR more than two decades post-transition. The Colombian case remains somewhat speculative given the recent publication of the CEV report; while its actual effects will unfold in the coming years, we can use preceding lessons to anticipate the direction it is moving towards. A key strength in Colombia, however, is the enduring existence of local organisations with a larger trajectory, a force and sense of identity over time. There, the arrival of the TC came to be already connected with organised collectives, encountering communities with their own profound understandings of violence and testimonial work.

Conclusion

The work of TCs is undeniably conducive to forms of interpreting the conflict and seeking reparations for victims. The central role of testimonial narratives within TCs has its strengths and complications, which result in TCs not fully grasping nuanced understandings of the multiple dimensions of violence, its legacies, and the unfolding experiences of victims (Hayner 2001). Both Peru and Colombia offer lessons about the creative movements in local communities when faced with the task of (re)producing and circulating their testimonial narratives, enacting a counter-pedagogy of violence. The testimonial work of the HIJXS de Perú group and the Museum of Memory in Putumayo epitomise forms of (re)telling stories of conflict where violence is not at the centre. This implies the creation of alternative and complementary narratives that help communities make sense of their experiences and become agents/protagonists in the construction of their own identities and political possibilities.

By conceptualising these acts as ‘counter-pedagogies of violence’, this article offers an important contribution to the fields of transitional justice and education. The empirical insights from the Museum in Putumayo and the HIJXS collective reveal that such pedagogies actively re-story the past through embodied, relational and creative methodologies (e.g. poetry, spatial memory, and affective solidarity networks). The force of these counter-pedagogies stems from the conscious move from passive acceptance of institutional forms of understanding violence towards grounded collective and relational practices of meaning-making, community building, and historical change. This transformative shift hinges on the work of community leaders and volunteers in the case of Putumayo, Colombia, and the allies and networks around the HIJXS collective in Peru.

The pedagogical relevance of testimonial narratives lies in their radical openness. This openness is cultivated in relational spaces where participants produce and circulate collective views and understandings of their context, modes of existence and their relationship with the environment, the state, and particular historical processes, including violence. Such a process escapes institutional truth-seeking and collection mechanisms designed to guarantee reparations. The communities in Peru and Colombia reveal how experiences can embrace complexity, long-term perspectives, and non-violent modes of re-existence beyond and despite violent conflict (Escobar 2020). The case studies also show fluctuations and (dis)continuities with the state through different configurations of institutional relationships. Through their practices, they render visible the social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of violence, while also inviting communities to a sustained engagement with questions about the present and future. By deploying multiple ways of knowing and building deep connections that continuously re-create their communities and their histories, these initiatives expose the structural violence and challenge marginalisation, offering critical and creative pedagogies that open spaces for dialogue and social change. Local communities hold the potential for alternative forms of memory-work that, given more systematic support, can connect with others, scale up and contribute to multi-dimensional and ever-changing understandings of violence and the pedagogical paths required to overcome it.

Notes

1. The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA for its acronym in Spanish), was an insurgent group inspired by the Cuban Revolution and one of the two armed groups that declared a war against the Peruvian state in the early 1980s. Albeit much smaller in numbers, the MRTA presented itself as an alternative to the Peruvian Communist Party – Shining Path (PCP-SL for its acronym in Spanish) joining what will be named the Internal Armed Conflict (1980–2000) by Peru’s CVR. The MRTA was considered responsible for 1.5 per cent of the fatalities reported to the CVR. (CVR 2003, 320).
2. In 2005, Law 28592 established the Integral Reparations Plan (PIR for its acronym in Spanish) ‘for the victims of the violence that occurred during the period from May 1980 to November 2000, in accordance with the conclusions and recommendations of the CVR’s final report.’ Article 4, defines the exclusions ‘Members of subversive organisations are not considered victims and are therefore not beneficiaries of the programmes referred to in this Law.’ Author’s translation from the original, available at: www.gob.pe/institucion/congreso-de-la-republica/normas-legales/1496834-28592.
3. Inspired by the Argentinean collective, the Peruvian group adopted the acronym H.I.J.O.S. (Sons for Identity and Justice, Against Oblivion and Silence). To challenge the masculine default of the Spanish *hijos* (sons or children of) they used variations like *Hijos en Hijas* and *Hij@s*, ultimately settling on HIJXS. They all belong to the International Network of H.I.J.O.S. since its creation in 2010.
4. See La Serna (2020) on how state, media, society, and mainstream scholarship adopted the terrorist discourse and understudied the MRTA. For its impact on descendants of MRTA militants, see Wilson Vásquez (2025).
5. The text is one of the ‘postalitas’ from the research with the HIJXS group: pieces of creative writing based on the testimonial encounters over the years with the collective.
6. National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) is a national and public entity (including a museum) that promotes memory of the conflict, dignity of victims, and a culture of respect for human rights.

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