

The role of memory practices in building spiritual solidarity for survivors of state violence

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Abstract

This article examines memory as a tool for transnational solidarity that is grounded in spiritual connection with those who have been disappeared or killed by state actors in Colombia. Remembering is one of the ways people come together to push against mechanisms of state violence that render survivors as invisible. By interviewing 15 survivors of state violence in Colombia, this study shows how memory is a life force transmitting agency while simultaneously keeping survivors' memory alive through a network of spiritual solidarity. In this ethnographic research, I ask: How can memory, grounded in spiritual connection, be a form of transnational solidarity and a tool for healing and social justice? The findings offer a powerful definition of spiritual solidarity and show how it is done through memory practices by (1) using memory symbols in everyday actions to connect to loved ones, (2) keeping the memories of loved ones alive by "seeing" them in others and in their surroundings, (3) creating spaces for others to build a spiritual relationship with their own loved ones, and (4) making memory work life's purpose. This article concludes with a set of recommendations for how to conduct community psychology research in service of social justice movements.

KEYWORDS

community psychology, memory, social justice, spiritual solidarity, state violence

Highlights

- Spiritual solidarity is essential to understanding survivors' strength in the face of state violence.
- Transnational spiritual solidarity guides the way research is done with survivors of state violence.
- Memory practices keep the memory alive of those who have been forcibly disappeared or murdered.
- Survivors' memory practices build relationships of solidarity with loved ones no longer present.

INTRODUCTION: MEMORY AS TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUAL SOLIDARITY

La memoria tiene movilidad, tiene olor, tiene amor y tiene dolor, tiene vida pero depende de nosotras y nosotros los que quedamos. [Memory has movement, scent, love and pain, it has life but that depends on those of us who are left.]
 (Esmeralda, Survivor of State Crimes)

For survivors of state violence, memory is alive. The process of remembering is one that is embodied, nourished and transmitted with a life force. Remembering is one of the ways people come together to push against mechanisms of violence, a violence that produces silences that bury, erase, and render the victims and survivors of state violence as invisible. What does it mean for memory to be alive in a context of ongoing institutional injustices? How can memory, grounded in spiritual connection, be a form of transnational solidarity and a tool for healing and social justice?

This article examines memory as a tool for transnational solidarity and social justice that is grounded in spiritual connection with those who have been disappeared or killed by state actors. Memory practices such as the making of banners, booklets, performative skits, slogans, and songs, have long been used by survivors of state violence as a way to collectively respond to individual and social traumas. Through these practices, memory has become an organizing tool for articulating visions of social justice. An emblematic example of survivor-led collective memory practices to tackle injustices during times of violence and state silencing is that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. During weekly public gatherings, mothers denounced the disappearance of their children and demanded the Argentinian government be accountable in bringing their children back alive. Similarly, in Colombia, almost 30 years after the Argentinian mothers started their plight, a women-led group in the neighborhood of La Calendaria in Medellin began a weekly protest to shed light on their loved ones who had been forcibly disappeared. The group known as Las Madres de la Calendaria enacted practices of memory by using pictures and slogans that ask for their loved ones who were disappeared to safely return. These acts of remembering have served to commemorate the dead and to demand answers for the disappeared. These memory practices are clearly not constrained by geographic boundaries as they reveal themselves across the Americas including in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia (Esparza, 2006; Gomez et al., 2007; Gomez-Barris, 2008; Jelin, 1994; Sostaita, 2016) and in other regions in the global south such as Kenya and postapartheid South Africa where individuals and communities are grappling with inexplicable violence both past and present (Musila, 2020; Stevens, 2017). They also emerge in contexts of transitional justice and postconflict such as in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Byrne, 2004; Hamber, 1998), the Guatemalan Truth Commission (REMHI, 1999), and other contexts where memories of the past are contested and nation-states are challenged to integrate the testimonies of survivors of state violence. The driving force for memory to become a transnational tool to demand justice is connected by the suffering and grieving of those who have lost loved ones to state violence. Memory emerging from experiences of violence then becomes the process by which these transnational acts and connections are made (Ramos Gutierrez, 2020; Wüstenberg, 2019). Most importantly, people engaged in these transnational memory practices, as outlined in this article, talk about them as emerging out of the love that lies behind their suffering for who their loved ones were and what they could have become.

In this article I show how transnational solidarity, particularly understood as the practices and layered relationships stemming from the bottom-up, localized, grassroots initiatives of communities extending their claims for justice outside the purview and limitations of post-colonial notions of nation-states (Stites Mor, 2013), provides a framework in which the spiritual elements of

solidarity can be examined. For those who are no longer physically present, their life force through memory gives purpose to those who are left behind. Spiritual solidarity then is transmitted in the relationship between the living and the dead and/or disappeared, allowing for a more expansive understanding of what transnational solidarity can look like beyond relationships of support across borders and nations and as acts of love and justice that transcend time, materiality, and human/spirit dichotomies.

SURVIVORS OF STATE VIOLENCE EMBODIED MEMORIES: KEEPING MEMORIES ALIVE

Memory practices are positioned as embodied practices that not only keep the memory alive of those who have been forcibly disappeared or murdered but also as a primary tool by which survivors find meaning in their own lives and thus are able to maintain their own agency in the midst of grief, collective trauma, and ongoing violence (Vassallo, 2008). The experiences of 15 survivors of state violence from Colombia who have lost a relative to forced disappearance or murder, are at the heart of this study. Their trajectories with memory practices in a context of ongoing conflict were captured in an ethnographic study I conducted in 2011 (Escobar, 2013). By immersing myself in the everyday work of survivor-led organizations together with informal ethnographic interviews, I listened, talked with, and documented survivors' stories. Through the spiritual solidarity work they have done to support their demands for justice, I came to more deeply understand memory as a life force. Although these interviews took place a decade ago, their spiritual solidarity work continues. Testimonies of violence and resistance continue to take place today through monthly public denunciations and other ongoing commemorative practices. Despite the political steps that the Colombian government has taken toward transitioning to a supposed postconflict society, survivors of state violence continue to call on their memories to demand justice in a context of impunity and violence, particularly in the face of ongoing state violence (Amnesty International, 2021).

The trajectory of scholarship on memory studies consists of analyses of the different forms of memory practices during conflict (Lacy & Riaño-Alcalá, 2006), the role of memory in transitional periods from war to peace/dictatorships to democratic governments (Jelin, 1994), and the denial and/or minimizing of collective memories that highlight past violence and current systems of violence (Bold et al., 2002). From a psychosocial perspective, an understanding of memory has been extended from an individual cognitive process to a collective process that is embedded in relationships and a sociohistorical context. This approach, which stems from sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' conceptualization of collective memory, situates memory as a process that is always done in relation to others even when people are remembering alone, "It is in



society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories...it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38). Following Halbwachs’ insights, this study contributes to understanding memory as a collective, relational process that is informed by and is shaped by sociohistorical and political dynamics embedded in power inequalities and injustices.

Situating memory within a social context of power allows for the examination of conflict within and between social groups in the construction of memories. Hence, the memories of one group can be contested and undermined by another group with greater political power. The group with the most economic, political, and social power can control the way the past is remembered and silenced. In the same vein, and in exploring memory practices during and after the dictatorships in the Southern Cone, Elizabeth Jelin points to this critical perspective which, “allows one to conceive of collective memories not only as facts that are out there, ‘given’ and preexistent. It calls for placing primary attention on the processes of development and social construction of these memories. This implies incorporating the agency of different social actors (including marginalized and excluded groups), and the disputes and negotiations over meanings of the past in different settings” (Jelin, 2003, p. 12). This emphasis on the process in by which memories get constructed is crucial to understanding not only the important role that memory plays in challenging exclusionary memories of the past but the psychosocial impact that memory making processes can have on those who are carrying these memories forward.

This alternative (and often contested) process of meaning making allows for the social psychological study of memory in relation to power, conflict, and political transformation. Furthermore, it provides tools to explore memory as a circular, power-embedded process that keeps us from essentializing memory as “a thing” a group inherently possesses. Rather, Jelin encourages a focus on memory as praxis, referred by Jelin as *ejercicios de memoria* [exercises/practices of memory] Jelin describes the “politics of memory” as the process of negotiation between individual memories and social frameworks to which “spaces of contestation” emerge. Thus, the focus becomes the power dynamics between memories we have as a part of our collective identity and memories we ignore or silence (Lorenzano, 2007).

State-centered collective memorializing practices, for example, generally aim to build “social cohesion, legitimiz[e] authority and socialize populations in a common culture” (Misztal, 2003, p. 56). Such “top-down” memorializing practices create an “official memory” (Jelin, 2003) or “hegemonic memory” (Bold et al., 2002). This process of identifying a set of memories as an “official memory” then highlights “the power of certain groups in society to define the past according to their present needs, inclinations, and interests often by silencing alternative and competing memory discourses” (Conway, 2003, p. 312). Sociologist

Macarena Gomez-Barris (2008) argued that the nation—defined as a community of memories—is a “project that is always made, challenged, and remade through exclusionary practices...[and] just as nations create the desire to belong, they use violence to target who is cast as marginal in the national project of reconstruction” (p. 14). This power differential—whose memories dominate the nation's interpretation of a shared past and thus who they are today (shared identity)—stands at the heart of the politics of memory. Nonetheless, domination rarely operates without engendering competing forms of resistance. Acts of resistance can be found in everyday tactics that do not overtly challenge the status quo (Scott, 1990), as well as massive social movements and upheavals that do (Tarrow, 1998).

Official memories are often challenged by people who have been silenced and excluded. Their resistance questions the validity and authority of official memories. Moreover, this process of collective memorializing stemming “from below” has been referred to as “alternative memory,” “counter-memory,” “oppositional memory,” “vernacular memory,” “subversive memory,” as well as “unofficial memory” (Brockmeier, 2002; Conway, 2003; Foucault, 1977; Misztal, 2003; Rowe et al., 2002). Despite the difference in terminology, all of these terms underscore the relational character of memorializing practices that emerge from people who respond to and challenge official hegemonic discourses of belongingness. Alternative memories not only contest official memories represented by state-approved cultural symbols and practices (e.g., mainstream media outlets, museums, national discourses, official commemorative sites) but also make visible and audible the voices of those who have been silenced by the dominant cultural narrative. Similar to community psychologist Rappaport (2000) description of turning tales of terror into tales of joy as reinterpretations of the past from the perspectives of those left out of dominant narratives emerge, marginalized groups make counter memories public as a way of making human rights claims, demanding recognition, and/or a redress to their grievances.

In this article, I situate the concept of embodied memory to describe how memories of loved ones are carried in the bodies and actions of those who actively remember them. Vassallo (2008), who analyzes the embodied memories of second-generation Algerian women through an examination of narrative literary texts, describes how the impact of war and violence is inscribed in the bodies and memories of these writers. He highlights the work of Algerian-French writer Bouraoui to describe this process, “Algeria is not in my language. She is in my body. Algeria is not in my words. She is within me. Algeria is not in what comes out. She is in what devours” (Bouraoui, 2000, p. 167 as cited in Vassallo, 2008, p. 189). Similarly, by centering the experiences of survivors of state violence in Colombia, this article shows how embodied memory becomes a practice of resiliency that transmits purpose to the lives of survivors in the present and how this relationship with the past and ongoing violence shapes the justice centered

actions and visions for the future. In other words, memory is not only an account of what has happened in the past but it is an essential and embodied aspect of how individuals and societies move toward a present-day and future of justice and healing.

This form of memory as a life force that is embodied can also be conceived as a process of spiritual solidarity. By spiritual solidarity I am referring to the way these memories are embodied and become alive when those remembering connect to those who are no longer physically present (i.e., the disappeared or murdered). In their review of the political and ideological nature of archives, Stevens (2017) similarly highlights the transcendental nature of relating to the past. Stevens describes the process of connecting to archives as bringing the past to life by stating,

For some, the contents in the archive are in some way static-dead-but it is in the engagement with this archive that its contents take on a spectral or ghost-like quality, always haunting the present and thereby enlivening the archive as we witness its contents and (re) interpret them. (p. 180)

The “ghost-like quality” of archives that Stevens is referring to is similar to the way that survivors find purpose and solace in connecting to their loved ones who are no longer present through memory practices. For Stevens the archives themselves when activated are the ones that carry the ghost-like quality, for survivors who embody and are carrying the memories of their loved ones, this transcendental nature is seen in the continued relationship that persist through memory practices. This connection to their loved ones is at the heart of keeping memories alive. I propose that this relationship is also a form of solidarity.

Solidarity has been conceptualized as relationships in service to others, where one person or group of people engage in helping behaviors for the protection or betterment of others (Esparza & De Ycaza, 2017). Often times the reciprocal nature of solidarity is left out highlighting only the acts of service toward others without an examination of how relationships of solidarity impact all those involved. I suggest that acts of solidarity are best understood through a relational lens where there is a clear commitment to transforming conditions of violence through the building of relationships (Escobar & Tamayo, 2017). Furthermore, there is an accompanying recognition that all those involved play an important role in articulating the type of world they are building, and that everyone's lives will be changed because of this relationship. Not only does my research help shed light on the ancestral and spiritual dynamics that were expressed by the survivors I interviewed and that exist across movement builders but it offers a unique look at the role of spirituality in healing, resiliency, and memory. Particularly, this article addresses the relationship building and spiritual connection that continues to happen through memory practices between those who are no longer present and those who are left

behind to carry on legacies and visions of justice. This reconceptualization of transnational spiritual solidarity brings to the center the essential role that memory as the life force of those who are no longer physically present, play in the visions and demands for justice being carried out by their loved ones. Memory as a tool for social justice allows for an exploration of solidarity and transnational movement building not only across borders but between ancestral knowledge and healing.

“MEMORIA VIVA” AS TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IN COLOMBIA

Public remembrance in Colombia is a deadly endeavor. For many years, human rights defenders and survivors of state violence have organized to denounce the crimes committed by the state. As a consequence, they have been persecuted and stigmatized. According to the nonprofit project Somos Defensores [We are Defenders], which has a national registry of cases documenting violence committed against human rights defenders, recently published a report titled “El Virus de la Violencia” [The Virus of Violence] that focused on the violence experienced by human rights defenders and social leaders from January to June 2020. The report highlights a total of 463 violations against human rights defenders which included death threats, murders, arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances and stolen information, with an increase of murder rates of 61% compared to the same period of time in 2019 (Somos Defensores, 2020). The report also addresses the pandemic of COVID-19 as adding another layer of unsafety that leaves defenders in precarious and dangerous situations given that they are forced to stay in one place due to the stay-at-home orders making them easier targets for persecution.

For survivors of state violence who often are considered human rights defenders and social leaders, taking part in the movement for memory is a necessary step in the quest for justice. Given the context of active silencing survivors have to confront, members of the National Movement of Victims of State Crime (referred to by its Spanish acronym MOVICE), see themselves as “obligated” to keep the memories of the violations committed against them alive because it is through these memories that they will “delegitimar a aquellos que, amparados bajo una bruma de impunidad, siguen hoy aprovechandose del dolor de otros” [delegitimize those, who protected by the fog of impunity, continue to take advantage of other people's pain] (Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado, 2010, p. 16). This idea of keeping one's memories alive, *memoria viva*, captures the urgency in which survivors engage in memory practices within a context of ongoing violence. Through memory practices survivors show that the violations committed against them (i.e., torture, sexual violations, displacements, exiles) or against their loved ones (i.e., disappearances, killings) are still very much present in their lives and that they are not instances of the

past for they continue to happen through revictimization and to many other people in Colombia. Thereby, the urgency to publicly expose these experiences of trauma through memory practices comes from the vulnerability and danger survivors confront as a result of the state's active silencing projects.

Methodology

The testimonies presented in this paper come from a larger ethnographic study I designed and conducted to examine the memory practices of survivors of state violence in Colombia during 2010–2011. I worked closely in memory practices organized by members of two organizations: MOVICE in Bogotá and Gallery of Memories in Cali, two major cities in Colombia that because of their vast geographic distance face different dynamics. Through my active participation in the work of Gallery of Memory, I also participated in memory activities in Trujillo, Valle a small rural town outside of the city of Cali. Although victims of state violence had been organizing collectively demanding recognition and justice from the Colombian state for many years, MOVICE became one of the first national organizations of victims of state crimes in June of 2005. With different chapters throughout the country and various regional organizations outside the capital aligning themselves under the umbrella of MOVICE including the Gallery of Memories, they now constitute one of the largest victim-led organizations in the country.

Although the testimonies shared in this paper are from almost a decade ago, survivors experiences of violence and memory practices continue today. Over the years I have kept in touch with individual survivors who took part of this project and with members of the organization in Cali and Bogotá. I have been able to witness their ongoing memory practices through social media and in group chats as they share their galleries of memories throughout the city. For example, a number of survivors interviewed for this project participate in a monthly *planton* (public demonstration) commemorating those who have been forcibly disappeared in Cali. Family members gather in one of the city's main plazas every last Friday of the month and place banners and boards with pictures of their disappeared loved ones as a relational practice that continues to bring attention to their loved ones lives and tragic disappearance. This effort is part of the relentless work survivors of state violence continue to engage in given the lack of justice and state accountability around this violence, and the increased cases of recent disappearances and other forms of state violence as seen in the latest protest across the city (Haugaard, 2021).

Participants

The majority of victims of state violence interviewed were women ($n = 10$) and five ($n = 5$) were men. Three

participants' age range fell between the ages of 30 and 40 ($n = 3$), nine survivors were 40–60 ($n = 9$) years of age, and three participants were above 60 ($n = 3$). Most of the interviewees identified as being separated and/or single at the time of the interview ($n = 11$), one woman stated she was married, while three women ($n = 3$) indicated they were widows and two out of the three women's husbands had been assassinated. The majority of participants were parents ($n = 12$) with the number of children ranging from one to nine. Out of these parents, seven participants ($n = 7$) had children who had been killed and/or disappeared by the state. Educational levels among survivors range from some elementary ($n = 3$), some high school or high school completion ($n = 9$) to some college or college degree ($n = 3$). In terms of their socioeconomic status most participants were unemployed ($n = 5$) or self-employed ($n = 8$), and two survivors were retired ($n = 2$). Although the analysis of the paper is derived from the collective voice of all 15 participants, only the survivors highlighted in the article ($n = 4$) spoke specifically to the topic of memory as alive and to the concept of spiritual solidarity.

Procedure

As a result of my participation in the Gallery of Memory and MOVICE organizations' activities and the relationships established there, 13 out of 15 survivors of state sponsored violence agreed to be interviewed for this project. Two participants agreed to an interview after a friend and former human rights defender, who was not directly part of either organization, recommended me to them. Over an 8-month period I travelled to Cali, Trujillo, and Bogotá to participate in organizational activities and to interview participants. In each interview session, participants were told that all the information provided during the interview would be confidential by having their identities remain anonymous in any publications of this study. Despite the fact that participants have already revealed their identities and narratives publicly, I emphasized that they could refuse to answer any questions and/or stop the interview altogether whenever they wanted, and that participating in the interview was voluntary and no penalties or repercussions would follow if they refused or stopped the interview. Interviews took place in people's living rooms and in the organizations' office space. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and audio recorded after establishing participants' informed consent. The length of the interviews ranged from one to three and a half hours.

At the beginning of each interview, I shared with participants my own personal trajectory as a *Colombiana* growing up in the United States and my motivation to engage in this type of research allowing them to ask me questions if they chose to. I began the interview with the following request, "Please share with me one of your fondest childhood memories." My goal at the beginning of each interview was to get to know the person beyond their experiences of trauma as well as to start weaving the

concept of memory as it informs other parts of their life trajectory. In essence, asking them to talk about their childhood memories allowed me to take a more holistic approach at understanding who they are as survivors and who they are in other aspects of their lives. The main components of the interview consisted of asking participants open-ended questions relating to three major themes: (1) Experiences of violence; (2) Experiences of political mobilization; and (3) Interpretations and the usage of memory. The idea of using theme driven open-ended questions is to allow for participants' views on the theoretical constructs to emerge fully. Questions for each theme consisted of inquiring about their experiences with state sponsored violence (e.g., "Tell me about what happened to you (or your loved one)"); their understanding of these experiences (e.g., "How did you make sense of this incident?" and, "Do you feel like you have changed since this experience?"); their interpretations of what memory meant to them, and how they centered the concept of memory in their efforts for social justice (e.g., "What motivated you to get involved in collective organizing?" "What does memory mean to you?" "Why is memory important in a place like Colombia?" "How do you engage in memory practices?"). The research goal was to describe grassroots level perceptions and definitions of memory to complement existing theoretical understandings of psychosocial/political trauma, political organizing, and memory. Finally, the interview ended with questions assessing participants' hopes and dreams for the future (e.g., "What gives you a sense of hope in your life?" "What are your dreams for the future?") After the interviews were completed, participants were asked if they had any questions or comments they wanted to make regarding the topics discussed or anything else they wanted me to know regarding the interview themes. I also encouraged them to ask me any personal questions. After all interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed and translated from Spanish to English, and coded for themes connected to research questions and for other themes emerging from survivors' own experiences. These themes were then cross-referenced by two research assistants and myself reaching intercoder reliability.

I conducted 10 interviews alone. For the remaining five interviews with survivors of state violence in Trujillo, I conducted them with one member of the Gallery of Memories present. The goal of having a member of the organization present in the interviews was to reassure participants that I was someone they could trust and that the organization supported this project. This was necessary because although community members knew who I was, given that I had visited the town with members of the Gallery of Memories a few times and participated in the organization's activities, these visits often lasted only two to three days limiting the time I had to establish a strong relationship with each participant. Establishing this rapport with potential research participants in the context of the small town of Trujillo was a crucial requirement given that survivors' speaking out about state violence there adhered to small town dynamics unlike a level of anonymity that could be

expected in large cities such as Bogotá and Cali. For survivors in Trujillo knowing who they were going to share their life stories with was crucial for their safety given that personal information could quickly spread in a town where everyone knows each other and the infiltration of undercover members of paramilitary groups in their collective organizing was a real concern for many of them.

Safety was also a concern for me. As I actively participated in organizations' activities and gathered survivors' stories through my interviews and field notes, I became concerned that I and/or my family with whom I was living in Colombia could become a target of threats and harassment due to the political nature of the work. I relied on organizations' members' knowledge to guide me through safety measures that they have had to follow given the dangers they face everyday as human rights defenders. For example, members of the organizations would analyze the risks involved in certain activities and we all decided whether or not to follow through with the action plan given the security situation. We also practiced constant check-ins via phone when we traveled to visit family members and/or organizations or when we left the organization's office at the end of the day to go home. I also feared that the information I gathered would end up in the wrong hands, and thus I was extra cautious with the interview recordings and field notes putting away my recording device and notebooks in a locked drawer when I was not using them. Emotionally it was difficult to cope with the possibility of something awful happening to the people around me including myself. I remember how one night the doorbell of the house I was staying in rang late, and the first thought that came to my mind was that the police had followed me and were now at the door wanting to interrogate me about my work with members of the organization. I was so relieved when I heard my roommate say it was one of his friends. I gathered strength and support to cope with the constant rollercoaster of emotions from members of the organizations. During many late afternoons we would sit around and talk about our fears and concerns over hot chocolate and warm freshly baked bread from the nearby bakery. Their experiences of survival and determination to continue the struggle for social justice helped me to reconnect with my own strength and determination to not let these lives and stories become lost in oblivion and to have this study project be another form of memory practice honoring the daily struggle of many.

Because I wanted this project to be a useful tool to advance the social justice work that organizations were already doing, the Gallery of Memory requested that the interviews conducted for this project be also used as part of the organization's registry of survivors' life stories they had been working closely with. Given the dangers many survivors face for their memory practices and the advanced age of some survivors involved in this study, members of this organization felt the necessity to capture the life stories of the survivors they had been working with to start systematically building a collective memory through oral histories of their collective struggle.



Next, I offer a discussion of how the relationship building between memory holders and those they have lost to state violence is done through memory practices including: (1) using memory symbols in everyday actions to connect to loved ones; (2) keeping the memories of their loved ones alive by “seeing” them in others and in their surroundings; (3) creating spaces for others to build a spiritual relationship with their own loved ones, and (4) making memory work their life's purpose. These four memory practices offer a way for transnational spiritual solidarity to be understood as a life force rooted in a social justice vision that is shared by those who are alive and those who are no longer physically present.

Keeping loved ones alive through memory symbols

Relating to their loved ones despite the fact that they are no longer physically present is one of the ways in which survivors find strength to continue moving forward in their lives and social justice endeavors. Loved ones are brought into everyday routines through commemorative symbols that allow survivors to connect with them and bring them into the present moment. One common symbol used by survivors are *pendones*, hand painted or printed signs made out of resistant fabric usually the size of a banner. These banner-size signs include pictures of survivors' family members and slogans highlighting the facts and lack of justice surrounding each case. Facts about the violence committed often include information such as when their loved ones were last seen or when they were murdered, the individuals or entities responsible for the violence, and at times quotes or symbols that represent something that their loved ones enjoyed or were known for in the community. These banners are meant to give others a snapshot of the lives that were taken away and the demands for justice that survivors are making, while at the same time disrupting the silence and by extension amnesia around state violence.

Survivors make their loved ones be known through symbols that remind them of their physical presence. Simultaneously, survivors give their loved ones an active role of continual resistance that serves as a source of strength. Sonia, an indigenous Waayu mother, showed an incredible amount of strength in the midst of deep sorrow and loss. After both her husband and daughter were brutally assassinated by paramilitary groups operating in the Guajira region, she was forcibly displaced from her territory to Bogotá the country's capital, to save her own life from the ongoing violence. She attributes her strength to continue fighting for justice to her daughter. Sonia speaks directly to her daughter through the use of *pendones* and through this active memory communication, Sonia pleads for support in her journey seeking justice,

Yo tengo un cuadro grande, un pendón no muy grande, mediano lo hice hace poco, y hablo con ella le digo “mami te quiero, te extraño, me

haces falta, un vacío que nunca se llena. Mija ayúdeme que yo siga luchando para que esos infames sean castigados por lo que te hicieron a ti, lo que hicieron contigo, de desaparecerte, de torturarte, violarte, quitarte tus sueños, tus alegrías, tus pensamientos, tus aportes, tu valor de mujer, eso para mi fue muy duro, te quiero hija ayúdame.” [I have a large painting, a banner, it's not too big. I did it not long ago. And I talk to her, I tell her: “honey I love you, I miss you, a void that is never filled. Daughter help me to continue fighting so that those villains are punished for what they did to you, to silence you, torture you, rape you, take your dreams, your happiness, your thoughts, your contributions, your value as a woman, that was really difficult for me, I love you daughter, help me.”]

Leonilde, similar to Sonia also uses photographs and banners to connect to her son who was a student organizer at a public university and was assassinated a few blocks from where they lived. These representations of her son are one of the ways he becomes “physically present” in her life. Everyday before she leaves her house, she looks at her son's banner hanging in her living room wall and asks him to accompany her and watch over the house while she is gone. She knows, that spiritually, her son is an active force of protection and strength. The banner, as she explains, is a symbol in by which she keeps her son's presence alive, “yo no lo miro como un papel, como algo que usted sacó de un computador, no a mi me da la misma vaina que el está vivo, eso es lo que me ayuda a mi.” [I don't see it [banner] as paper, as something that came out of a computer, no I feel as if he is still alive, that is what helps me]. Leonilde recognizes the life force being transmitting through her son by making a distinction between his body and spirit, “La gente dice que el se murió y eso no es así. Muere es el cuerpo, la materia pero el alma no.” [People say that he died and that's not what it is. What dies is the body, the flesh but not the soul].

Strength for these survivors emerged from their efforts to continue relating to their loved ones by integrating them into their lives despite the absence, transforming their relationship from the physical to the spiritual. As they plead for help and protection from their loved ones, survivors also understand this ongoing relationship as their source of guidance and purpose for their own lives. The presence of their loved ones is embodied in these memory symbols and brought to life by the commemorative actions of those who are remembering them. I propose that this relationship building that happens after the body ceases to exist, is a relationship of solidarity where those who are no longer here continue to be carried by their loved ones. In other words, this spiritual relationship is a form of solidarity in that those who are still alive rely on those no longer present to navigate the ongoing violence they are surviving and those who are no longer here physically “stay alive” by the commemorative acts of their loved ones.

Seeing loved ones in others

To keep the memory of a loved one alive is to remember every aspect of their lives—from what they looked like and their favorite pastimes to their goals in life and future aspirations. Survivors are able to remember these specific details of their loved ones by “seeing” them in others and in symbols that remind them of their loved ones.

Martin has embarked on a political struggle to end police brutality after his 15-year-old son was brutally beaten and killed by members of ESMAD, Colombia's riot police at a May 1st demonstration. He often speaks to other youth in schools and universities about his son's death as a way to raise awareness about the impunity regarding his son's case and to ensure other young people are conscious of this reality and take necessary action to protect themselves and each other. Being surrounded with other youth, conjure up in Martin a sense of what it would feel like to be in the presence of his son once again. He describes this as seeing his son when he was alive and the person he could have become if he had not been killed by the riot police. As Martin states, “cuando hablo con los muchachos, cuando los veo enamorarse, cuando los veo jartar, cuando los veo estudiar, cuando los veo llorar,” [when I talk to the youth, when I see them fall in love, when I see them eat, when I see them studying, when I see them cry]. Similarly, by seeing certain symbols or people that remind her of her daughter, Sonia activates memory practices that illuminate her daughter's beauty and what she liked to do before she was assassinated,

Por ejemplo, cuando yo veo vestidos, cosas bonitas que a ella le gustaba, se me viene a mi memoria todo lo que ella era. Eso es para mi memoria. Y que ella era una persona muy alegre, muy orgullosa, muy vanidosa no en pintura si no en ropa en su modo de vestir en estar bonita. Entonces para mi cuando veo una niña así se me viene a la memoria lo que ella era, cuando me abrazan o me dan un beso me siento como si fuera ella. Para mi todo eso es memoria. [For example, when I see dresses, nice things that she used to like, I am reminded of everything she was. That for me is memory. And she was a very happy person, very proud and vain, not by wearing make-up but by clothes she would wear, she liked to look pretty. Therefore, when I see a girl like that, I remember who my daughter was, when I am hugged or kissed, I feel like it is her. For me all of this is memory.]

Through their remembrances and actions, both Martin and Sonia demonstrate how survivors keep the memories of their loved ones alive by consciously connecting their memories within the locations they navigate. Evoking memories that remind them of their loved ones and consciously holding memories as a way to not forget who their loved ones were and who they could have been is one of the

ways that memory is kept alive. This practice of remembering is also a way in which survivors derive support and strength from their loved ones. As a result, keeping memories alive is essential for survivors to engage in and continue to be involved in collective efforts of remembrance for social justice. Survivors do not remember their loved ones just for the sake of remembering or to remain in the past, instead, keeping these memories, even the specific details about their loved ones, allows survivors to contest the imposed silence surrounding state sponsored violence while sustaining spiritual solidarity with their loved ones.

Connecting loved ones with others

The idea of making visible the memories of their loved ones to dignify their lives emerges from survivors' efforts to challenge the state's justification that anyone they killed, disappeared, detained or displaced was engaged in some type of “illegal” or “subversive” acts and thus state sponsored actors were forced to act accordingly. Survivors contest the state's discourse of victim deservingness by arguing that the state's responsibility is to protect and provide for its citizens, not to violate their human rights and thus their justification for the violence they perpetrated against their essential duty. The power of publicly remembering the victims of state violence is that it humanizes and dignifies them as people with families, jobs, and aspirations thus challenging the state's attempt to separate them as “others” from the rest of society. To dignify the lives of their loved ones, survivors publicly exposed many aspects of their loved ones' lives as a way to establish the truth about who the victim was and the facts surrounding the violations.

Storytelling is one of the memory practices that survivors use to revere the lives of their loved ones in the midst of the state's discourse and actions aimed at tarnishing victims' names and legacy. Survivors share pictures, music, and writings to create a story of victims' life histories that capture the lives of their loved ones. After paramilitary groups killed her son in October 2006, with the help of students and members of the human rights organization Gallery of Memory, Leonilde commemorates every year her son's life on the date of his assassination. For her son's fifth year anniversary, Leonilde and I sat down to write a *Remedios por la Memoria* [Remedies for Memory], a newsletter produced and published by Gallery of Memory organization as a tool to expose violence committed by the state. The word “remedy” is intentionally used to highlight the lack of memory that the country has about state crimes. The newsletter serves as an antidote or remedy to this amnesia by informing people of a reality that has been silenced and forgotten. As we brainstormed ideas regarding the content, Leonilde wanted to include in the newsletter a commemoration of her son's life. Leonilde told me that her son was an amazing salsa dancer and that she wanted to include the lyrics of one of her son's favorite songs. The song titled *Parao/On My Feet* by well-known salsa singer

Ruben Blades (2002) represented not only a passion that her son enjoyed doing while he was alive but the song lyrics captured the spirit of her son's legacy—as someone who lived his life with honesty and did not falter at the face of life's hardships.

...Yo no fui el mejor ejemplo y te lo admito,

Fácil es juzgar la noche al otro día;

Pero fui sincero, y eso sí lo grito,

Que yo nunca he hipotecado al alma mía!

Si yo he vivido parao, ay que me entierren parao;

Si pagué el precio que paga él que no vive arrodillao!

*...La memoria se convierte en un sustento,
Celebrando cada río que se ha cruzao.*

...Ahí te dejo mi sonrisa y todo lo que me han quitao.

[...I wasn't the best example, and I admit it, it's easy to judge the night the next day;

But I was honest, that I can scream out loud I have never sold my soul!

If I have lived standing, oh let me be buried standing;

If I had to pay the price of someone who doesn't live on their knees!

...Memory becomes sustenance, celebrating each river crossing.

...I leave you my smile and everything they took from me.] (Blades, 2002)

Leonilde often described her son as someone who had integrity and a commitment to helping others. At the time of his assassination, Leonilde did not know that he was an active student leader in his university advocating for students' rights, she found out by seeing students and the media portray him as such. Leonilde chose this song because the lyrics convey her son's approach to life, as someone who stood for something bigger than himself, and for which he ended up being assassinated. The lyrics of the song serve as a tool of memory for Leonilde, a memory that she embodies. The song fuels memory of her son's character and love for dancing, it provides people who did not know him with a sense of the type of person he was. The song thus becomes a vehicle in which memories of

Leonilde's son can emerge for those who knew him when he was alive and at the same time allows for a wider public to get a more intimate look at who he was, what he stood for, and begin to question the reasons for his assassination. I personally did not know Leonilde's son when he was alive but after helping her create the commemoration for the newsletter and witnessing memory practices she enacted for her son, such as participating in public galleries of memory, marches, and meetings with state officials, I began to feel like I knew who him. I was able to get to know him through the love of his mother, the memories she embodies, and the void he left behind. As we sat together, Leonilde talked about her son's relentless efforts to bring resources and advocate for others in his role as student leader. She also talked about his love for his fiancée at the time, and how they were both graduating only a week before he was assassinated. She described his walk, similar to his father's but with a swagger that made it his, and what a great salsa dancer he was. In all of this, Leonilde kept coming back to herself. Speaking of the similarities she shared with her son often noting that although he looked like his dad, he inherited her character and sense of humor. For example, she referred to herself as “bien parada” [standing strong] just as her son was and how this song, one of his favorites, helps describe him.

Leonilde and other survivors who insist on keeping the memories of their loved ones alive allowed for this relationship to emerge, one that helps others, like myself, get to know who the person was and form connections of solidarity. I connected to Leonilde's son through her stories which made it possible for me to then forge a connection to him directly. As I write about his story and revisit who he was and what he symbolized for his community, there is no doubt that his legacy informs this present work not only as a contribution to our understanding of how memory is kept alive, but also how this article and any other ways in which I talked about him is in itself an act of keeping the memory alive. It is in this process of memory making that we get to construct a spiritual solidarity of those we write about and their loved ones who continue to denounce and bring to life their loved ones. This spiritual solidarity emerges through the relational character of memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and the embodied connection that Leonilde has developed with her son's memories after his death (Vassallo, 2008) which is then transmitted to others through memory practices. Being able to get to know Leonilde's son along with other victims of state crimes, through the eyes and stories of their loved ones, allows for heart connection to these crimes and not simply an analytical understanding. Engaging in memory practices with survivors forces us to slow down, listen, and feel for the loss that is being transmitted through these practices. Leonilde's testimony opens an opportunity to reckon with the collective loss that symbolizes her son's death given his love for community, for family, and social change which added life to a place with so much violence and death. These memory practices allow for a deeper connection to emerge, nudging others to be memory makers too, and standing in spiritual solidarity with

those no longer physically present and their loved ones. At the heart of spiritual solidarity is the act of having those who have been disappeared or killed continue to lead their loved ones in speaking up and demanding justice which in turn activate a collective solidarity that includes both the living, the disappeared, and the dead.

Memory as life's purpose

Se reconstruye memoria para no olvidar para que nuestros muertos no se mueran, para que sigan con nosotros, para que nos fortalezcan, y a not al través de nosotros como si ahí estuviera la re-encarnación sigan ejerciendo un papel para que algún día se cumplan los sueños que estaban construyendo. [Memory is rebuilt so that we do not forget our dead, so that they continue with us, so that they strengthen us, and through us, as if that's where reincarnation existed, they continue to play a role so that one day the dreams that they were building come to be fulfilled.] (Esmeralda, Survivor of State Crimes)

Esmeralda describes herself as a walking testimony. After witnessing her family and friends killed and disappeared and seeing all their political projects and dreams fade away, she sees herself as a carrier of this history. Being a walking testimony, she holds knowledge regarding the lives of the people she knew, and has made it her mission to share this knowledge wherever she goes. Her testimony includes her own life trajectory of violence as a result of her political organizing and that of an entire generation that suffered unimaginable violence. These embodied memories are carried—literally—in Esmeralda's body and the bodies of members of a society that does not allow space to publicly denounce injustices. As Martha Cabrera, a Colombian scholar studying the role of trauma and memory stated, “cuerpos pasan a contener la memoria prescriptiva para todo un colectivo” [bodies become vessels that carry the prescriptive memory for a whole collective] (Cabrera, 2005, p. 52). The embodiment of memory becomes a crucial tool of truth telling when there are not mechanisms that recognize, honor, and assure that these memories are kept alive and integrated into the social fabric. Memory is embodied in the bodies, psyches, and spirits of survivors who understand their experiences of violence and that of those no longer present as essential truths about the past. Their truth and memory practices are grounded in a spiritual consciousness that allows for transnational solidarity to emerge.

DISCUSSION

Spiritual solidarity that transcends borders and the human-spirit dichotomy are essential to understanding how survivors of state violence find purpose and strength in the

face of state violence. Memory practices become the mechanism in by which this relationship of solidarity is formed and maintained, and it includes not only the family members of those no longer physically present but also individuals and communities who didn't know those who had been disappeared or killed but become memory carriers through the stories and commemorative practices of their loved ones. This practice of memory making continues to be seen in different contexts where communities are challenging the narrative of violence and dehumanization through commemorative acts.

Memory movements

Recent movements for social justice have centered memory as an important element in their quest for truth and justice. In the US and Mexico border, for example, memory practices such as placing crosses, pictures, and other artifacts representing those who have died migrating to the United States near the wall or in the desert are seen throughout by visitors, residents, and other migrants still in the middle of their own journey (Sostaita, 2016). In this physical space of memory making, stories of survival, loss and hope converge, with those who are no longer physically present being at the center of these memory practices reminding everyone of both the livelihoods and deaths of those who didn't get to tell their story. The Movement for Black Lives Matter also uses memory practices to re-humanize those who have been criminalized and murdered by the police. By using digital commemorative practices such as hashtags #SayHerName to highlight the police violence against Black female identified people in the United States, others bear witness to not only the details of the violence but also the details of the human life that was taken and the collective loss that is experienced at the hands of systemic racialized violence. These memory practices, although localized to their specific contexts, share in common the urgent need for those who are no longer present to not be forgotten and for their memories to nourish the social justice initiatives on the ground.

One of the contributions that community psychologists can make to this transnational movement for memory is to transform our own practices of research to meet the needs and demands of those we are in collaboration with, as Martin-Baro (1996) urged us over 20 years ago “Given what psychology deals with, we must ask ourselves whether, with the tools at our disposal today, we can say, or more important, do something that will make a significant contribution to solving the crucial problems of our communities (p. 19).” This call to transform theory and practice for the sake of social justice transformation is also shared by (Stevens et al., 2013, as cited in Stevens, 2017) who note that a form of decoloniality in academic research is to revisit, contest, and retell the histories that have been excluded by legacies of colonialism and imperialism (p. 182). To challenge these legacies of erasure the work of recovering histories and keeping these memories alive serve

to decolonize the narratives that continue to uphold conditions of violence and exclusion.

Implications for social justice research

One of the ways that this decolonial, transformative justice approach to research as proposed by Stevens et al. (2013) can be fostered is through the practice of relational reciprocity. When we think about our research as community psychologists, we are often thinking about ways that we engage in responsible and reciprocal relationships with the communities we are engaging with. We often employ methodological approaches such as participatory action research and other community-based methodologies to help translate and bring research methods and values into communities. However, although we are forming relationships of collaboration with communities, we are still centering research tools and outcomes as the main component of this process. Similar to the call for accompaniment in our relationships with communities as community psychologists (Evans et al., 2017), I propose that we think of ourselves and our work as forming relationships of solidarity that support the healing and justice vision of the communities we work alongside. Accompanying those who are suffering the blunt of state violence requires not only a “walking side by side with others on a common journey” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 118), but rather a transformation of how we use our bodies, privilege and institutional resources and tools in service of social justice needs on the ground. What does it mean to not only position ourselves in the research we do, but also directly tie our research to the demands and visions that are emerging from those we have on the ground? How can our research become part of the social movements we seek to understand and uplift? In other words, similar to spiritual solidarity, this type of accompaniment is rooted in a long-term relational commitment to embody the memories and demands of survivors of state violence in how and why we do research, and to use everything we have in our disposal to be part of the social justice visions being led by survivors.

One of the clear requests I received from survivors of state violence in Colombia was to share their stories as wide as possible through my research as a way to challenge the state's official account of the violence. This form of counter memorializing (Bold et al., 2002) requires an ongoing active remembering that stays alive by continuous embodiment and engagement. Sharing these testimonies with broad audiences, in different languages, supports survivors' memory work on the ground as the more others share their stories, the more the state sponsored narrative which often time excludes their experiences as legitimate is challenged. We can also share our research back to the communities we worked with in a way that supports their ongoing efforts for social justice. For example, in addition to sharing my research that I translated from English to Spanish for the organizations that I worked with to read and provide feedback, they also ask for it to be included in the archives for human rights violations in the region. They

received this study as not much different than the thousands of testimonies and denouncements they had collected showing the impact of state violence. This article is also part of the memory practice led by survivors. As with any relationship of solidarity, reciprocity is at the heart of these types of relationships. We can continue to produce research that advances our fields and academic knowledge while still unapologetically and clearly positioning our work as part of a larger movement for social justice.

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