

# Forgiveness and Memory: Opportunities for Reconciliation. An Introduction\*

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**Abstract** | In this introduction, we argue for a basic idea. Community-based spaces for promoting forgiveness and memory-making bear the promise of promoting some of the cultural transformations needed for thick, structural reconciliation. As we show by discussing some recent examples taken from the Colombian context of the past decade, these spaces do not compete, but actually complement a pragmatic, thin institutional design for reconciliation. This idea, as we discuss here, serves as the common thread connecting the articles in this special issue. The texts reflect on the practice of forgiveness and some of its specific contours in the context of the Colombian conflict.

**Keywords** | forgiveness; memory; peace agreement; reconciliation

## Perdón y memoria: oportunidades para la reconciliación. Una introducción

**Resumen** | En esta introducción defendemos una idea central: los espacios comunitarios que promueven el perdón y la construcción de la memoria tienen el potencial de fomentar algunas de las transformaciones culturales necesarias para una reconciliación estructural y profunda. Como mostramos al discutir algunos ejemplos recientes tomados del contexto colombiano de la última década, estos espacios no compiten, sino que en realidad complementan un diseño institucional pragmático y estrecho para la reconciliación. Esta idea, como discutimos aquí, actúa como hilo conductor de los artículos de este dossier. Los textos reflexionan sobre la práctica del perdón y algunos de sus matices específicos en el contexto del conflicto colombiano.

**Palabras clave** | acuerdo de paz; memoria; perdón; reconciliación

## Perdão e memória: oportunidades de reconciliação. Uma introdução

**Resumo** | Nesta introdução, defendemos uma ideia central: os espaços comunitários que promovem o perdão e a construção da memória têm o potencial de promover algumas das transformações culturais necessárias para uma reconciliação profunda e estrutural. Como mostramos ao discutir alguns exemplos recentes retirados do contexto colombiano da última década, esses espaços não são concorrentes, mas, na verdade, complementam um projeto institucional pragmático e restrito para a reconciliação. Essa ideia, conforme discutimos aqui, funciona como um fio condutor dos artigos deste dossier. Os textos refletem sobre a prática do perdão e algumas de suas nuances específicas no contexto do conflito colombiano.

**Palavras-chave** | acordo de paz; memória; perdão; reconciliação

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This Special Issue brings together essays that reflect on the practice of forgiveness and some of its specific contours in the context of the Colombian conflict. The first group of essays discusses the nature of forgiveness and memory in a theoretical way. A second group, focuses on widespread attitudes about forgiveness and memory among Colombians, documenting in some detail the experiences of the direct victims of the conflict. The essays are written by historians, philosophers, psychologists, political scientists, and activists, employing a broad spectrum of methodologies.

The purpose of the volume is not to offer a state-of-the-art analysis on forgiveness, memory, or the prospects of reconciliation in Colombia. Instead, we seek to spark conversations among experts and literatures that have dealt with these topics. Our conviction is that a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of forgiveness and memory among populations affected by protracted cycles of violence requires open deliberation. These conversations ought to include diverse voices, disciplinary perspectives, and theoretical and methodological approaches.

In this introduction, we propose what we believe are some of the elements that should guide this conversation. First, we discuss the place of forgiveness in processes of reconciliation. Next, we explore ways in which forgiveness and memory come together. Finally, we introduce the seven essays, highlighting differences and common themes.

## Forgiveness along Reconciliation

Over the past 60 years, Colombia has suffered an internal conflict, resulting in more than 9.500.000 victims<sup>1</sup> (Uariv 2023). The history of the conflict shows considerable variation in terms of its causes and the factors contributing to its escalation, the actors and their repertoires of violence, and the regions and populations affected by it (CNMH 2013; CHCV 2015; CEV 2022). The most recent concrete effort to overcome the conflict is the Final Peace Agreement signed in 2016 between the government and the largest and oldest left-wing guerrilla group in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP). As part of the agreement, a transitional justice framework, known as the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition, was established. The system includes the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Truth Commission, and the Unit for the Search for Persons Deemed as Missing.

Like other agreements inspired by the South African case, Colombia's Final Peace Agreement was constructed with, among other objectives, the aim of achieving reconciliation (Gobierno de Colombia and FARC-EP 2016, 3). Notions of reconciliation, however, can be thin or thick (Seils 2017). At a legal and practical level, the Final Peace Agreement and the ensuing transitional justice framework took a relatively thin approach. Institutionally speaking, the goal has focused more on the procurement of relations that allow people to get along, to tolerate each other in ways that prevent a return to hostility and violence (Meernik 2019), to trust one another on the basis of a joint commitment to formal institutions and norms (De Greiff 2012), rather than changing attitudes and sentiments that would result in meaningful interactions between previously conflicting parties.

This thin approach contrasts with the way reconciliation was sometimes pursued in the South African context (Doorn 2008; Allais 2012). There, under the sponsorship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, if not on paper at least in practice, sometimes actively promoted spaces of interpersonal forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure corresponds to the number of victims officially registered by the governmental Unit for the Assistance and Integral Reparation to the Victims, which includes cases since 1985; the number of victims of the armed conflict before that year is undetermined.

Indeed, although Tutu's famous phrase, "No future without forgiveness," was by no means the slogan of the process, talk about forgiveness was prevalent throughout the process, and it was often a subject of criticism as well.

The thin approach of the 2016 agreement contrasts, perhaps more visibly, with the 2003 peace agreement between the Colombian government and right-wing paramilitaries. The process, governed under the so-called Law of Justice and Peace, resulted in more than 600 paramilitaries convicted with sentences that included reduced imprisonment and obligatory acts of reparation. Among the latter, public acts of asking for forgiveness were contemplated and frequently mandated by the courts.

There are various reasons why many believe that when it comes to conflicts of this magnitude a thin approach is preferable over a thicker one (Clark 2014). Pragmatically, thin reconciliation is a less demanding goal to reach than attaining forgiveness. On a deeper level, peace agreements tend to be negotiated and signed by elites on behalf of their armies (including the state), whereas forgiveness is supposed to happen between private parties (De Gamboa Tapias 2004). Thus, even if signatories of the agreement can rightly commit to peace, or even ask for forgiveness, on behalf of their armies, they cannot ask for forgiveness on behalf of the individuals who were part of them.

Nonetheless, there is something to be said for forgiveness in this thin context. Peace agreements are not supposed to merely involve the elites serving as signatories but are also intended to result in deep cultural changes in the way society as a whole deals with the wounds of the past and the possibility of renewed conflict (López-López *et al.* 2016). In order to achieve those goals, it is clear that something beyond thin reconciliation is required. Building the social fabric torn by decades of acute conflict requires more than mutual commitments to tolerate each other issued by leaders on behalf of their groups. It requires changing daily routines of stigmatization, distrust, and prejudice that define the ways individuals have seen each other for a long time.

This is especially true in circumstances like those of the Colombian conflict, where civilians were heavily victimized, and where victims and perpetrators must go back to live together in small communities. Under such circumstances, it is arguable that interpersonal processes of forgiveness ought to be incorporated by society alongside reconciliation. As a matter of basic fairness, perpetrators not only need to seek to reconcile with the people they wronged in the past, but they also ought to undergo the process of repentance, atonement, and reparation that are normally part of a genuine request to be forgiven.

Regardless of how things ought to be, the fact remains that formal reconciliation, even thinly understood, often sparks processes of interpersonal forgiveness. At the very least, this has been one visible consequence of the most recent Colombian peace process. Although promoting interpersonal forgiveness has been outside the scope and purpose of the transitional justice system, processes of forgiveness have occurred at various times and locations throughout the nation. Some of these have taken place in the context of the trials held by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. Even though the tribunal has repeatedly expressed that asking for forgiveness is a personal decision that cannot be imposed on the perpetrators, many of them have used their opportunity to speak publicly at the trials to ask for forgiveness from the victims and their relatives present in the court room. These include FARC-EP leadership publicly asking for forgiveness from those who were victims of extorsive kidnappings, and Colombian military officials asking to be forgiven for having been complicit, and sometimes even directly involved, in extrajudicial executions of non-combatants.

Perhaps more interesting for our current discussion, many acts of forgiveness continue to unfold spontaneously in autonomous scenarios led by civil society in communities that

have been heavily hit by the conflict. A vivid example is the Festival of Reconciliation, an annual event that has been held since 2017 in the Montes de María region on Colombia's Caribbean coast. The festival is organized by the Regional Peacebuilding Space, a large platform that brings together a diversity of grassroots organizations and that strives to coordinate reconciliation processes among different actors and groups of victims. During the 2-3 days of the festival, several events are organized, including "reconciliation dialogues." In these dialogues former combatants and victims who have been previously working together in private meetings to resolve their differences, publicly engage in conversations regarding their memories of the conflict and ways to move forward.

With around 300 people in attendance, these exercises tend to be complex and tense. Despite having previously accepted responsibility for their acts during private meetings, perpetrators sometimes use reconciliation exercises to justify what they did or to minimize the import of the harms caused. At times, the victims react with resentment and anger, or mere indifference to the expressions of repentance. But oftentimes the conversation also leads to the recognition of the harms caused, sincere apologies from perpetrators, commitments on reparations, and verbal and non-verbal expression of forgiveness from the victims. That is, the exercises become genuine opportunities for thick reconciliation, evidently involving process of interpersonal forgiveness.

## **Memory: Individual and Collective**

It has long been recognized that memory plays a role in processes of reconciliation (but some recent discussion can be found in Radzik and Murphy 2019; Wills 2022). Just as forgiveness can be seen as a possible mechanism for achieving reconciliation, memory plays a role in this too. Yet, memory interacts with forgiveness in ways that we need to make explicit if we want to understand how they can both contribute to processes of reconciliation and, also, what their limitations could be. We begin by considering individual memory. Then, we talk about collective memories.

Generally speaking, forgiveness is a way of altering one's relationship to the past. So, forgiveness and memory evidently, to the extent that the latter is our gateway to the past, bear a close connection to one another. The connection is essential to understand why forgiveness matters for a process of reconciliation. In short, it is through the connection with memory that forgiveness can result in the deep cultural changes required for reconciliation and can meet some basic requirements of fairness.

Begin with the person who forgives. Although forgiving is clearly not forgetting, there is reason to believe that forgiveness involves a change in how the victim remembers the transgression. Many theorists describe this change in emotional terms. While forgiveness does not require altering the content of one's memories or the cessation of negative emotions, it does require that certain negative emotions associated with the memory of the event no longer exert a controlling influence on one's behavior. At the very least, it requires a shift in how the memories of the transgression influence one's feelings toward the person who caused the harm (Blustein 2014; Amaya 2019).

On the other hand, there is the person seeking forgiveness. Memory also plays a crucial role in this regard. Not only in the trivial sense that the individual needs to remember what they did and, hence, why they are asking for forgiveness. More significantly, a central requirement for genuine forgiveness, as emphasized by theorists and by the victims themselves, is the requirement of truth-telling (Shriver 1995; Griswold 2007). Ideally, the perpetrator should come forward to take responsibility for what they did, which includes, among other things, recognizing that the transgression took place, what role they played in it, and what their motivations were in the first place.

Obviously, there is a connection between these two ways in which memory and forgiveness interact. The possibility of distancing oneself from the negative emotions associated with the memories of what happened depends on some minimal agreement on what that past event actually entailed. At the same time, the perpetrators cannot reasonably expect that the animosity, resentment, or reluctance displayed by the victims might subside unless they are willing to assist the individuals who were harmed in comprehending what transpired. We can speculate to a certain extent about the mechanism behind this: agreeing on a common narrative on what happened, who did it, and why it happened, involves dynamics of dignification and perspective-taking that tend to enable more positive interactions among estranged parties (Bruneau and Saxe 2012).

As with other conflicts around the world, in the Colombian case memory has been at the center of the institutional arrangements devised as part of the multiple efforts to achieve reconciliation. In a landmark decision in 2011, the Congress sanctioned the so-called Law of Victims as part of a major effort to define an administrative and legal framework for assisting and repairing victims of the conflict. Operating under an explicit commitment to repair their dignity, the law ordered the creation of the National Center for Historic Memory (CNMH, by its acronym in Spanish): an institution whose function has been to receive, protect, store, and analyze information (documents, testimonies, etc.), as well as to engage in participatory research processes, that would lead to the clarification and understanding of events that occurred during the conflict, including their actors, causes, and patterns. Equally important, the Final Peace Agreement of 2016, as mentioned above, included the creation of a Truth Commission, an extralegal entity in charge of documenting the practices, responsibilities, and social impact of the conflict for the people and territories affected by it.

Both institutions, the CNMH and the Truth Commission, have undeniably played an essential role in whatever success recent reconciliation efforts have had in the country. Working under complicated political circumstances, both have made documented contributions that have led to a better understanding of the responsibility of the different actors of the conflict. The reports from the CNMH, for instance, were key to revealing that the different massacres occurring across Colombia in the 1990s and the early 2000s were not isolated incidents aimed at local supporters of guerrilla groups but part of a systematic campaign of land procurement orchestrated by regional and political powers in rural Colombia (CNMH 2013). Similarly, the Truth Commission painfully documented the extent to which the military exacerbated the impact of the conflict on innocent civilians, on account of being responsible for over 6,400 cases of extra-judicial executions of innocent individuals as a strategy for producing “showable results” in their counter-insurgency government-mandated policies (CEV 2022).

Despite their evident successes, it is clear that these memory reconstruction initiatives have their limitations (Jaramillo *et al.* 2020; Wills 2022). First, many of the victims who have long been neglected by the state may perceive these institutional efforts as alien and overly fixated on contrasting evidence and finding facts, while perhaps not placing enough emphasis on preserving the experiences and emotions of the communities that suffered the conflict. Additionally, at their inception, both of these institutions were designed to have fixed durations (the CNMH 10 years, the Truth Commission 3 years). Thus, to effectively carry out their work, both of them had to prioritize their research efforts around some “emblematic cases.” This approach left many victims with the feeling that their accounts of victimization and suffering were never recognized as part of the reconciliation processes.

Fortunately, a trend similar to the one mentioned earlier in the context of forgiveness can also be observed with regard to memory construction. State-led institutional processes have sparked a variety of community-led memory-making initiatives in the communities affected by the conflict. There are currently, for example, more than a handful of regional

historical memory research groups operating in different parts of the country, including Montes de María, the Pacific coast and the Amazon basin. Even though these groups were initially promoted by the CNMH, many of them now operate independently under the guidance of academics, schoolteachers, local and regional community leaders, and victim associations.

Grassroots collective memory initiatives have also flourished around the country. Many of them have come together to form the Colombian Network of Places of Memory, which has grown to include more than 30 community-led memory preservation and reconstruction processes since 2015. These initiatives range from local museums, to memorials, to communication collectives, and even the ritualized preservation of natural settings in which atrocities were committed, such as the Tamarind Tree where the massacre of Las Brisas took place. These efforts have produced numerous forms of artistic expression, including not only written and graphic accounts, but also radiophonic narratives, music registers, murals, theoric performances, and tapestries.

## Outline of the Essays

So far, we have argued for one basic idea, which we have illustrated with some brief remarks on the Colombian situation as shaped by the peace initiatives of the last decade or so. The idea is as follows: community-based spaces for promoting forgiveness and memory-making bear the promise of promoting some of the cultural transformations needed for thick, structural reconciliation, even within a pragmatic, thin institutional architecture.

The essays in this issue touch on basic elements of this picture. They discuss the mechanisms of forgiveness, both from an abstract theoretical point of view and from the perspective of the individuals who have been directly or indirectly affected by the Colombian conflict. Their discussion touches on the connection between forgiveness and memory, but also the relationship between these topics and issues of justice, resilience, and the politics of transitioning towards peace. Although we cannot present a full summary of the essays in this brief introduction, we want to highlight some of their main contributions to the overall idea discussed above, as well as how they fit together.

Understanding how forgiveness can serve as vehicle for reconciliation requires identifying how the practice can actually transform the dynamics between victims and those who have wronged them. The first group of essays makes significant progress in this regard, focusing on two leading accounts of forgiveness. In “Putting the Past into Perspective. Remembering, Reappraising, and Forgiving,” Christopher Jude McCarroll and Roy Dings start from the idea that forgiving involves altering one’s emotions towards the person who has wronged them. According to the authors, this change is commonly mediated by how the episode of wrongdoing is remembered. Taking a cue from Construal Level Theory (Trope and Lieberman 2010), McCarroll and Dings argue that forgiveness leads us to reframe past events in a more abstract manner, granting us an external perspective on what transpired. Taking this perspective, they argue, is what allows the modulation of the feelings of anger or resentment that typically hinder the challenging and arduous process of reconciliation.

For Dana Kay Nelkin, however, changing how one feels about the offender or the wrongdoing is not sufficient (perhaps not even necessary) for forgiveness. In her essay, “Forgiveness and Letting Go: Ways of Changing the Normative Landscape,” she argues for a conception of forgiveness as involving a change of the normative landscape. Forgiveness, from this perspective, is primarily a response by which we release offenders from the obligation to make up (or continue to make up) for the offenses committed. According to Nelkin, this account aligns with two fundamental observations: first, the fact that offenders, by virtue of their wrongdoing, incur an obligation to their victims, and second, that victims,

by virtue of having been wronged, have a right to demand reparation from the offenders. Importantly, as she argues, understanding forgiveness in this thoroughly normative manner also explains how, when we forgive, we do not merely let the offense go, but instead bring changes in what we can expect and demand from those who caused us harm.

However we define the concept of forgiveness, there are many reasons why even those who would like to reconcile might not be ready to forgive. This can pose challenges for the notion that forgiveness can serve as a vehicle of reconciliation. For instance, one might be unable to remember the episodes of wrongdoing without feeling anger or resentment. Also, if forgiving involves giving up the right to make certain demands, there might be concerns about potential regrets regarding that decision, especially in circumstances where reconciliation requires, as in the cases of the Colombian communities mentioned above, overcoming long histories of wrongdoing, where the prevailing conditions make it difficult for people to trust each other.

Building on recent research by Wonderly (2021), in their essay, “Forgetting to Un-Forgive,” Lel Jones and Hannah Tierney defend the idea that forgiveness can be revoked or, as they put it, that people can be unforgiven. While it is perhaps intuitive that forgiveness can be revoked if the wrongdoer relapses and hurts their victims again, Jones and Tierney argue that grounds for revoking forgiveness can come from the victims themselves. For instance, they might realize that the cost of forgiving the offender is in fact too high and that they cannot put the whole incident behind them. When that happens, they argue, victims might actually be entitled to forget, despite their previous commitment to forgive. That is, instead of trying to have a relationship with the person based on the mutual recognition that the wrongdoing occurred, they can try to relate to them in ways not mediated by that memory.

A second group of essays presents us with large-scale quantitative and qualitative studies on attitudes towards forgiveness. The studies focus mainly on Colombian populations, although they discuss data from other groups as well. As we see it, studies of this sort are key to understanding to what extent forgiveness, given people’s attitudes towards it, can help or hinder reconciliation process. They might also provide theorists of forgiveness with a finer description of what the phenomenon they are trying to account for looks like, when people who have experienced serious forms of wrongdoing speak about their feelings towards reconciliation.

In their article, “Everyday Citizens and Peacebuilding: Social Beliefs on Forgiveness, Justice, and Reconciliation in Colombia,” Juan David Villa-Gómez *et al* sketch a rather pessimistic picture of the prospects of reconciliation in Colombia. In a series of studies based on in-depth interviews in Colombian capital cities, they document a worrying trend that would explain why thicker forms of reconciliation are hard to come by. Even among those who favor some form of state-led process of reconciliation, forgiveness is seen as a legitimate response only when wrongdoers have undergone severe forms of legal and social sanctioning. Still, Villa-Gómez *et al* find nuanced distinctions behind this overall belief that make the prospects look somewhat less bleak: for instance, they contend that those who favor reconciliation, tend to recognize that non-punitive and retributive forms of justice might be preferable in certain cases.

A more optimistic outlook emerges when the focus shifts from the general population to the attitudes of the direct victims of the conflict. This is one of main conclusions that Diana Rico Revelo *et al* present in their article, “Psychosocial Processes Linked to Memory and Forgiveness in Mobilized Victims in Colombia.” In line with what has been found in studies in other troubled regions of the world (Clark 2014; Mullet and Leto 2019), their findings reveal major obstacles to the prospective of forgiveness: victims often contend with intense feelings of resentment and they continue to see themselves as possible targets

of further episodes of victimization. At the same time, the authors note how collective exercises of memory-making have the power to open genuine possibilities of forgiveness in the future. As the authors observe, when victims and perpetrators sit together to reconstruct what happened, negative feelings tend to dissipate, de-humanizing thoughts about the other subside, and this can lead to more empathic encounters.

The final group of essays delves into the specific experiences of forgiveness among victims of the conflict. In their essay, “Forgiveness and Resilience: Reflections from the Experiences of Victims of the Colombian Armed Conflict in San Juan Nepomuceno, Montes de María, Colombia,” María José Martínez and Alejandra Peñata investigate conceptions of forgiveness and mechanisms of resilience among survivors of massacres in the Montes de María region. The testimonies collected by these authors offer valuable insights into several of the points mentioned in this introduction. Among these, participants insist in the emotional aspects of the process of forgiving perpetrators (from the need for emotional preparation to face perpetrators, to the benefits of forgiveness), as well as the importance of memory and truth in this process. In addition to this, they often emphasize the significant role that social and communal aspects have played in the process of forgiveness and memory-making, contributing to their sense of empowerment.

Now, as both Villa-Gómez *et al* and Martínez and Peñata have observed in their contributions to this volume, perceptions of forgiveness in Colombia are often mediated by religious ideas of Christian origin. It is interesting in this regard to reflect on what forgiveness and memory might look like to people from other cultural and religious backgrounds who have, nevertheless, directly experienced the conflict. This is what Pedro Jurado Castaño *et al* offer in their article, “It’s That Everything Is Alive Simultaneously: Memory and Forgiveness as Reharmonization of the Territory Among the Peoples That Make up the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, Colombia.” In it, the authors discuss how indigenous communities from Cauca in the Southern part of the Colombia have conceived forgiveness and its relationship to memory in the context of reconciliation. Using a wide variety of resources, from personal interviews with community leaders to a reconstruction of native cosmologies, they present a view of forgiveness where the purpose of the practice is to reinstitute a form of harmony between the human and non-human forces disturbed by the conflict and which places exercises of memory-making in the context of a non-linear understanding of time.

## Closing Thoughts

We are very excited to present these essays, which collectively assemble essential components for understanding the dynamics of forgiveness and memory and within the context of reconciliation. As we mentioned earlier, this volume is by no means a definitive state-of-the-art presentation on the topic, nor does it offer a comprehensive overview of the field. We hope that the contributions gathered here serve to advance conversations between academics documenting reconciliation processes from different theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds, but also to include activists who have been making them possible. The variety of theoretical frameworks and methodologies present in this volume are good evidence of the many avenues in which this can be accomplished.

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