Of flesh and bone: emotional and affective ethnography of forensic anthropology practices amidst an armed conflict

María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra *
Ensamble Investigaciones, Bogota, Colombia

ABSTRACT
As I set out to write about my research process with forensic anthropologists in a country with a long-lasting armed conflict, I was unable to ignore the imminent role that affect and emotions play in my practice and in my relationship with this topic. I fought the urge to disregard the struggle implied in writing about my own practice. Thus, I reflect on the effects and affects that this fieldwork and its related methods have on my approach to this topic, to the people I work and share with, and to myself. My argument is twofold. First, if one is to acknowledge that affect and emotions produce knowledge and that knowledge productions have world-making effects, as researchers we need to attend to the worlds we enact through our own research and knowledge production practices. Second, writing and registration practices constitute modes of research that, in themselves, produce knowledge. I develop my argument in three steps. I reflect on the difficulties of writing this particular text; I address my own knowledge productions — that include my own registration practices, and I attend to the worlds that I help to enact. I also pay attention to others’ registration practices.

De carne e osso: etnografia emocional e afetiva das práticas de antropologia forense em meio a um conflito armado

ABSTRATO
Quando me propus a escrever sobre meu processo de pesquisa com antropólogos forenses em um país em um conflito armado de longa duração, não pude ignorar o papel iminente que o afeto e as emoções desempenham na minha prática e na minha relação com esse tópico. Eu lutei contra o desejo de desconsiderar a luta implícita em escrever sobre minha própria prática. Assim, refleti sobre os efeitos e afetos que esse trabalho de campo e seus métodos relacionados têm na minha abordagem a esse tópico, às pessoas com quem trabalho e com quem compartilho, e a mim mesmo. Meu argumento é duplo. Primeiro, é que se alguém reconhecer que o afeto e as emoções produzem conhecimento e

KEYWORDS
Affect and emotions; field notes; writing practices; knowledge production practices; feminist STS ethnography; care; material semiotics; Colombian conflict; forensic anthropologists

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
afeto e emoções; notas de campo; práticas de escritura; etnografia CTS feminista; cuidado; semiótica material; conflito Colombiano; antropólogos forenses

PALABRAS CLAVES
Afecto y emociones; notas de campo; prácticas de escritura; producción de conocimiento; etnografía feminista de ESCT; cuidado; materialismo semiótico; conflicto colombiano; antropólogos forenses

CONTACT
María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra
olartesierra@gmail.com
Ensamble Investigaciones, Carrera 21 # 102-69, Suit 502, Bogota, Colombia
*Ensamble Investigaciones. www.ensambleinvestigaciones.com

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
Because of the emphasis on the written product, we often think about writing as a form of communication, a kind of expression that looks outward and locates meaning in the transaction with a reader. But writing also provides a means of looking inward, a means of connecting with ourselves. (Julia Colyar 2009)

1. Introduction

Starting to write this text proved much more difficult than I could ever have anticipated. When my dear friend and colleague Tania Pérez-Bustos first mentioned her interest in addressing ethnographic approaches to STS issues in Latin America, I was thrilled by
The possibility of thinking and writing about it. Later, when the editors shared the call with me, I accepted without hesitation. However, the words and the arguments have proved elusive. It is not only that it has been difficult to find them, but also that I have been unsure about how to relate to what I was feeling and how my body was reacting when writing the few words that did come.

For around three months, I scribbled ideas and drew sketches in various places: notebooks, diaries, planners, post-its and my own mind. Yet I kept facing what I felt was a brick wall, an obstacle that did not let me through. But why? This was a why with multiple nuances: Why was it so difficult to put into words my process with forensic anthropologists who work in a country with an ongoing armed conflict; a process that I consider to be an enriching journey that I have not walked alone? Why did I choose a topic that is difficult to talk about because of the pain related to it, and which, as Behar (1996) poignantly puts it, “breaks your heart”? Why would I want to dig up and face the fear, frustration, and anger that this topic produces in me, and to do so in public? Was it not already enough to recognize such affects, to feel such emotions and deal with them privately and in the company of one of my colleagues and co-researcher María Ordóñez – not to mention my close friends and family –? Instead of brushing off the struggle and discomfort, I took up the challenge to reflect on these difficulties; to make the conscious effort to name them and acknowledge what they do to my research practice. In this text I reflect on the affects and affects that this fieldwork and its related methods have (had) on my approach to this topic, to the people I work and share with, and to myself. My argument is twofold. First, if one is to acknowledge that affects and emotions produce knowledge (Ahmed 2004; López 2014; Thrift 2008) and that knowledge productions have world-making effects (Haraway 1988; Law and Urry 2004; Law 2015), as researchers we need to attend to the worlds we enact through our own research and knowledge production practices. It is not enough to only reflect on our methods of inquiry. Second, writing and registration practices during and after fieldwork constitute modes of research that, in themselves, produce knowledge. In this sense, I develop my argument in three steps. I reflect on the difficulties of writing this particular text; I address my own knowledge productions – that include my own registration practices, and I attend to the worlds that I help to enact. I also pay attention to others’ writing and registration practices as much as to my own.

It has been widely discussed in STS ethnography and feminist ethnographic literature that when doing research, one transforms and becomes together with the field, the topic, and those involved in it (Haraway 1988; Pérez-Bustos, Tobar-Roa, and Márquez-Gutiérrez 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2012). Emotions and affect in fieldwork, the role they play in our relationships during research, how they shape our practice and guide our inquiries, have – fortunately – been openly addressed by many scholars, and central stage has finally been given to the body; our bodies and emotions as researchers (Ahmed 2004; Alcalde 2007; Beaulieu 2010; Behar 1996; Blake 2011; Ghanem-Yazbeck 2017; Smith 2009). We now know that to address such feelings is as an unequivocal act of self-care as much as an explicit act of academic honesty and ethical research (Alcalde 2007; Ghanem-Yazbeck 2017; Smith 2009). I know and appreciate such academic production and I consider it a most fruitful way to be a researcher. But it was not until I sat down to write this piece that I embodied and enacted, at least consciously, an emotional and
affective STS ethnography, and could articulate how such an approach has helped me to enact the very topic of my research, and the consequences it has had for myself and others involved.

2. STS ethnography as a slap in the face

In the call for papers for this special issue, the editors invited contributors to “address the possibility of rethinking STS ethnographies” in a number of ways, amongst which was a consideration of “(in)sensibles [for they] (interrogate what seeing, feeling or experiencing through modern technoscience is about)” (Pérez-Bustos, Mora-Gámez, and Medina 2017). They further invited contributors to imagine other possible adjectives for such ethnographies. In the elusive process of finding the right words, the first – and most persistent – phrase that occurred to me was a slap in the face. I admit that I found its dramatic flair irritating, so that every time it came up I wondered if my experience with forensic anthropologists had really been that – a slap in the face. And if so, a slap of what? The answer that came was that it was a slap of reality. One fair question to ask in turn, especially when doing STS research, is of what reality? And in answering this question, I hit for the very first time the aforementioned brick wall. Not because I could not answer – indeed, I could respond right away – but because of what the answer meant: to admit that I had not felt the bloody and cruel Colombian armed conflict in my own skin and that I was now getting to touch it. Both realizations were rather complex to grapple with, as I shortly discuss below.

For the past two years, I have been working closely with Jaime Castro Bermúdez, a forensic anthropologist with more than 20 years of experience, who works at the Prosecution Office in Bogota, Colombia. I approached him because I wanted to gain deeper insight into the practice of forensic identification in the midst of a conflict. My interest is in forensic anthropologists’ (and other related forensic specialists’) qualitative knowledge, the potential it has for memory practices and for scenarios of transitional justice. Also, I address the effects that forensic anthropologists’ experiences and practices may have on our lived experience of violence and conflict; in this particular case, the Colombian armed conflict. That is, I wonder about forensic anthropologists’ enactments of violence and conflict through their knowledge production practices.

Allow me to give some context. The Colombian conflict refers to more than six decades of enduring violence (Fajardo 2014). During these years, a number of peace agreements have been signed with some of the main actors, including the agreement signed with paramilitaries in 2005 through Law 975/20051 and the agreement signed with the FARC guerrilla group in 2016.2 Over the decades, the characteristics and materializations of violence have been manifold. Colombia has witnessed novel forms of killing, torturing and disappearing people. Political parties, drug traffickers and capos, political guerrillas, paramilitary forces, the state and the army, serial killers, and common criminals have all committed open acts of violence in the form of attacks on civilian populations and violence to destabilize political opponents. Additionally, the conflict’s shape-shifting nature has

---

1Law 975/2005 was controversial. For many, it did not constitute a peace and justice process (Jaramillo-Marín 2010).
2On November 24, 2016, the FARC guerrilla group and the Colombian government signed a peace agreement after decades of ongoing confrontation, named “Acuerdo Final Para La Terminación Del Conflicto Y La Construcción de Una Paz Estable Y Duradera.”
extended across the country, affecting both rural and urban populations, and those who are considered victims have changed over time and have swollen in number (Bello 2013; Molinares Dueñas and Jaccard 2016; Quevedo 2014; Rodríguez Morales 2016). As of September 2018, the National Registrar of Victims reported more than 8,745,000 victims (Unidad de Víctimas 2018). In such scenario of an ever-growing number of victims of murder, torture, and forced disappearance throughout the country; the constant changing of actors; and the number of post-conflict processes taking place amidst the ongoing violence, forensic anthropologists have a paramount role. They must search for, exhume, and identify such victims to repatriate them to their families, and identify perpetrators in order to prosecute them. Presently, forensic teams of the Prosecution Office have exhumed 9,000 bodies of victims of the armed conflict (Fiscalía General de la Nación 2018). However, the nature of the continued conflict has posed particular challenges to forensic anthropologists, thus their knowledge of the socio-cultural, political, and historical dynamics and effects of violence is multi-layered, multifaceted and it is central for making sense of the conflict (Olarte-Sierra 2018; Olarte-Sierra and Castro Bermúdez 2019).

I contacted Jaime in mid-2016 and proposed this research. He agreed, on one condition: that he would not be a passive object of study, but an active co-researcher, who would think and publish with me. And so we started working together. I will address the experience of working with Jaime in the following section. Here, I want to reflect on the slap in the face that working on such a topic has entailed. For that, I need to give some details of my own experience of the Colombian conflict.

As a Colombian born in the second half of the twentieth century (and for those born later on), the conflict has been a constant presence in my life. I have learnt to live with the silent and permanent fear of a violence-stricken context. Nevertheless, I can say that the conflict as such never hit me directly, in the sense that none of my closest family members or friends were disappeared, kidnapped, displaced, murdered, or killed (although many had close calls: on one mothers’ day, my parents and my aunt and uncle, although living in different cities, missed by seconds being killed by bomb blasts set off by drug capos.3 Some years later, that same aunt and my grandmother missed being kidnapped by the ELN guerrilla group at the church. My grandmother decided to go to a later mass rather than the usual noon mass that she went to every Sunday4). I saw, nonetheless, how relatives of my friends and acquaintances of acquaintances were not so lucky. Furthermore, as many Colombians born and raised in Bogota (the capital city), the conflict of the mid-1990s and early 2000s happened only in the news, whether on radio, TV, or in the newspapers but it hardly materialized in my daily life.

In 2003, I left the country and lived abroad for nine years. During this time, the conflict became even stranger to me. I knew that many people were suffering, and of the atrocities committed by members of the paramilitary, the guerrillas, and the armed forces alike. I could discuss the situation, I had my own position and opinions about it, I could empathize with those suffering in the first person, but I did not feel it. It was a distant conflict happening very close to me but not to me. And so, by writing this piece, I understood Claudia Salamanca’s take on empathy as being an emotion that supposes a relation with another

---

3On May 14, 1990 Bogota and Cali were attacked by three car bomb blasts (Lozano 1990).
4On May 30 1999, members of the ELN guerrilla group kidnapped 165 people at the church of La María in Cali (Ugarriza, Nathalie, and Guerrillas 2017).
person that does not involve truly making the effort of actually trying to understand, share, or feel someone’s pain (Salamanca 2014). And here is one of the difficulties of writing about working so closely to the conflict: I came to realize that what I knew, said or even felt about the conflict was empty, and as such all I did was contribute to re-victimizing the victims. With that realization came another one: I did not want to be that kind of actor in such a bloody conflict. In this realization, I also comprehended, however, that my connection to the conflict was neither one of cynicism nor of indolence. It was detachment; it did not affect me directly. The conflict became a sort of normal state, an un-tuned radio. This was hardly my experience alone, but was the experience of many of us living in the main cities who witnessed the conflict taking place at a distance; after the persecution and capture of the drug capos, the conflict lessened considerably in a number of cities, including Bogota (Linares Prieto and Ariza 2014), but intensified in the countryside (where it has always been present), with confrontations between guerrillas and paramilitary groups over land and territory. But, again, it was a distant conflict – at least to me. 

What I have come to understand through this exercise of acknowledging my being with this research – by working with Jaime and his colleagues, by delving into their accounts, practices, and experiences as forensic anthropologists – is that I have come as close to the conflict as I have never been. I am digging deeper into its nuances and dynamics that were previously unknown to me. I have come to feel perhaps not the conflict as such, but certainly some of its effects. The conflict is now enacted differently: I have understood that little has changed in Colombia over the past decades because the conflict, with its many actors and changing natures, has always been crossed by the economic interests of a few powerful and rich people. This new knowledge made me feel anger towards those who, in many ways, nourish the conflict for their own benefit and power. This was the slap in the face that I received, and it woke me up from a long and uneasy sleep. The reality that I have faced with this writing practice is that in this enactment of the conflict I have had to deal with a mix of my own naïveté in assuming that the conflict was always about politics and ideology, and the pain caused by acknowledging that economic interests and power hunger constitute the fuel for the seemingly never-ending violence. Indeed, I recognized these affects and feelings one day when returning from fieldwork, though at that time I did not delve further into their relationship with my research process: 

It’s 19:05. Christmas decorations and pouring rain accompany me on my way back home from the Prosecution Office. This is the first time I am leaving this late – I usually have to leave earlier as visitors cannot stay later than 18:00 – but today Jaime had brought most of his field diaries and we were going through each of these technologies of past and present, of memory and registration. He was recounting every story behind every page, answering all of my questions, remembering details, people, actions. And in doing so, he connected different cases. What started as a lineal wander through his documents became a network of cases, strung together by people, by commonalities in the graves, by actors of the conflict. The drawings, writings, coordinates, diagrams, and sketches became stories of their own, but also stories of a long-lasting, bloody and painful sustained violence of an armed conflict. [...] And just as he did when going through his notebooks, I do the same with what has been this one and a half years of working with him … Different comments, statements, explanations, that took place at different times, in different settings, prompted by different questions, now come back, and I can hear Jaime saying: What we have to keep in mind about the paramilitary is that they were a social group that disguised elite interest in acquiring land through the creation of anti-insurgent groups supported by some members of the armed forces and the police
… it was an underground war to consolidate a political and economic power and thus co-opt the State. The booty was to control the price of coca for some, and for others to gain land. Not to liberate us all from the evil dangerous insurgents and leftists. Then another episode: “The scandal of the so-called false-positives was a stage, a performance for guaranteeing and legitimizing the policy of democratic security. It was a strategy to disappear innocent people, kill them and display them as war trophies, a theatrical statement about the fight against the insurgents”.

On this bus, in this traffic jam, it hits me: What these exchanges and experiences with Jaime are doing to me is that they are making the conflict graspable, difficult to ignore. All these accounts, experiences and practices are giving flesh and bones to a conflict that I have till now only reluctantly and briefly looked into; that I have very much ignored for decades.

My bus stop is approaching. I have to pack up my own notebook and ready my umbrella. But I know that these thoughts and feelings of anger, disgust and impossibility will not stop now, that I have to start redefining and reshaping my relationship with this conflict, to face my own responsibilities and duties as a person who has lived through it, however impersonal my relationship with its direct violence was. (Diary entry. December 12, 2017. My translation)

When revisiting these notes that I made after a particularly troubling encounter with Jaime, when I look at what I had registered, not as data but as a practice of making sense of my feelings (Alcalde 2007), I recognize that although I never made it conscious before writing this piece, it has been impossible, at least for me, to separate the affects that take place at the moment of data production from the emotion that happens after I leave the field. Here, it is important to address the analytic distinction between affect and emotions. Following Ahmed (2004), Labanyi (2010) and López (2014), affect is the body’s reactions to stimuli; it is what sets the body in motion. They are largely pre-conscious and occur previous to emotion. That is, affect is thought in action (Thrift 2008, 175). Feelings and emotions, on the other hand, imply a conscious act of acknowledging and naming them. They are embodied though. In both cases, what is at stake – in theoretical and methodological terms – is the recognition that the body produces knowledge; that emotions and affect link together different actors and help to produce the social. In doing so, scholarly work on emotion and affect recognizes that “in social dynamics forces of the order of the corporeal that are irreducible to discursive interpellation are at play” (López 2014, 5. My translation).

Hence, affect and emotions are present all along the research process and become constitutive of the data itself, of research practice and of my own knowledge productions. I realize that after the data has been produced, during all those days when it dwells with me (in me) in a sort of unfocused way, and later on when it again becomes imminent, focused and defined as I consciously analyze it, the affect of uneasiness and discomfort, and the later (much clearer) emotions of anger, pain, shame, frustration, but also of inspiration, commitment, courage, and a sense of purpose, shape us all. By us all, I mean data, fieldwork, actors, analysis, and my lived experience of the conflict. We become together (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012). We get entangled in ways that boundaries no longer hold (Labanyi 2010, 223).

5 Most of the work on affective knowledge assumes affect as not culture-bound given its pre-discursive nature. However, I cannot relate to such an approach for there is no instance in our lived experience that happens in a cultural vacuum (see Haraway 1988).
3. Textures of knowledge and care

From a Care Theory approach, we know that “relations of knowing and thinking require care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 198), in the sense that in order to produce knowledge, one necessarily establishes relations that “involve material engagement in labors to sustain interdependent worlds” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012). From this perspective, care involves all those practices directed not only at maintaining but also repairing the worlds we live in, with the intention and conviction that a better future is possible (Díaz del Castillo, Olarte-Sierra, and Perez-Bustos 2012; Olarte-Sierra 2015; Tronto and Fisher 1990). Hence the ethics of care entail an ontological dimension that materializes via a series of practices (Haraway 1988; Olarte-Sierra 2015; Pérez-Bustos, Tobar-Roa, and Márquez-Gutiérrez 2016; Puig de la Bella Casa 2010, 2011; Singleton 2011), and it is both a theoretical framework and a methodological device. This approach, together with STS feminist and material-semiotic approaches to the politics of knowledge, have reclaimed the body as a site in which knowledge is produced. This destabilizes the well-established, yet insufficient, mind–body divide. Central stage is therefore given to the affect and emotions that come with and are produced through the practices we engage with during research (Ahmed 2004; Alcalde 2007; Labanyi 2010; López 2014; Rose 1983; Thompson 2015; Thrift 2008). Acknowledging that the body through its affects, emotions, and experiences produces knowledge, and that such knowledge supposes the establishment of relationships with those involved in its production, implies that knowledge is not neutral, objective, innocent, or universal. Rather, knowledge is situated, produced by people, in socio-political and historic specific contexts, and it cannot be universalized (Epstein 2004; Haraway 2008; Mol 1999). Additionally, following Law (2015), knowledge production practices have world-making effects. That is so because research methods are performative and give format to the social. In other words, knowledge production, through its methods of enquiry, enacts the very thing that it studies (Law and Urry 2004). Hence, knowledge productions are not only situated, and non-neutral; they are also political and have ontological effects on the social: they enact it (Mol 2002). Therefore, STS ethnography and ethnographic approaches are no longer considered representations of a reality. Rather, they produce the realities they study.

This stance on the politics of knowledge has been my compass when doing research (and has also served as a life ethos) for many years (Olarte-Sierra & Pérez-Bustos Forthcoming). I do not consider my own knowledge productions to be neutral, neither do I consider Jaime’s and colleagues’ to be so. I chose to work with forensic anthropologists not merely because of the centrality of their role in (post-)conflict scenarios, or because of the fact that the work involved in identifying a body is largely overlooked, as are the effects that such a job has on forensic specialists’ personal lives and bodies. I also chose to work with them because they are part of a group of people with the power to present their knowledge productions not only as neutral and purely testimonial but also as objective evidence to help determine a person’s identity whether a victim or a perpetrator. The political implications and social effects of such knowledge are seldom studied (Douglas 2014; Moon 2013). Thus, I want to and I am addressing the world-making effects of forensic knowledge in the context of the Colombian (post)conflict.

I met Jaime in 2012, when doing ethnographic research on the practice of forensic identification in relation to memory and knowledge production of a particular part of
the armed conflict (Olarte-Sierra et al. 2014). In the course of that research, the perils of being a forensic expert in Colombia became clear. This included the risks inherent to working in inhospitable geographies, such as snakebites; passing through the marks that the engagement in recurrent exhumations causes on the body, such as herniated vertebrae discs and injured shoulders; to facing threats to their lives because of the very nature of their job, both by having to work in scenarios where they risk coming into the cross-fire or by personally receiving death threats.

The invisibility of forensic experts and what they go through struck me as unfair. Additionally, it was evident that they have produced an enormous trove of qualitative knowledge about the conflict; a knowledge that is able to assemble dynamics, actors, politics and socio-political contexts of the different moments of this long-lasting violence. It is nevertheless not addressed as having enormous political effects for memory practices and in transitional justice scenarios. This further invisibility struck me as unreasonable. Four years later, I embarked on a project to address these specific issues. As mentioned before, Jaime became my co-researcher and we have established a solidary and reciprocal relationship in which we both accompany the other, providing support in the issues that we know are our strengths and humbly asking for guidance in those matters that fall out of our reach. This collaboration has meant, of course, a negotiation of research questions and topics to address them; not so much on the theoretical and methodological approaches, which I provide and Jaime agrees on. The negotiation of the research question is in terms of precisely that: to agree on that we need a specific question to guide us. In the beginning, Jaime’s idea was more to give testimony of his and his colleagues’ work. To make visible what they do, how much they contribute, and what it entails to be a forensic anthropologist of the Prosecution Office having to exhume bodies amidst an armed conflict. Nonetheless, after many conversations, we agreed on having a question: How forensic anthropologists’ knowledge provide nuances to the Colombian (post) conflict?

During the course of these two years, we have moved on to ask about the world-making effects of such knowledge. Jaime suggested organizing our objectives through specific artifacts, events, and practices: (a) Forensic evidence; (b) The body of the enemy as it is produced through the archaeological and forensic investigation of the context in graves and crime scenes; (c) The development and establishment of forensic anthropology in Colombia. Jaime has been incredibly generous and patient with me when sharing his experience, knowledge, and expertise regarding his practice as a forensic anthropologist, as well as his knowledge and understanding of the conflict and its actors. The following two photos of my field diary eloquently show our collective work (Figures 1 and 2).

I, on the other hand, have provided academic structure to our meetings and helped in knitting his and his colleagues’ experiences with theoretical discussions. I have also facilitated to produce an argument after making sense of our data. As a material result, we have now submitted two papers to scientific journals, one is accepted and one is in revision. We plan to write two more papers together.

Along this road, I have also established other relationships of collective and solidary interactions and research. In relation to the overarching question of forensic knowledge effects I am also working with María Ordóñez, an artist doing research on registers, narratives and the immaterialities of forced disappearance in Colombia. After many talks about
our topics, we realized that we are looking pretty much at the same phenomenon but from opposite sides of the river, so to speak. We are both focusing on technologies for registering the disappearance of and the search for people, in María’s case, as conducted by family members, in my case by forensic specialists. We thus decided to combine our interests and to try to establish a dialogue between the experiences of these two main actors of the conflict.

María comes from a different academic setting than I do and she has been close to her affect and emotions as a fundamental source of her work. She has a refreshing easiness when expressing, naming and sharing with me the emotions that her research produces in her, and consciously nourishes her thoughts with them. In the face of this relationship came the second element that made this writing practice so difficult: although I have read the literature and appreciate fellow ethnographers’ accounts of and lessons in recognizing one’s affect and emotions during fieldwork and afterwards, and despite the fact that I am fully convinced that one can only learn, know and live with and through the body, it has been extremely difficult to do so in a paper. Reflecting on such difficulties, I dare say that writing this paper has forced me to acknowledge and to name the contours of my feelings. I recognize myself in Ghanem-Yazbeck’s (2017, 50) words when she says that “the most important reason to disregard my [affect and] emotions was my desire to ‘be scientific’.”

The paradox here is that neither I, nor Ghanem-Yazbeck, believe for a moment that acknowledging one’s affect and emotions is un-scientific. Yet acknowledging them has been challenging. This paradox has to do to with the fact that it is one thing to know...
that emotional and affective knowledge is no less scientific than knowledge that denies emotions (Ahmed 2004; López 2014) but an entirely different thing to actually confront, name and analyze such emotions and concede their role in research practice. As I am doing here.

As a response to this, María and I have begun an ongoing epistolary system whereby we share particular affects and emotions that arise in our respective research. The following excerpt is of a message in which I proposed using this system to face our body as part of our experience and data:

Hello María,

I understand perfectly how you feel, the pessimism that takes over … Whenever I leave the Prosecution Office I feel as if I have run a marathon watching horrors. The fatigue that I feel
is as physical as it is emotional … When I get to the street I can only think of trying to shut it all out, because everything is so ugly, so twisted, so impossible …

… Thank you for giving me the opportunity to tackle this issue of what I feel head on, and to dedicate my time, my head and my heart to making sense of that. I am now able to put words to a discontent and nuisance that I have been feeling for years.

I think that we must also document our own emotions, because they affect us, because they make us the people we are, and give context to the questions we ask and the intentions we have. They become part of the questions we pose, the conversations we engage with, the people we want to involve … I propose that we record them in a field diary, and that we take them as seriously as data, as an interview. What do you think? (Diary entry. November 18, 2017. My translation)

We have committed to identifying the affective and emotional parts of our research practice and let them be part of our analysis. We ponder about how they shape our questions, interests, and approaches. For instance, we have recognized that monopolizing versions of victims’ experiences produce deep discomfort and María has decided to address the invisibility of experiences that are ignored. I, on the other hand, have acknowledged the fatigue that I feel right after visiting the Prosecution Office for a number of hours. I thus have decided to write my notes in a coffee house located opposite the Prosecution Office right after I leave. This allows me to not visit my data for a couple of days, at least. Also, I have recognized that because of the affect and emotions involved in my research practice, I choose to go further in issues that make me angry and that are hard for me to comprehend. For example, I am focusing more on the State’s abuses on civilians and on paramilitary abuses that happened under the State’s consent. I recognize, that in doing so I make those stories more visible, more present, and as such, they circulate more.

4. Formatting the word: on (un)making the conflict

As John Law (2004, 14) says, “[methods] may be understood as methods assemblages, that is as enactments of relations that make some things (representations, objects, apprehensions) present ‘in-here’, whilst making others absent ‘out-there’.” Focusing on a certain topic and working on certain issues through particular methods helps to enact them in specific forms, because “methods are not simply techniques but carry personal, skill-related, theoretical and other agendas,” they are performative and contribute to formatting the world (Law 2015, 3). In this final part, I reflect on the worlds that I help to enact and format through my research practice. For doing so, I attend to my interest in forensic anthropologists’ writing processes. I consider them technologies of memory (Bowker 2008). Also, I address the effects that my own writing and registration practices have.

As part of my research, I am exploring forensic anthropologists’ various registration techniques and technologies, such as diaries, logs, notes, drawings, schemes, and diagrams. For this, I have incorporated the experiences and practices of two forensic anthropologists who do humanitarian forensic work. For them, as for Jaime, my interest in their registration practices has been quite puzzling, as they see them as having no particular relevance to anyone other than themselves. As I explained, I take such artifacts as one of the traces that forensic anthropologists leave for every case that they work on. They amount to a memory, not only of each specific case, but when taken as a whole are
also part of a memory of a practice, of a conflict (whichever conflict they have worked on), and of a time (which is not necessarily linear) (Olarte-Sierra 2018).

My interest in attending to these diaries and forms of registration is an attempt to address the processes, details, and the solitary and silent moments of thinking (Garforth 2012) that forensic anthropologists have when they produce knowledge. These diaries are multiple, and they are materialized through different practices (Mol 2002). For instance, for me, they are, amongst other things, a testimony of a practice and a form of archive. However, for these forensic anthropologists, diaries are also devices that prompt reflection, spaces that allow conversations between the forensic anthropologist and him or herself. This is visible when, in the diaries, forensic anthropologists ask questions meant for them, very much like my own registration practices and the particular practice of writing this paper. On this regard, Alan and Esteban⁶ said:

It [the diary] provokes a reflection. Exhuming is a process and detailed registration allows us to know clearly what we don’t know, what we need to investigate. It helps me to ask how I can understand what I’m seeing. It’s one thing to touch, smell, see, and another thing is to write or draw … It is a process of thought and it is also support when I’m writing the final report. And when I look at them in retrospect, when the case closes, they help me think about what I should improve in my work. (Alan. November 2017. My translation)

The diary, or the notebook, is always present. In it I write events, meetings, facts, appointments. I also use it for writing down questions, for organizing ideas. But now that I’ve come to think about it, I realized that I draw and do schemes much more than I write. It’s a private document, nobody else can make anything of it, it’s only mine […] But it is a backup for when I’m doing the final report. (Esteban. December 2017. My translation)

In both cases, the diary is a private object, used only by the person who keeps it. Nevertheless, diaries and their content do circulate further – albeit in rather small circles – as they can become evidence. And in this sense, these notes are non-innocent, they have effects in the world. Jaime explained:

My notes are also proofs, forms of fixing evidence that I will later be able to use when writing the official report or to present when I’m summoned to an audience [as witness]. (Jaime. September 2017)

Furthermore, through my ethnographic methods – prompted by questions and interests in looking at logging and archival practices as possible reservoirs of memory, and through my writing and paper presentations – these diaries move even further and to previously unthinkable places. My research into these forensic anthropologists’ diaries as technologies of memory helps both to recall diaries to memory, and also to enact such diaries as memories in ways that make them visible and available to others, far beyond their authors. Through my methods, these logs are materialized and enacted as the qualitative forensic knowledge that is not limited to a mere technical and quantitative measurement of death. Rather, the diaries become the doings and experience of flesh and bone people who work daily on the job of trying to identify victims of violence, while also trying to make sense of the conflict. And in doing so, they co-produce the conflict.

As for me, I do not consider writing and note-taking during and after a field visit as merely technical practices. Rather, they are an instance of the very experience of research

⁶These are pseudonyms.
that produces the world I am researching. Through my own writing practice of field notes and of papers like this one I, too, try to make sense of the conflict and of my role in it. In so doing, I enact a particular form of it: one that privileges and makes more visible both the doings of forensic anthropologists and the abuses by the State and the paramilitary.

Additionally, taking notes simultaneously with Jaime, materializes the fact that I do not research alone, and that we become together with the data we are producing. In my case, I get closer to and produce the conflict through Jaime’s experiences. Jaime, on the other hand, through his explanations, enacts a conflict in words and forms (and perhaps details) that are not the regular ones that he uses when talking about these events and his experience with/in them in official settings like, for instance, an Audience. And the two of us produce a conflict through our inquiry and note-taking practices. However, collaborative note-taking supposes a different relationship with data. Here notes take the form of a conversation that needs to make sense to the both of us. In my own note-taking practice, data is a mix of what I hear, see, and feel and it only needs to make sense to me. Very much like Alan and Esteban pointed out previously. Hence, we produce a conflict that is multiple, that is sometimes ours and that is sometimes mine.

5. Final thoughts

I have managed to write this text. Writing it has been an arduous yet gratifying practice of (shared) self-reflection. Although I address my affect and emotions when doing ethnographic STS research on forensic anthropologists’ practices in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, the core of this paper is about the ways in which affect and emotions have played a role in the course of this research, how they have shaped my relationships with others involved in this research, with the conflict itself, and with the ethnographic practice. As such, I have not only attended to the role my affect and emotion have as knowledge productions. I also, and more importantly, add to the discussions on this topic as well as to STS material-semiotic ones by actively addressing the effect that such productions have to the worlds that I enact through my own research practice. In this sense, explicitly acknowledging the difficulty that writing this text supposed has allowed me to recognize two main issues regarding my practice as a feminist STS ethnographer.

First, there is the pain caused by looking directly at and coming closer than I have ever been to a conflict that, although I have coexisted with it and it very much defines an important part of my lived experience, I have not truly (or consciously) felt in my own skin. The head-on approach that this writing process required resulted in me comprehending that my detachment from the dynamics of the conflict was an effect of my enormously naïve former understanding of it. My new relationship with the conflict has produced pain, frustration, anger, and a new experience of this (post-)conflict that occasionally leans towards skepticism. But most of all it has made me understand that I too am an actor in it, and that I too am affected by it.

In this sense, it is possible to state that writing is very much a process in which knowledge is produced by the very act of generating words and sentences (Colyar 2009), of making sense of what one feels, and of naming such feelings. It is also about making sense of the role of these affects and feelings in one’s research practice. As Colyar (2009, 426) states, “in the writing process, our ideas are immediately available for
review and reevaluation, a process that assists as we refine our ideas.” Writing is, therefore, a process that knits together two activities that seem separate: data production and data analysis (Colyar 2009). Writing reflexively about how affect and emotions play a role during and after fieldwork allows us to understand and deal with them; not as something separate from the research process, running alongside, but intertwined and constitutive of the very data one produces, the analysis one makes, and the research process as a whole.

In this regard, I also looked into others’ and my own note-taking practices during fieldwork. I considered them as a practice of reflection, but also as research itself, which formats the world (Law 2015), helps bring to the fore the non-innocent nature of our research products and our responsibilities regarding the kind of worlds we are willing (or helping) to enact (Law and Urry 2004). For me, one result of this writing practice is that I have been able to recognize that this research has enabled me to become together with those that form the assemblage of this ethnographic practice, and this has made us all into renewed committed actors trying to make a contribution to lessening the ongoing conflict.

**Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to Adriana Díaz del Castillo, Nathalia Cabrera, and María Alejandra Rubio for their fruitful comments to earlier versions of this text. Also I want to thank my editor Zoe Goldstein for her impeccable work. Additionally, I want to thank the unknown reviewers for their useful comments that helped strengthen my argument.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**ORCID**

María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6537-7138](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6537-7138)

**Notes on contributor**

María Fernanda Olarte-Sierra is Doctor of Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Amsterdam. Currently she is an independent researcher of Anthropology of Science and works at Ensamble Investigaciones as a senior researcher. Her focus is on the effects of forensic knowledge production practices as enactments of violence and conflict.

**References**

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Alcalde, Cristina. 2007. “Going Home: A Feminist Anthropologist’s Reflections on Dilemmas of Power and Positionality in the Field.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7 (2): 143–162.

Beaulieu, Anne. 2010. “From Co-Location to Co-Presence: Shifts in the Use of Ethnography for the Study of Knowledge.” *Social Studies of Science* 40 (3): 453–470.

Behar, Ruth. 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Bello, Martha Nubia. 2013. ¡Basta YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad. Bogota: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.
M. F. OLARTE-SIERRA
Olarte-Sierra, María Fernanda, and Jaime Castro Bermúdez. 2019. “Testigos Modestos y Poblaciones Invisibles en la Cobertura de la Genética Humana en los Medios de Comunicación colombianos.” Interface – Comunicação, Saúde, Educaçao 16 (41): 451–467.

Douglas, Lee. 2014. “Mass Graves Gone Missing: Producing Knowledge in a World of Absence.” Culture & History Digital Journal 3 (2). doi:10.3989/Chdj.2014.022.

Epstein, Steven. 2004. “Bodily Differences and Collective Identities: The Politics of Gender and Race in Biomedical Research in the United States.” Body & Society 10 (2–3): 183–203. doi:10.1177/1357034X04042942.

Fajardo, Dario. 2014. El País. Tres Coches Bomba Siembran el Terror en las Ciudades de Bogota y Cali. https://elpais.com/diario/1990/05/14/internacional/642636001_850215.html.

Fiscalía General de la Nación. 2018. Fiscalía Ha Ubicado y Recuperado los Cuerpos de 9.000 Víctimas del Conflicto Social Armado, Razones de Su Persistencia y Sus Efectos Más Profundos en la Sociedad Colombiana. Bogota: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.

Garforth, Lisa. 2012. “In/Visibilities of Research: Seeing and Knowing in STS.” Science Technology and Human Values 37 (2): 264–285.

Ghanem-Yazbeck, Dalia. 2017. “Challenging Fieldwork: Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria.” Anthropology Matters Journal 17 (2): 28–56.

Haraway, Donna. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” Feminist Studies 14 (3) 575–599.

Haraway, Donna. 2008. When Species Meet. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Jaramillo-Marín, Jeannette. 2010. “Reflexiones Sobre los ‘usos’ y ‘abuses’ de la Verdad, la Justicia y la Reparación en el Proceso de Justicia y Paz Colombiano (2005–2010).” Papel Político 15 (1): 13–46.

Labanyi, Jo. 2010. “Doing Things: Emotion, Affect, and Materiality.” Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies 11 (3–4): 223–233. doi:10.1080/14636204.2010.538244.

Law, John. 2004. After Method. Mess in Social Science Research. New York: Routledge.

Law, John. 2015. “STS as Method.” Heterogeneities (blog). http://heterogeneities.net

Law, John, and John Urry. 2004. “Enacting the Social.” Economy and Society 33 (3): 390–410.

Linares Prieto, Patricia, and Nubia Herrera Ariza. 2014. Los Silencios y los Olvidos de la Verdad, Justicia y Paz. Bogota: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.

López, Helena. 2014. “Emociones, Afectividad, Feminismo.” In Cuerpo y Afectividad en la Sociedad Contemporánea: Algunas Rutas Del Amor y la Experiencia Sensible en las Ciencias Sociales, edited by Adriana García Andrade, and Olga Sabido Ramos, 257–276. Ciudad de México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.

Lozano, Pilar. 1990. “Tres Coches Bomba Siembran el Terror en las Ciudades de Bogota y Cali.” El País. May 14, 1990. https://elpais.com/diario/1990/05/14/internacional/642636001_850215.html.

Mol, Annemarie. 1999. “Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions.” The Sociological Review 47 (1_suppl): 74–89. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1999.tb03483.x.

Mol, AnneMarie. 2002. The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Molinares Dueñas, César, and Nathan Jaccard. 2016. La Maldita Tierra. Guerrilla, Paramilitares, Mineras y Conflicto Armado en el Departamento de Cesar. 1st ed. Bogota: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.

Olarte-Sierra, María Fernanda. 2015. “Comunicaciones Cuidadosas: Generando Pro-Comunes.” Universitas Humanistica 81 (2): 119–147.

Olarte-Sierra, María Fernanda, and Jaime Castro Bermúdez. 2019. “Notas forenses: Conocimiento que materializa a los cuerpos del enemigo en fosas paramilitares y falsos positivos.” Revista Antipoda de Antropología y Arqueología 34: 119–140.

Olarte-Sierra, María Fernanda, Adriana Díaz del Castillo, Pulido Ronchaquira Natalia, Cabrera Villota Nathalia, and Roberto Suarez Montañez. 2014. “Verdad e Incertidumbre En el Marco del
Conflict en Colombia: Una Mirada a los Sistemas de Información Como Prácticas de Memoria.”
*Universitas Humanística* 79: 233–254.
Olarte-Sierra, M. F., and T. Pérez Bustos. *Forthcoming.* “Careful Speculations: Toward a Caring Science of Forensic Genetics in Colombia.” *Feminist Studies* (in revision).
Olarte-Sierra, María Fernanda. 2018. “Unearthing Knowledge: Forensic Anthropology and Technologies of Memory.” Blog of CASTAC. *Platypus* CATAc (blog), April 10. [http://blog.castac.org/2018/04/forensic-memory/](http://blog.castac.org/2018/04/forensic-memory/)

Pérez-Bustos, Tania, Fredy Mora-Gámez, and Santiago Martínez Medina. 2017. “Calls for Papers.” *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 1 (1): 14–16.

Pérez-Bustos, Tania, Victoria Tobar-Roa, and Sara Márquez-Gutiérrez. 2016. “Etnografías de los Contactos. Reflexiones Feministas Sobre el Bordado Como Conocimiento.” *Antípoda* 26: 47–66.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2010. “Ethical Doings in Naturecultures.” *Ethics, Place & Environment* 13 (2): 151–169.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2011. “Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things.” *Social Studies of Science* 41 (1): 85–106.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2012. “Nothing Comes Without its World‘: Thinking with Care.” *The Sociological Review* 60 (2): 197–216.

Quevedo, Helka. 2014. *Textos Corporales de la Verdad. Memoria Histórica y Antropología Forense.* Bogota: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.

Rodríguez Morales, Tania Gabriela. 2016. “Geografía del Terrorismo en Colombia: Una Visión Retrospectiva.” *Revista de Paz Y Conflictos* 9 (2): 179–198.

Rose, Hilary. 1983. “Hand, Brain, and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9 (1): 73–90.

Salamanca, Claudia. 2014 “Cuatro Imágenes de Falsos Positivos.” Presented at the Historia del Arte y Poder. Fase 3: Historias de Investigación, Museo Nacional de Colombia, September 15, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = APKUdB9Ieto&t = 639s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APKUdB9Ieto&t=639s)

Singleton, Vicky. 2012. “When Contexts Meet.” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 37 (4): 404–433.

Smith, Katherine. 2009. “Is a Happy Anthropologist a Good Anthropologist?” *Anthropology Matters Journal* 11 (1): 1–11.

Thompson, Charis. 2015. “Situated Knowledge, Feminist and Science and Technology Studies Perspective.” In *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, edited by James Wright, 2nd ed., Vol. 22, 1–4. Cambridge: Elsevier Science & Technology.

Thrift, Nigel. 2008. *Non-Representational Theory. Space, Politics, Affect.* London: Routledge.

Tronto, Joan C, and Berenice Fisher. 1990. “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring.” In *Circles of Care*, 36–54. New York: SUNY.

Ugarriza, Juan Esteban, Pabón Nathalie, and Militares y Guerrillas. 2017. *La Memoria Histórica del Conflicto Armado en Colombia Desde los Archivos Militares 1958–2016.* Bogota: Universidad del Rosario.

Unidad para las Víctimas. 2018. “Registro Único de Víctimas.” Accessed September 30th, 2018. [http://mi.unidadvictimas.gov.co/RUV](http://mi.unidadvictimas.gov.co/RUV)