



*A local fruit seller in the traditional clothing*

FROM CONFLICT TO PEACE – LIVING TOGETHER IN A POST WAR  
SETTING

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## Abstract

In 2021, I traveled to the small mountain town of Chita, Colombia with my daughter by my side and a camera in hand. The town had endured decades of civil war and guerrilla control, leaving its inhabitants deeply scarred by violence and division. The town's history was a tapestry of conflicting allegiances, with families and neighbors pitted against one another, some supporting the government while others believed in the guerrilla's cause. This dramatic rift had torn the community apart, leaving wounds that seemed almost impossible to heal. Today, this division seems almost unbelievable. Despite the lack of formal reconciliation efforts or direct work on trauma from the war, the town appeared to be functioning surprisingly well, with few apparent conflicts.

This intriguing dynamic inspired me to delve deeper into the experiences of three middle-aged men – Angel, Alberto, and Benjamin – who had grown up in Chita and lived through the 50 years of conflict in vastly different ways.

Through conversations with these individuals, hearing their stories and perspectives on the conflict and the current situation in Chita, I gained valuable insights that have informed the development of my film "Above the Clouds" (Haukland, 2022) and this thesis.

By exploring the diverse narratives and experiences of those who have lived through Chita's tumultuous history, this project aims to shed light on the complex interplay of trauma, reconciliation, and the human capacity for resilience in the aftermaths of conflict. The insights gained from this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and psychological dynamics at play in post-conflict communities, offering valuable lessons for fostering sustainable peace and healing.

**Keywords:** Conflict, reconciliation, guerilla, peace, memory, collective trauma

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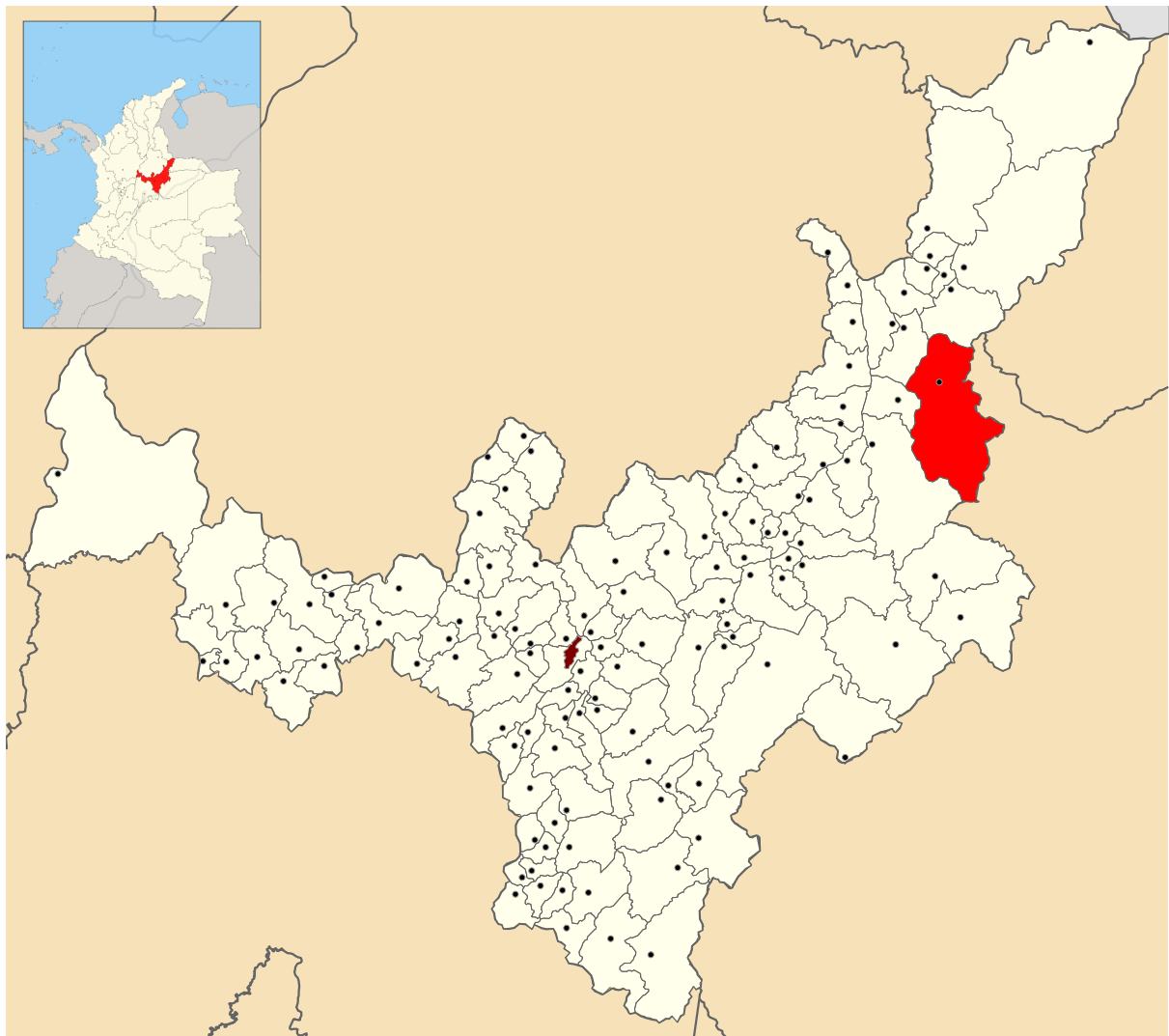
My sincere thanks go to Celina and Roosevelt for hosting my daughter and me during our five-month stay in Chita. I will forever cherish your kindness.

I am profoundly thankful to my friends and family, who have motivated me and helped me persevere with this thesis. A special thanks to my mom, who has been an unwavering source of support and mentorship throughout this entire process. Without you, I would not have been able to complete this.

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## Introduction

Experiencing conflict or other traumatic events can cause a lot of stress and impact how people live their lives. Trauma extends beyond individual psychology to encompass entire communities, shaping the collective psyche and influencing the trajectory of global history (Audergon, 2004, p. 118). The impact can be dramatic and severely decrease the life value of the people experiencing this.

The impact of conflict is even more severe when it affects a small community that rely on each other to get by. “If we assume an experience beyond that of a single individual, i.e. by two or more people, to be collective in nature, then their shared traumatic experience may be described as a collective trauma” (Koh, 2021, p. 118). Trauma originates from events that surpass our capacity to endure. These experiences exceed the limits of what we can process and integrate into our individual or communal identities.

As Herman (1994) explains, there's a tendency to push atrocities out of consciousness; some breaches of societal norms are so dreadful that they become unspeakable. The struggle between suppressing these events and acknowledging them forms the core conflict of psychological trauma. Traumatized individuals oscillate between numbness and vividly reliving the traumatic event (Audergon, 2004, p. 19).

In the five decades of civil war in Colombia, there is confirmed at least 220,000 deaths, and the nature of the violence unleashed against civilians by armed groups, the paramilitary and the national army have been brutal and degrading ((NCHM), 2015).

The conflicts have left an indelible mark on the social fabric of the community. What began as ideological divisions and disputes over resources gradually escalated into cycles of

violence that tore the town apart. Opposing factions engaged in bitter feuds, fuelled by long-standing grievances and a thirst for retribution.

As the conflicts raged on, they became deeply entrenched in the daily lives of Chita's residents. Families found themselves divided, with members taking opposing sides in the strife. Neighbours who had once shared cordial relations now viewed each other with suspicion and hostility. The very streets and public spaces that should have fostered unity became battlegrounds for rival groups to assert their dominance.

This thesis seeks to investigate how conflict has affected a small community, and how reconciliation can be difficult when the root of the conflict goes as deep as the fundament of the values one has for himself. When conflict is based on ideology, the chosen side becomes part of who you are, and abandoning those choices can be a major challenge.

This project has in many ways been in the making for many years, every since the first time I visited Chita, I knew that it was a place that I had to come back to for some kind of project. In addition to having an interesting history, the place has beautiful and calming surroundings and with the traditional way of dressing, it is one of my favorite places for photographing people. When I first started studying for my bachelor in anthropology it became clear to me that Chita would be the perfect place to do fieldwork, especially after deciding to make a film.

What I wanted to investigate in my project was how people living in conflict, learn to live somewhat peacefully together with their former enemies, or the ones responsible for the death of your loved ones. The people living in Chita have been living with ongoing exposure to violence for a long time, with many of the habitants also participating in the violence. As Chita is such a small place, everyone lives very close to each other, and everyone has some kind of relation to the rest.

For my fieldwork I was able to get in contact with three different participants, who together illustrates how it is possible to live together after being in conflict, but also illustrates the challenges there are and have been for Chita as a community. These three men included in my project have all grown up in Chita, a rural, very catholic town, isolated from the rest of the country up in the mountains. They have three very different views on the conflict, how it has affected them and ideas of reconciliation, reflecting upon how a shared experience can be



seen in three completely different perspectives. The text will explore how the truth about the past can be experienced differently by people, but that it represents the individual truth and memories of what happened.

The idea of representation was something of importance to me arriving in Chita. Both as an anthropologist and as a foreigner, there were some issues that had to be reflected upon for me to film and represent this marginalized and often stigmatized group. It was important to me that my project would not be another representation of them as poor, dirty and violent. On the other hand, there has been a great deal of violence and there is a serious alcohol problem in the community. For me it was important to comprehend this in a perspective that takes into consideration their trauma and survival history.

One teacher in Chita told me that “Chita has dealt with the conflict and the past resentments in a way that should be an inspiration to the rest of the world”. Though I think it is safe to say that the town has suffered great consequences from all the violence and that there is still a lot of pain left in the community, it can be perceived from the outside that the people from Chita have managed to deal with all they have been through in an impressive manner.

## Research questions

In what way is social fabric and power dynamics visible today in Chita and how does these shape daily life, interactions and relations?

How has the protracted conflict influenced and reshaped the structure within Chita's community?

To what extend can reconciliation be measured and evaluated in the context of Chita, and to what extent is the pursuit of societal reconciliation and healing crucial for the community's long-term well-being and social cohesion?

## Problems identified

Ethnographic fieldwork presents unique challenges, including gaining access to the community under study and maintaining a rapport with participants. Researchers must navigate ethical considerations due to the in-depth nature of their discoveries and be mindful of potential biases that can influence data interpretation. Additionally, the process of analysing social situations goes beyond mere familiarity; it requires an in-depth understanding of cultural nuances and behaviours (Sewdass, April 2009).

The fact that some of the participants want to hide or represses the problematic parts of Chita's past is challenging for the film. For the written part, it is easier to analyze how people use this as a way of protecting themselves from the past and to represent themselves in "the best" way. For the film, it can be difficult to use these clips and for the audience to understand the meaning of them. Fortunately, I have a variety of participants telling their own stories, which lets me get into the topic of the different perceptions of the past in the film as well as in the text.

The conflict that has been going on in Chita (and in Colombia) is like most conflicts, very complex. I have no intention of showing the full picture of a conflict that has been going on for so long, with so many different points of view. I imagine that it can become challenging to give the audience the information they need about the conflict, without making it a history lesson. I strive to find a balance in my work between giving my audience the information they need and making the project about the participants and their experience.

I hope that my thesis can become a contribution to show a part of the conflict that is often forgotten, giving an insight in the lives of the people who have experienced or taken part in the conflict. Showing how the war has affected a community like Chita and the people living there will hopefully give both participants and victims of this conflict a voice of their own.

It cannot be avoided to reflect on the fact that you go on fieldwork not only as a machine to gather data, but as the person you are, with the positive and negative aspects this brings with it. For me, one of the biggest challenges in my fieldwork was that I had my daughter with me, making it harder to always get the time I wanted to do research, as her and her wellbeing

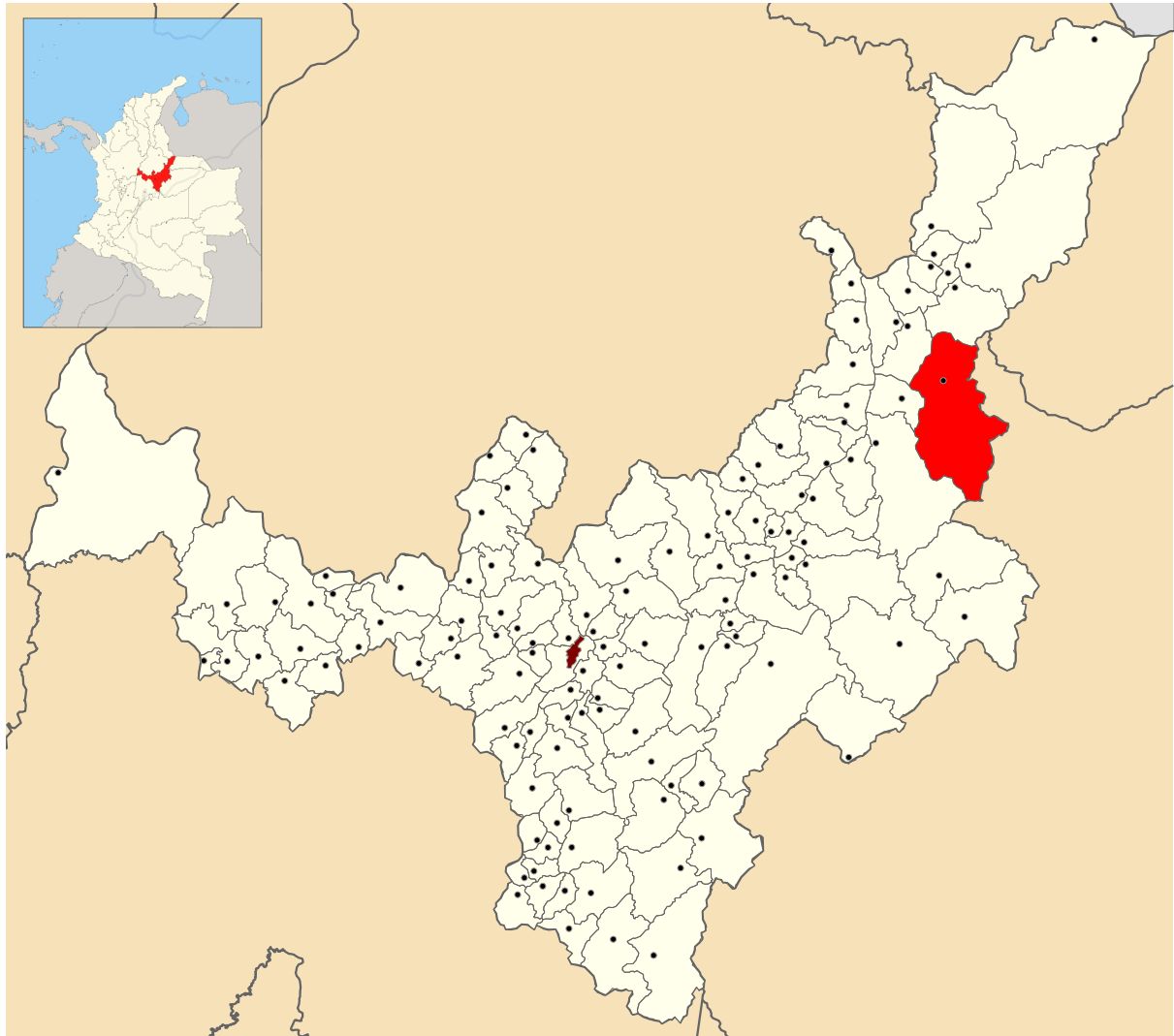
always were a priority. The way I dealt with this issue was to plan for a longer stay than needed in Chita, giving me more time to be both a researcher and a mom. We stayed a total of 5 months in Colombia, where about 4 of those were spent in Chita.

Another aspect of “me as a person” in the fieldwork that both brought problems and solutions was that I had already been in Chita two times before, and that I had extended family living there. Therefore, I was not able to arrive as only a researcher, but entered the field as a person that many were already familiar with. It also made it harder for some people to share their thoughts, because of the fear that I would tell their thoughts to others and that it would affect them negatively. The fact that I already knew people from my previous visits in Chita did however make it easier to get in contact with more people and get participants, and with some participants I could skip the “getting to know each other” part of the fieldwork.

From the start of the project, I was interested in attaining diverse experiences from the conflict in Chita. One of my main focuses before going on my fieldwork was my wish to get both women and men as participants. I had two women who seemed interested in participating and I was hopeful that they would eventually join, but every time I came to them, asking if that day was good for filming, they said we will do it later, and later never came.

I ended up getting some clips from one of the two women, but it was disappointing seeing that this part of my fieldwork did not go as planned. In the end I made a choice to not push people too much into joining, as I did not want participants who felt they were involuntarily a part of my project. As Chita is a place where the gender roles still stand strong, where the women mostly care for the home and the men takes care of the public sphere, it was challenging for the women I wanted to participate to take the role as a public person, representing the town and the narrative it has lived.

## Situating Chita: Contextualizing Conflict, Resilience, and Visual Representations



*Map positioning Boyaca and Chita in Colombia*

(Milenioscuro, 2012)

### Chita

Chita is a small town located in the mountains of Colombia, perched at an altitude of 2900 meters above sea level. Surrounded by towering peaks and deep valleys, with only one other town visible in the distance, Chita exudes a dramatic and isolated appearance.

As the economy primarily revolves around agricultural activities, the area surrounding Chita is a patchwork of fields and livestock, with farmers constantly traveling back and forth carrying buckets of fresh milk or the harvest of the day.

The traditional clothing in the department of Boyacá, consisting of the sombrero and a ruana (a thick wool poncho), is widely worn in Chita, providing protection from the intense sun and the chilly climate. Most of the habitants of Chita make their living through small scale agriculture or caring for their livestock. The department of Boyacá is one of Colombia's largest potato producers, and other than that, its economy is based on agriculture, livestock, and the mining of minerals, metals, and other natural resources.

The mining industry has experienced significant growth in the surroundings of Chita, with many residents working in the mines during the week and returning to the town on weekends. The mines are mainly illegal and the workers are not protected in case of accidents (Blanco Tellez, 2022). In exchange for putting their lives at risk, the miners earn good money, which many of the more religious habitants of Chita claims to be cursed.

Despite living on meager incomes, most of the habitants of Chita express contentment with their way of life, as the low cost of living and affordable rent allow them to maintain a modest yet satisfactory lifestyle. When asked, they often express a deep appreciation for their connection with nature and the tranquility of life away from the chaos of the city, a lifestyle many of them would not trade for anything.

The population of Chita are predominantly decedents from the native American group Laches, and the town's name, "Chita," means "our land" in the Lache language. Although most residents have native ancestors, being called an "Indian" is generally considered an insult, and the Lache language has unfortunately died out. There is a significant stigma associated with being native, and the group of people who identify as such often live separately from the rest of the community and are frequently victims of discrimination.

## A History of Conflict and Resilience

The armed conflict in Colombia has predominantly unfolded in rural areas, hamlets, and towns isolated from major cities. Small rural communities like Chita have borne the brunt of this violence. From 1948 to 1958, the country was engulfed in an all out civil war known as "La Violencia," which split the population along political lines between liberals and conservatives. In only 10 years the conflict claimed at least 200,000 lives, and nearly 1 million people were displaced from their homes (HRW, 2024).

The ideological divide centred around the role of the Catholic Church in society. The liberals sought to limit the Church's influence over the population, while the conservatives aimed to maintain traditional religious authority. In Chita, this split manifested itself physically, with the town divided into two factions separated by the church itself. Crossing the invisible border to the "wrong" side could be a death sentence.

Residents lived on either side of the church, their allegiances dictating their place of residence. To this day, the political leanings of Chita's inhabitants shift abruptly as one crosses the symbolic boundary defined by the church during "La Violencia". This physical and ideological divide has left an indelible mark on the town's social fabric, with deep-rooted tensions and animosities persisting across generations.

When the civil war finally came to an end in 1958, unresolved grievances and ideological divisions persisted, leading some liberal factions to form revolutionary guerrilla groups. In 1964, a new conflict erupted, this time pitting these guerrilla groups against paramilitary organizations and the Colombian national military forces.

While less overtly bloody and grotesque than the previous civil war, this new conflict was characterized by guerrilla groups operating primarily in remote mountainous and jungle regions, where the army's reach was limited. For five decades, from 1964 to 2013, the Colombian people endured the ravages of this protracted armed conflict (HRW, 2024). Small rural towns like Chita bore the brunt of this violence and instability. During the 50 years of fighting, young men were frequently coerced into joining one side or the other, with many never returning home. For extended periods, guerrilla groups maintained firm control

over Chita, imposing their own rules and acting as both judge and executioner in enforcing their version of law and order.

Chita was seen as a strategic point for both the guerrilla and the military and ended up being the battleground not only between the two opposing sides, but also for the different armed groups. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), both militant guerrilla groups, fought between themselves over the control of Chita, which resulted in more division and violence (Blanco Tellez, 2022).

Locals confirm that the guerrilla had full control over Chita for 15 years, where they controlled the elections, laws and the information given to the habitants. They could also demand economical support from anyone without governmental interruptions. The guerilla lost control of Chita after a bomb they were accused of placing accidentally went off in the main square, killing 8 individuals and destroying most of the surrounding infrastructure. The bomb was supposed to detonate in front of the police station at the time of the change of guards, to ensure as much damage to the police as possible.

Even though the conflict officially ended in 2013, remnants of these armed groups still linger in the surrounding mountains, and certain areas remain off-limits, particularly for foreigners, due to remaining security concerns.

### [My connection to Chita](#)

My connection to Chita began in 2015 when I was invited to spend Christmas with a friend and his family in the town where he was born. Unbeknownst to me, this would involve a gruelling 12-hour bus journey over tiny bumpy roads, dangerously close to gut-wrecking cliffs to reach this remote destination. I embarked on the 24th of December, expecting a 3–4-hour trip, only to find myself spending the entirety of Christmas Eve on a bus, arriving tired, sore, and grumpy in what felt like the middle of nowhere.

Despite my frustrations upon arriving in Chita, I ended up staying for three weeks, perhaps partly due to the dread of enduring the bus ride back. During this time, I fell in love with Chita, even though I couldn't speak Spanish and struggled to communicate with the locals. I



also fell in love with one of those locals that I struggled to communicate with. What struck me was the hard-working ethos of the people, who strived relentlessly to earn a living from the land.

While this rugged lifestyle may not suit everyone, for those who embrace the rewards of physical labour and the beauty of their surroundings, Chita is a paradise.

Although worlds apart, I saw parallels between Chita and the mentality portrayed in the film "The Shepherds of Berneray" (Shea, 1981). Both communities have chosen a life of physical demands, but one that offers the reward of waking up each day in a breath-taking, isolated environment, removed from the hustle and bustle of the modern world.

During my residential stay in Chita, I was hosted by Alberto, a local music instructor, and his spouse, Ana Maria, who operates a modest café establishment within the town's limits.

Notably, Alberto later became a participant in my film documentary project, and he also happens to be the uncle of my former romantic partner. With the house as a natural social meeting place for a big part of the community and with Alberto and Ana Marias's son and nephew as my guides, I had a unique opportunity to become part of Chita's social life.

Alberto's nephew, the one who invited me to come to Chita in the first place, ended up being my partner and we lived together for 8 years and have a daughter together. This is also one of the reasons for why I chose this remote place for my fieldwork and why I have a certain understanding of the social dynamics. My ex was born in Chita and both of his parents were from the surrounding area. The whole family lived there until his father was threatened by the guerrilla and he and his family chose to flee and start a new life far away from Chita when his best friend was killed for refusing to join.

In 2017 I returned to Chita for a photography assignment, during which I gained a deeper understanding of the conflict and the violence the people had endured. At this time, I was finally able to understand and be understood. This made it so that what I had previously gotten a superficial look at, I could now have a much more profound understanding of. At this point I started to become fascinated by how the inhabitants, despite inflicting immense suffering upon one another, had managed to coexist in a well-functioning community after such trauma. Chita had grabbed my attention and was able to continue laying in my subconsciousness until it was time to choose the site for my field work.

The fieldwork would not have been the same if I did not have family relations in Chita, and at the time of my fieldwork I lived in my mother in laws house together with my daughter and my ex. Celina, my ex partners mother, had after fleeing Chita over two decades ago, decided to go back to the place she came from now that the guerilla was not a threat anymore. This made me a more natural part of Chita and gave more people a reason to trust me and to accept my wish to dig into their painful past. Also having lived together with someone from Chita for the past 8 years, my communication skills both in Spanish and with the specific local dialect with their unique words and sayings, also made me more welcome as a part of Chita. Being there with my daughter, who it can be said is partly from Chita, also helped in being trusted and in getting in contact with people.

The experience of living together with and having a child with someone who has experienced war and is part of the enormous group of internally displaced Colombians has taught me something about the consequences of never working through trauma and how generational trauma works. When traumatic and difficult experiences are not dealt with, but pushed away, the result can be explosive reactions and difficulties regulating emotions. Juan's father never dealt with his experiences and took out his frustrations and fears on his son, being violent and abusive to him.

My ex again pushed his experiences with his father and with the war away and became a troubled man, with little control of his emotional regulation because of it. My ex-partner struggles a lot with his mental health, depression and anger issues. It can be suggested that these issues are connected to the trauma passed down from his father and his own violent experiences. On a personal level I have had the experience of trying to help someone resolve their issues connected to this kind of experiences and to try to avoid that these traumas get passed on to my own daughter. From this very personal experience I can say that it is extremely difficult to work with traumatic experiences that is not recognized and have not been worked on.

Having to flee from everything and everyone one knows is an enormous burden, both psychologically and economically. Both Celina and her late husband, Edgar, were from Boyacá and knew only of life there. Edgar had a well-paying job, and the family had a comfortable life compared to others in the community. Chita was the place they had family to

help them out and the social connections to a better life. Leaving all of this and starting over somewhere completely new is something that still affects the economical position and the social status of the family to this day.

## Multimodal Methodologies: Combining Visual and Narrative Approaches in Anthropological Fieldwork

### Encountering the lived experience

Arriving in Chita with my pre-existing knowledge of the place and connections with some of the residents presented both advantages and obstacles for my fieldwork. My family in Chita is a well-established part of the upper class, wielding significant influence and connections. They are an integral part of the church community and, overall, a highly respected family who have lived in Chita for generations. This initially helped me gain access and initiate conversations with people, and in the beginning, many seemed willing to participate due to this association.

During my first month in Chita, I was introduced to several interesting individuals, and it seemed that I would face no issues in conducting my fieldwork. However, after some time, I realized that what had seemed like a great starting point also posed some challenges. After talking with many potential candidates, I sensed that my connections in Chita made them apprehensive about engaging with me, as mentioned, they feared their opinions might be shared with influential figures. From others, I felt a reluctance to be fully honest, stemming from concerns that their views might not be appreciated by those in positions of power. While my connections initially facilitated access, they also introduced a layer of complexity and potential bias. Participants may have felt compelled to present a certain narrative or refrain from expressing their true opinions, given the perceived power dynamics and social hierarchies within the community.

To navigate these challenges, I had to consciously work on building trust and creating a safe space for open and honest dialogue. This involved emphasizing the confidentiality of our

interactions, actively listening without judgment, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to understanding diverse perspectives without fear of repercussions.

## Field Work

For my fieldwork, I employed two primary approaches: visual documentation through photography and videography and engaging in conversations with participants without the camera. When not using the camera, I would strive to write down our conversations as quickly as possible to avoid forgetting any details. At the end of each week, I would compile a log detailing my activities and the data collected. Some weeks, I would write a little every day, while other times I would summarize the week's events and gathered data in a single sitting.

My methods varied for each participant. For my main character, Angel, I would visit his workshop during business hours with my camera. I would engage in conversations with him and his family, film the workshop environment or capture details of his work and document his interactions with customers. Spending extended periods in the workshop, I carefully choose when and where to film, as well as when to engage in conversation and when to simply observe and let him work.

My interactions with Alberto and Benjamin were constrained by more limited timeframes, resulting in video footage that bears a more formal, interview-like quality. While this approach diverged from my initial creative vision for the film, it proved to be the most pragmatic means of obtaining the requisite material within the constricted time available. In Alberto's case, we were fortunate to travel a bit outside of Chita itself, giving him the opportunity to physically showcase the surrounding locales that featured in his narratives. By allowing Alberto to inhabit and interact with the physical spaces that served as backdrops to his recounted experiences, I was able to capture a more immersive and multidimensional representation of the subjects he described.

For Benjamin, we only had time for a single interview in his home. While this was very limiting, I tried to make the most of the situation. During the interview, I used two cameras,

allowing me to vary the visuals and prevent a static composition. One camera was set up on a tripod, facing Benjamin, providing a stable, continuous shot of him and an uninterrupted recording of his story. With the other camera, I captured close-ups of Benjamin and details from his home environment.

While the constraints of a solitary interview posed challenges, having two cameras filming facilitated a layered and multidimensional visual record. The varied perspectives captured through the two-camera technique imbued the material with depth and nuance, amplifying the character of Benjamin's impactful story.

Utilizing both film and text in my thesis affords me the opportunity to express two distinct perspectives. Through the film, the audience can witness what I saw and metaphorically "accompany me" into the field. The film invites the audience to analyse the material themselves, becoming active participants in the project (Tan, 2018). Conversely, the written thesis allows me to analyse and clarify situations that are not easily explained through film alone, as some contexts require accompanying text for clarity.

As Heider (1995, p. 83) writes, "Both disciplines, film and ethnography, bring specific ways of seeing the world. The ethnographic cinema needs to represent the best of each one." In creating an ethnographic film, it is essential not only to be an ethnographer and a filmmaker but also to combine these two distinct ways of seeing into a cohesive whole.

### A visual approach

Through film and photography, I aimed to capture the essence of the lived experiences and narratives of the participants, offering a multidimensional perspective on their realities and the complexities of the post-conflict context in Chita.

The incorporation of visual elements in research presents a unique opportunity to communicate more than what can be achieved through text alone. Especially in the realm of trauma studies, the visual materials can unveil layers of meaning and subtext that may remain obscured in purely linguistic accounts. The haunting specter of trauma often manifests in

subtle, nonverbal ways – a fleeting expression, a telling gesture, or the evocative juxtaposition of images and environments.

By attuning our scholarly gaze to these visual cues, we can cultivate a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between individual experiences and the broader sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded.

It is one thing to read about traumatic events, but another dimension is created when you get to look into Angels eyes and see his pain when he talks about his experiences with the guerrilla, or seeing Benjamin's nervously looking around the room, obviously feeling uneasy with the topic he is talking about. These details give that extra dimension of understanding and compassion, because you see that this is real people, who suffer just as you would have if you had been in their situation.

As González (2017, p. 145) eloquently states,

*"Obviously, all photographs are loaded with memory, every photographic image contains that elegiac character of linking life with death, they are memento mori in Sontag's words, they draw a temporal framework between what is represented and what is remembered."*

When using the camera, I primarily engaged in participant observation, filming whatever situations I found myself in. At times, I would also conduct conversations with participants while recording. However, I never conducted structured interviews; instead, I allowed our conversations to flow organically in the direction the participant wished to take them.

Bringing a camera with me in my fieldwork did not only positively affect my project. In some cases where participants ended up withdrawing from the project, the camera and the fear of sharing information that could possibly end up harming them later were most likely the reason. When being filmed, the participants are more exposed and the fear of sharing information that could possibly harm them became greater than had it been only text.

Voices from the Mountains: In what way is social fabric and power dynamics visible today in Chita?

Angel



*Angel in his workshop*

Angel, a former member of the guerrilla, is the last of the participants that I met during my fieldwork. Despite being introduced to him only a month before finishing my research, his story and experiences quickly became a focal point for my film. Angel was an active guerrilla fighter until his arrest in 2003, which led to a 4.5-year prison sentence and a year of house arrest. Today he is living in Chita, where he is working as a mechanic and spending time with his children.

When Angel finished serving his time in the military as a young man, he attained an education as a mechanic and went back to his hometown of Chita to live with his then wife and together they ended up having four children. Angel was terrified when the guerilla started entering the town and his life took a dramatic turn when his biggest nightmare came true and his children, all under 15, were expected to join the armed groups.

In a moment of gut-wrenching decision, Angel found himself grappling with unfathomable choices: escape and abandon his home and everything he knew, send his children to war and into an uncertain and dangerous future, or give his own life to defend his children. Each path appeared shrouded in darkness, offering no clear way out. Yet, in an act of unwavering love and sacrifice, Angel made a courageous decision. He made the ultimate offer, pledging himself to the guerrilla forces to secure a future for his children. With a heart heavy yet resolute, he struck a deal with the guerillas - his own safety for the chance for his children to pursue their dreams, to complete their education amidst the chaos of their world.

In the guerrilla, Angel found a sense of purpose and belonging, believing he was fighting for those who couldn't fight for themselves. As a self-educated individual with a passion for learning, but with the limitation poverty brings, he was lacking formal education. Finally, he found himself respected and seen as both intelligent and as a resource, despite not being educated. The guerrilla's focus on ideals, knowledge, and community, rather than money, formal education, and status, made him feel superior to his previous experiences and capable of contributing to a change for those in poverty.

He never found himself officially stationed in Chita by the guerrilla forces, thus his presence there was merely a semblance of "vacations" during his time as a guerrillero. Nevertheless, he had a lot of stories and experiences, unravelling of a life as a former guerrillero in the community of Chita - a landscape fraught with the heavy landscape of judgement and stigma connected to having participated in the fighting. Our conversations often flowed effortlessly, and while he never delved into the painful aspects of his past, I found our discussions to be deeply fulfilling. Angel reflects on his contradicting feelings towards the war, guerilla and his position in it all, shining light on his good and bad experiences in an honest manner.

### The workshop

In my project, crucial scenes unfold in Angel's workshop, where he operates as a mechanic from his home. His days are predominantly spent repairing motorcycles and cars for customers or working on personal projects when the workshop is not busy with clients.



Typically, there is a queue of at least five bikes awaiting repair, that he works on when the workshop is empty.

As the workshop is located on the ground floor of Angel's own house, he is never really at work, and often flows between being at work and being at home.

Upon entering Angel's workshop, one encounters a man drenched in grease from head to toe, always with a broad smile on his face. It quickly becomes evident that amidst all the motorcycle parts and grease, is where Angel feels most at ease and that working as a mechanic derives genuine pleasure in him.

The interactions between Angel and his customers offer insights into the dynamics of Chita's society and shed light on how former guerrilleros are perceived and treated. Despite the generally amicable ambiance where people stay longer than necessary during repairs, and where going to the mechanic is almost seen as a social occasion, still some individuals interject hurtful remarks about his past, resorting to sarcasm and cruelty. In such instances, Angel must brush off these comments with a laugh, although the pain they inflict is noticeable. He must maintain social acceptance and likability for people to choose his workshop for their repair, while he also wants to avoid making enemies in the small community of Chita.

The social dynamics in Chita appeared fragile, and the fear of conflict seemed to dissuade people from engaging in difficult conversations or voicing unpopular opinions. There was an unmistakable sense of caution and self-censorship, likely rooted in the town's history of conflict and the need to maintain a delicate social equilibrium. Angel, as part of the oppressive group, must stay silent to keep the peace and avoid confrontation.

When working alone with only myself and the camera present, Angel exhibits intense focus and demonstrates profound expertise in his craft. His mastery of motorcycle anatomy is uncanny after years of hands-on experience and he navigates through what may seem to others like chaotic surroundings with ease.

The workshop has evolved into an extension of himself, reflecting his identity and the hardships he has endured. It stands as a testament to his pride in having a place he can call his own and contribute to society with his exceptional skills.

## Alberto



*Alberto in a field overlooking Chita*

Alberto was born and raised in Chita, and except for a few years when he was attending university, he has lived his whole life there. He is a devoted musician and works as an arts and music teacher at the town's school. He is married to Ana Maria, and together they have two adult children. His daughter lives with them, her husband and their son while Alberto's son lives in another city with his girlfriend and daughter.

Ana Maria has a little coffeeshop that is connected to the house, where she spends most her day, taking part in the social life of Chita. Alberto and Ana Maria attend mass in the church on a daily basis and are the ones taking responsibility for producing the music experience. Every day they bring speakers and microphones, and Alberto plays the instruments while Ana Maria sings. Engaging in church work is vital for maintaining their social status, as active involvement contributes significantly to achieving and sustaining one's position in society all over Colombia, but especially in small communities like Chita.

The way status works in Colombia and Latin America is complex and time-consuming for the ones who take part in it. The film "Yesterday a girl - tomorrow a woman" (Solvang, 2014) demonstrates how some of the aspects of how a family puts effort and money into a 15<sup>th</sup> birthday party. In Latin America, when a girl turns 15, it is a big event and a chance to show off one's economic privilege and connections. Solvang (2014) also demonstrate how racism

and segregation is still incorporated in Latin America. In Chita this shows itself in the way that people in general put importance in showing off wealth, often in a contradicting way, where what is shown is not necessarily the truth.

Alberto inherited a considerable amount of land surrounding Chita in addition to the house he lives in from his parents. On the land he owns, Alberto has many cows, which only serves as an economical drain to him. The number of cows he owns shows merely as a sign of economical status, especially since he is in a position where he pays someone else to take care of them for him. Ana Maria also pays someone to do most of the work both in the house and in her coffeeshop.

I have known Alberto for many years, as he is my Colombian "uncle." I have never previously talked directly with him about the conflict and his life in Chita, but from others, I have encountered numerous narratives detailing the profound impact of the violence in Colombia on both him and his family. He was among other things shot in his foot by the guerrilla, his son was centimetres away from being killed by a bomb, and his grandparents were killed by the conservatives when his father was only 12. After finding his parents dead, his father went looking for the two adult men responsible for the murder of his parents and killed them. His father's hard life and experiences with violence affected Alberto growing up, and he had to deal with the aftermaths of the trauma his father suffered from.

Despite all this, in our conversations Alberto would only emphasize the positives about living in Chita while omitting the negative elements. He seemed determined to "sell" Chita to the camera, focusing mostly on Chita's history or facts about the plants surrounding Chita. If I tried to ask some critical questions, he would quickly return to talking about the fauna of Chita and the geographical issues they encounter.

With Alberto the biggest issue was getting time to film with him. He always seemed to have a million things to do, and he had to cancel our appointments a couple of times. I only got the opportunity to interview him twice, with each session lasting about an hour. Additionally, I captured footage of him working on his farm and spending quality time with his family on a couple of occasions.

## The church

The church in Chita holds profound symbolic significance. As mentioned earlier, if one wants to attain certain social status, particularly among the older generations, engaging in church activities is crucial. The church wields considerable influence, with the words of the priest often regarded as the absolute truth. Situated at the town's centre, the church is rich in symbolism and serves as a focal point for gatherings and social interactions, mirroring the typical layout of Colombian towns where everything revolves around the church, making it the center for gatherings and social activities.

However, in Chita, the church also embodies division, historically acting as a point of separation during times where the town was divided in two. During periods of the liberal-conservative strife, the church physically divided the community, rendering movement between factions impossible and contributing to the initial rift.

The church was also one of the reasons why this division took place in the first place. In this deeply Catholic town, the church symbolizes not only community and belonging but also shame and control. Membership in the church community and regular attendance at mass are indicators of influence; exclusion from these activities can preclude one from the social elite.

Conversations with Alberto reveal the church's direct role in aggravating the social divisions. Because of his strong religious beliefs, it hurts Alberto to talk about the church's involvement in the conflict, but in a conversation, he recounted to me how the town's priest at the time of "La Violencia" was responsible for ordering the assassination of his grandfather, along with several other liberal citizens. Furthermore, he recounts how he as a child got the nickname "chusmero" from the priest. Alberto didn't understand this word as a child and was thrilled that the priest cared enough about him to give him a special nickname. When he later found out that the name was a term for a guerilla fighter, he was heartbroken. However, he continues to frequent the church daily, dedicating significant time and effort to his religious practices.

## Benjamin



*Benjamin in his home*

Benjamin is another lifelong resident of Chita and together with his wife, they have a small store in the town. It is mostly his wife who works in the store, while Benjamin does more sporadic jobs, mostly involving driving trucks or busses for the town.

Benjamin's experience serves as an illustration of the oppressive conditions imposed by guerrilla forces during the prolonged civil conflict. For an extended period spanning multiple years, he found himself confined to his residence due to escalating violence and direct threats to his life. The guerrillas made repeated attempts to terminate Benjamin, undertaking several failed assassination efforts targeting him.

For him, it feels extremely unjust that those responsible for inflicting so much pain and harm on the community can now freely move around the town, start families, and force their victims and their families to relive their haunting past, day after day. As much as he wants to see justice served, there is also a part of him that finds some peace in the belief that divine retribution will ultimately catch up to those who caused so much harm to the community.

His anguish and anger are primarily directed towards a specific individual in the community, a former influential figure within the guerrilla ranks who holds hostility towards him. This person orchestrated attempts on his life and made his existence in Chita difficult. The absence of accountability for her actions, coupled with her current prosperity and societal integration, fuels much of his resentment. “How can I coexist with a person that has caused me so much harm, and pretend it never happened?” (Haukland, 2022). Although he avoids mentioning her by name during our conversations, I am aware of her identity and the unpunished transgressions she has committed.

Coexisting with people who have caused you harm, especially when this harm has gone unpunished, is an energy drain in Benjamin’s daily life and something that causes a lot of resentment.

## Representation

From the beginning, the idea of representation has been an important topic in my project. In a small community like Chita, which has endured significant challenges, how they are perceived by others holds great importance. External stigmas associated with living in Chita, and the shame many feel as a part of this, drive the residents to try their hardest to present themselves in the best possible light. Therefore, I as a filmmaker had to make sure that the participants truths were communicated correctly, while at the same time respecting the community's desired representation.

The impact of how we are represented and how we represent ourselves on our self-perception and thoughts is profound. How does the way we are represented and represent ourselves affect how we feel and think about ourselves?

An intriguing situation arose with Alberto during the project. Alberto was from the start of our discussions unwilling to share any conflict, problems or past issues. I was very familiar with his story and it became evident that he was withholding information. Berreman (1972, p. 163) explains how the ethnographer seeks access to back region information; the subjects seek to protect their secrets since these represents a threat to the public image they wish to

maintain. Neither can succeed perfectly. Here he describes the tension between ethnographers seeking hidden information and subjects safeguarding their secrets to maintain a public image.

In the case of Alberto, he appeared to be acting differently when the camera was rolling, trying to represent and portray his town and himself in the best, most positive way. As soon as I turned the camera off, I would go back to being a friend/family, and he would share information completely contradictory to what we had just discussed when the camera was filming. This behaviour aligns with Goffman (1959) concept of being "onstage" in front of the camera and "offstage" when not being filmed. There is also the possibility that having lived for so long exposed to conflict has made him reluctant to delve into negative memories, leading to memory suppression.

Narration plays a pivotal role in shaping memories, particularly those stemming from challenging or traumatic events. Even though I felt my part of the project was to authentically capture the participants truths, I did at times feel uncertain regarding whether I was really presenting their genuine experience, or an altered version of the truth that the participants constructed for themselves to avoid dealing with the harsh reality.

While I do believe that my participants shared their objective truth, I did also feel like there were details that were sometimes deliberately avoided. This made me at some point of my fieldwork doubt how authentic my work was. The desire to make a good impression and to be presented in a good way is very natural, especially in a place like Chita, where the fear of being stigmatized is immense.

The film ultimately reflects the participants' desired truths through their personal stories and interpretations of the past rather than offering an objective historical account of Chita. The three different stories told are personal stories and their interpretations of the past. The process of interpretating memories is a complex one, as the local memories are already interpretations of the past experiences (Romero et al., 2020). It is not necessarily that the participants intentionally withhold the complete truth, but rather that their memory interpretations differ from others. Ultimately, the truth about the past is subjective and varies depending on individual perspectives and recollections.

Even though Alberto, Benjamin and Angel give a good representation of different ways the war have affected people and how there is many ways to deal with the trauma after conflict, they do still not represent Chita as a whole. There is as many stories and experiences in Chita, as there are people.

In a close-knit community like Chita, preserving peace and social stability is of great importance, especially given the town's history of violence and conflict. The social fabric of Chita is delicately woven, requiring a careful and nuanced approach when broaching difficult topics related to the past.

While some individuals may be more daring in voicing their opinions, all three participants in this study – Angel, Alberto, and Benjamin – exhibited avoidance and self-censorship in their interactions with others. Despite the outward appearance of a peaceful and calm atmosphere in Chita, there exists an underlying tension and fear surrounding the confrontation of the past, as it is perceived as a potential catalyst for reigniting conflict.

The participants' narratives reveal the fragility of the social equilibrium in Chita, where open discussions about the town's traumatic history are often avoided to maintain a delicate balance.



## Unraveling Narratives: How has the protracted conflict influenced and reshaped the structure within Chita's community?

### Collective trauma

The people living in Chita have all either experienced the violence of the war or are descendants of those who have. According to Gilad Hirschberger (2018) the term *collective trauma* refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society. The conflict in Chita persisted until September 2003 and throughout it, Chita have between the government, the paramilitary and the armed groups lost approximately 300 citizens, a significant toll for a community of only 2000 inhabitants.

The trauma of living in conflict for years has from the beginning of the project been a focal point in my project. Despite outward appearances of coexistence and what seems like people living together without an extent of problems, there are some signs of what could be the result of the trauma that most people have lived through. Substance abuse, particularly alcoholism, is a widespread issue in Chita. Heavy alcohol consumption is normalized and ingrained in the social fabric.

Bars serve as vital social hubs where alcohol plays a central role in social interactions, thus being a part of the drinking culture is essential to being fully a part of community. The normalization of alcohol consumption from a young age is striking, with children as young as 12 years drinking in the bars and even infants being brought in strollers. Alcohol is intertwined with social life from childhood to adulthood, with children often exposed to heavy drinking behaviours at an early age.

The residents of Chita have endured immense pain without adequate opportunities for healing and working through the pain of the past. The war lasted until 2003 and before that it has been a part of everyday life for everyone. A lot of people were also involved with either the

guerilla or the military forces during the war, leading to unresolved trauma and loss. Many of the youths went away to join either side of the battle and never came back, leaving the families wondering if they are alive or dead. There are still many bodies missing and parents, siblings, children and friends continue the search for their loved ones. How does this trauma affect the lives of the ones who have experienced it? How does it affect Chita as a group of people who have lived through trauma together?

The community's collective trauma has become so normalized that some struggle to acknowledge the violence they have witnessed or participated in, while others find it challenging to forgive those who caused them harm.

Dealing with a traumatic past manifest in various ways, as observed in the distinct coping mechanisms of my three participants who have had diverse experiences with the war. As mentioned above, ignoring the past or minimizing the severity of traumatic events, telling yourself and others that the traumatic conflict you experienced did not really happen or downplaying the seriousness of the past and its consequences is one way of protecting yourself from the harsh truth of what you have endured.

On the contrary, holding onto past grievances and anger towards wrongdoers is another coping mechanism. Benjamin struggles to see beyond his resentment towards the guerrilla, viewing them as responsible for the suffering and pain inflicted on him during the conflict. To him, they are the ones at fault, and he expresses that he feels that it is unfair that the ones causing so much suffering and pain are allowed to live in the town, taking away the importance of the crimes committed. "They live their lives without worries, like nothing ever happened" (Haukland, 2022). Benjamin is part of the right-side politics that sees the guerilla fighters as the responsible ones for the war, from his perspective they are evil terrorists that cannot be forgiven.

One of the governments decisions to promote peace was to promote the demonization of armed groups by giving the participants in both guerrilla and paramilitary groups a reduced sentence of up to eight years in exchange of them confessing to their crimes and appearing in a public hearing. In these hearings victims were welcome to ask questions, but the combat could answer what they wanted and the victim did not get to tell their stories (Ruiz Romero,

2012). This did in the end result in the victims again feeling like their experience and memories of the violence were not listened to and that their truth was once again ignored.

Angel's position in the conflict is a complex and at times seemingly contradicting. His years in the guerilla has become an important part of his identity. He is driven by a strong belief in the ideology behind the guerilla and that he was fighting for the farmers and the marginalize against the oppressive state.

Having partaken in the war in a much more active way than the other participants, it is understandable that he feels the need to justify his actions and good intentions. At the same time, he acknowledges how the economic interests of the guerilla, and the unethical businesses they had to participate in to continue their fight against the state, tainted the ideology and made many of the guerrilleros lose sight of the original purpose of why they were even fighting. The war turned in to one where many stopped fighting for what they believed in, and turned into one where profit was a big motivation.

### Moving on and forgiving

Moving on and forgiving after having been the victim of extreme violence, or even having lost your loved ones is not easy, especially when having to continue living with the ones responsible for your pain and suffering. Some of the ones I talked to in Chita argued that it is necessary to leave the conflict in the past, to be able to move on and heal, while others had a hard time accepting that the people who have inflicted this on them should be able to continue living in Chita like nothing had happened.

It is often said that it is important to remember the past, to prevent it from being repeated (Romero et al., 2020), but in Chita's case it seems as they have taken a different route. People have chosen to forget and move on for the fighting to stop. Almost everyone has to some degree participated in the violence, people are hurt, but they know that the price for living in peace is to move on and leave the past behind. A teacher in Chita told me that "Chita should be an inspiration for the rest of the world, we have moved past our differences and learned to live together peacefully".

A history filled with violence does not mean that violence will be the only way people know how to deal with things. As G. Hirschberger (2018) describes in his article, collective trauma can help a group find a collective meaning, but do the group not also then need to acknowledge the trauma?

In the context of Benjamin's struggle to move on after experiencing trauma caused by others in his community, the psychological mechanisms at play (SAMHSA, 2014) can be complex and multifaceted. Benjamin's dissatisfaction with the forgiveness granted to those who caused him pain reflects a deep emotional conflict and moral dilemma.

Benjamin's inability to come to terms with the forgiveness granted to the wrongdoers suggests unresolved trauma and emotional pain. Traumatic experiences can leave lasting scars that are challenging to heal without proper acknowledgment and processing.

Feelings of betrayal and resentment towards those who have caused harm can intensify emotional distress and hinder the process of moving on. Benjamin's struggle may stem from a sense of injustice and a desire for accountability from the perpetrators.

Comparing one's own experience of trauma and healing journey with others in the community can influence perceptions of justice, fairness, and personal growth. Benjamin's dissatisfaction may be fueled by comparing his own struggles with how others have seemingly moved on more easily.

Individuals like Benjamin may seek validation for their pain, a sense of justice, or acknowledgment of their suffering from both the perpetrators and the community at large. Without this validation, moving on can be significantly challenging.

Benjamin's experience highlights the intricate interplay of psychological factors such as unresolved trauma, guilt, social comparison, and the need for validation in navigating a history of trauma within a community (Levine, 2007).

Angel finds that Chita have been able to move on and forgive, and he gives the impression of having been forgiven and is now a part of the community. He does point out as he was never stationed in Chita or the surrounding area as a part of the guerilla, he has never done harm to people from Chita. He is still a strong advocate of the ways of the guerilla and believes that especially FARC did more good than harm in their years of controlling the town. He is not willing to admit remorse and says that he stands behind everything he has done, as he

believes the ideology that he fought for was worth the sacrifices. He still experiences hate from time to time but emphasizes that he just wants to do his job to help the people in Chita with his skills as a mechanic.

From the moment I arrived in Chita, I was struck by a profound fascination – how were they able to cooperate so seamlessly after enduring years of brutal conflict? This question lingered heavily as I engaged with individuals like Angel, seeking to understand the mechanisms that enabled such remarkable resilience and reconciliation.

In our conversations, Angel offered an interesting insight – people had grown so weary of the relentless cycle of violence that they collectively chose to ignore the pain of the past, a conscious act of letting go. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder how they navigated the daily interactions with those who had once been sworn enemies, individuals who may have even taken the lives of their loved ones.

Angel's personal anecdote shed light on this dynamic. He recounted how the very man responsible for his brother's murder had, in the aftermath of the conflict, sought his services as a mechanic to repair a motorcycle. While the initial encounter was undoubtedly fraught with immense pain, Angel revealed a profound capacity for forgiveness, a desire to "forgive and forget" that transcended the weight of his loss.

His perspective highlighted a critical distinction – the ability to recognize that an individual's actions during the heat of armed conflict do not necessarily define their essence in the absence of such circumstances. He emphasizes how the armed man is not the same unarmed, probably also including himself in this image. Many who participated in the violence, he asserted, did so not out of free will but rather a perceived lack of choice, caught in the inescapable currents of a conflict that consumed entire communities.

Moving on from a history of trauma looks different for each of the participants in my project. For some, this may involve completely ignoring the past and inventing a new one, while for others, it may consist of suppressing their pain and ignoring their memories/past.

## Repressing the past

The participants in my project exhibit a striking variation in their perceptions and narratives surrounding Chita's tumultuous past and present realities. Alberto's approach, in particular, stands out as a compelling case study. He appears to consciously minimize the significance of the century-long conflict that profoundly impacted the lives of every member of the community. His narrative frames the 50 years of traumatic experiences as an insignificant footnote in Chita's history, as a phenomenon that predates his own lived experiences. Alberto's coping mechanism manifests as a deliberate act of erasure – a refusal to acknowledge the very existence of the conflict and its enormous consequences. He constructs a reality in which "nothing ever happened" and "everything has always been good." Whether this revisionist narrative is crafted for my benefit as a researcher, for his own psychological preservation, or a combination of both, remains unclear.

What is evident, however, is that Alberto appears to have convinced himself of this alternate reality, one in which the conflict exerted no tangible impact on his life or experiences. This approach to moving forward from trauma can be interpreted as a coping mechanism, a means of avoiding the pain and anguish associated with confronting the past.

Yet, this strategy of willful ignorance raises critical questions about its long-term implications, both on an individual and communal level. By choosing to ignore the past, individuals may inadvertently perpetuate a cycle of unresolved issues and conflicts, as underlying tensions and traumas remain unaddressed and unprocessed. "The right to the truth is a substantial part of the fight against impunity and the prevention of new violations of human rights, with a focus on non-repetition" ((NCHM), 2015, p. 24).

This phenomenon underscores the complex interplay between individual coping mechanisms and collective healing processes. While Alberto's approach may provide temporary psychological reprieve, it potentially undermines the broader community's ability to engage in meaningful reconciliation and address the root causes of past violence.

Moreover, Alberto's behavior could also be linked to psychological defense mechanisms such as denial or repression. Denial involves refusing to acknowledge unpleasant realities, while

repression involves pushing distressing thoughts or memories into the unconscious mind. In this case, Alberto's narrative of a harmonious past may serve as a defense mechanism to shield himself from the emotional distress associated with acknowledging the conflict's lasting effects.

Additionally, social identity theory could provide insights into Alberto's perspective. By presenting a sanitized version of history where everything has always been good, Alberto may be reinforcing his positive social identity within the community. This selective memory and reinterpretation of history could be a way for Alberto to maintain a positive self-concept and preserve his standing within the social group. These mechanisms shed light on how individuals navigate complex historical narratives to protect their self-image and social identity in the face of challenging realities.

Remembering the past can be a challenging task, especially when it involves a significant amount of pain and suffering. At the beginning it surprised me to discover that many individuals from Chita seemed to some degree to have repressed the memories of the violence they had experienced. I later got a deeper understanding of the fact that the participants in the study were dealing with their trauma and allowing themselves to remember only what they could handle. In forgetting some parts of their experience, they were protecting themselves.

In Saugestad (1972) «The Two Sides of the House» she explains how people talk about the conflict as something that they passed a long time ago and is long forgotten, while analysing everyday life shows her that the conflict is very much ongoing. Saugestad's analysis of everyday life in Northern Ireland relates to the conflict in Chita in that both situations involve a struggle to address underlying conflicts and tensions that are often ignored or suppressed. In both cases, the conflict is not just a historical event but a lived experience that continues to shape the present and future.

By ignoring the past and suppressing the experienced pain, individuals and societies may struggle to address the root causes of the conflict and find lasting solutions. This approach of suppressing the past can lead to a perpetuation of the same problems in the future, as the underlying issues are not addressed and resolved.

Saugestad's work highlights the importance of understanding the everyday experiences of people in conflict-affected areas to gain a more accurate understanding of the ongoing nature of the conflict. This approach can help inform more effective strategies for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The situation in Chita relates to what Saugestad (1972) experienced in Northern Ireland in that both places are trying to make it seem like there is no underlying conflict, when in reality there is. Both places need to be seen as friendly and unproblematic to the outside world, because of the fear of being stigmatized.

As we can see in Alberto's narrative regarding his upbringing and the experience of raising his own children in Chita, it is without any negative undertones. When asked about the potential impact of the conflict on his life, he claims that it has had no bearing whatsoever. In the initial stages of my research, when my interactions were limited solely to Alberto, I found myself questioning whether Chita had indeed endured any significant conflict at all. While his reluctance to engage with the subject matter of my inquiry was initially a source of frustration, I soon came to recognize it as a coping mechanism (Heeke et al., 2017), a means of shielding himself from the pain and trauma of the past.

As more participants became involved in the project, I began to perceive Alberto's perspective not as an obstacle, but rather as a distinct and valid mode of remembrance – a self-preserving act of insulating oneself from the anguish of lived experiences. It is also understandable that Alberto feels a need of representing Chita in a way where he feels that conflict and war does not fit in.

In another rural town in Colombia Ruiz Romero (2012) explains how the community is affected by the suppressing of reality.

*“The degradation of a conflict begins precisely when the brutality of war is seen as something natural, even by those who suffer from it directly. Pretending that nothing is happening is a disturbing phenomenon that destroys the core of community life.” (Ruiz Romero, 2012, p. 551)*

When asked about regrets, Angel, a former guerrilla fighter, admits to none, stating that he fought for a good cause and that even though he is saddened by the organization's



transformation away from its formal principles, he still stands behind his participation in the conflict.

Čehajić and Brown (2010) explain how it is normal that perpetrator groups often have difficulties accepting responsibility, and tend to suppress the negative memories, leaving “blank spaces” in their minds and in history. Angel gladly shares his views on the conflict and the guerillas ideals and how those ideals where slowly lost and transformed the conflict to one without purpose. He admits that after leaving prison, he had no intentions of going back and that the main reason why he joined the guerilla was to protect his children. Still, he either denies or steadfastly refuses to acknowledge any regrets about his decision to participate in the violence.

*«The case of Colombia shows how different modes of remembering can highlight the idea that the past is not given, on the contrary, it is continually re-constructed and re-represented; where collective memories of previous events can fluctuate in different degrees or scales.» (Tamayo Gomez, 2022, p. 11)*

## The horse bomb

An important incident in the history of Chita took place on the 10th of September 2003. A bomb, allegedly placed by the guerilla, detonated in the town center. The bomb claimed the lives of 8 individuals. This tragic event turned most of the citizens against the guerilla and gave the government the opportunity to regain control of the town.

Various theories circulate about the bombing incident, including suspicions of government involvement or powerful community figures orchestrating it. The shifting political landscape post-bombing saw increased government support and dwindling backing for the guerrilla. The unresolved nature of the bombing incident underscores its impact on Chita's political dynamics.

While questions persist about the true culprits behind the bombing, its repercussions reshaped loyalties and strengthened governmental authority. Both the incident itself and the aftermath are topics where most people have opinions on what happened that differs from the official

version. The responsible people were never caught, and there are many opinions on who it was that organized, assembled and placed the bomb.

One of the people I was in contact with early in my fieldwork and who showed interest in participating was the individual who went to jail and was found guilty of the incident. Yulis Alberto, a man that had worked hard his whole life trying to provide for his family, was found guilty of producing and placing the bomb as a part of the FARC guerilla group. The only reason he became a suspect was because of the proximity of the farm where he worked to the site where the bomb was made, even though Yulis Alberto had no connection to the guerilla, or any proof was presented, he was still sent to jail. He spent a decade in prison before the government had to admit that they made a mistake and released him. He has now been out of prison for more than 10 years but has still not received any recompensating for the time he lost.

There seems to be a big group of people who believe that the one responsible for the bomb was someone that today is a powerful person in the community. He/she was strongly connected to the guerilla when they had power, but never officially a part of FARC as I have understood. The general idea in Chita is that this person was the one “really” in charge of FARC and the one who ordered the bomb to be placed.

Another theory, especially among the ones who supported the guerilla, is that the government placed the bomb themselves. One of the people I talked with described that right before the bomb went off, he heard a helicopter. He was just a child at the time but remember thinking that the sound of the helicopter was strange. The town had a helicopter from the bank that would come once a week to pick up money, but the day the bomb went off was not the right day for the pick-up to be made. The helicopter was never mentioned after, and some believe that someone from the government detonated the bomb from the helicopter before flying away.

Only one day after the bomb, the at this time incumbent president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe, arrived in Chita to show his support and condolences. In his speech the ex-president encouraged the habitants to be part of the anti-terrorism movement, and in that supporting the government instead of the guerilla. The bomb changed the political support in Chita overnight, and the government finally had most of the people with them, after years of guerilla support.

The bomb and the ones responsible for it will stay a mystery, but what is certain is that it only damaged the guerilla, making the government stronger. The horse bomb is just another incident that shows how the lack of clear answers and accountability twists the people to have opposing opinions and memories of the attack.

How is reconciliation measured and is it important for society that people find peace?

### Memory and collective narratives

Incidents like the horse bomb contextualizes how memories and the narratives around a happening can be immensely different, depending on who you talk to. “When we speak of collective memory, we are referring both to the commonality of what we remember together as well as that which each person remembers individually” (Koh, 2021, p. 124). How much we agree on a collective narrative can have a huge impact on how well reconciliation work will impact a community.

Nora (1989) seminal work "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" presents a theory that contrasts memory and history and introduces the concept of "lieux de mémoire" (realms or sites of memory). The central idea is that in modern societies, there has been a fundamental break between lived memory (memory as a social phenomenon) and history (the scholarly reconstruction of the past).

Nora argues that with the acceleration of history and the disappearance of traditional modes of transmitting memory, societies have become detached from their past, leading to a shift from "true memory" to the creation of archives, commemorations, and sites that serve as placeholders for what has been lost (Nora, 1989).

This contrast between memory and history becomes particularly pronounced in the aftermath of conflicts, where contradictory opinions and vastly divergent perspectives have shaped the

experiences and narratives of those involved. This contrast becomes more evident and pronounced in such contexts, making it challenging to reconcile divergent memories and construct a shared historical understanding.

From a similar project in Peru, the film “Between memories” (Dietrich, 2015) portrays the victim who lost her husband, the guerrillera who fought for ideas she believed in and the military who is clear on the fact that there should have been other steps before sending the army to kill fellow Peruvians, but that they were only doing their job. The filmmaker states that “the history doesn’t change, but the memories do”(Dietrich, 2015) when reflecting on how military, guerrilla and civilians all have different memories of the violence that happened.

These varying perspectives highlight the subjectivity of memories and the difficulty in placing responsibility for past events. Though not the same, my film identifies some of the same characteristics that Dietrich (2015) finds in her film regarding different ideas of the past and memories of the conflict. The position and experiences my subjects had during the conflict and where they find themselves in the social sphere of Chita at the time of the film greatly influences where they stand today and how they feel about the past.

*“The phrase ‘history is written by the victors’ could be most accurate in addressing the relationship between the construction of collective memories in post-conflict Colombia, and the power associations around the establishment of official narratives of the past. This sentence reveals how the category of power defines who is allowed to write the narratives of what happened at the end of war hostilities. In order to establish clear understanding about what happened in almost six decades of armed conflict in Colombia, it is important to note that this is a field of constant tension between official narratives about the war waged by the Colombian government, the Colombian army, Paramilitary groups and Guerrilla groups (‘the official warriors’), and non-official narratives created by civil society organizations, NGOs, social movements, human rights defenders, civilians or victims (‘the unofficial war actors’).»*

*(Tamayo Gomez, 2022, p. 10)*

The study by Tamayo Gomez (2022) on collective memory in one of the neighbouring departments to Boyacá highlights the importance of victims of the conflict agreeing on a shared narrative of the past. Without this consensus, achieving genuine reconciliation becomes a significant challenge.

Collective memory plays a crucial role in shaping a society's understanding of its history, particularly in the aftermath of conflict and violence. When victims hold divergent narratives and interpretations of the past, it can perpetuate divisions and hinder the process of healing and reconciliation.

Tamayo Gomez (2022) research underscores the need for a shared understanding and acknowledgment of the experiences and suffering endured by all victims, regardless of their affiliations or backgrounds. By fostering an inclusive and participatory process that allows victims to collectively construct a narrative that resonates with their lived experiences, a foundation for reconciliation can be established. However, achieving this shared narrative is often a complex and delicate endeavour, as it requires confronting deeply entrenched perspectives, addressing power imbalances, and navigating the emotional and psychological impacts of trauma. It necessitates creating safe spaces for dialogue, active listening, and a willingness to acknowledge and validate diverse experiences.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that without a collective memory that reflects the perspectives and narratives of all victims, the process of reconciliation may remain elusive. A shared understanding of the past is not only a matter of historical accuracy but also a crucial step towards healing wounds, fostering empathy, and building a more inclusive and just society.

By highlighting the importance of collective memory in the context of post-conflict reconciliation, Gomez's (2022) research provides valuable insights for policymakers, peacebuilders, and communities grappling with the legacies of violence and conflict. It underscores the need for victim-centred approaches that prioritize the co-creation of narratives and the acknowledgment of diverse experiences as a foundation for sustainable peace and social cohesion.

Navigating a history of trauma and coexisting with those who have caused pain can be a collective journey, especially in societies deeply affected by conflict. It is essential to recognize and respect the diverse perspectives on forgiveness and reconciliation, as they can significantly impact the healing process and the ability to live in peace.

The journey towards healing and reconciliation often involves a collective effort to address past traumas and move towards a more peaceful coexistence (Audergon, 2004; Gilad Hirschberger, 2018; Koh, 2021). While some advocate for leaving the conflict in the past as a means to achieve peace, others, like Benjamin, emphasize the importance of accountability and responsibility for actions to truly heal and move forward.

In the 1990s Benedict Anderson (1991) introduced innovative concepts to comprehend the relationship between the symbolic dimension of the construction of memory narratives and the social construction of the past and the present from different perspectives. Anderson's concept of imagined community was not concerned with whether the social constructions of memories are false or real.

Through workshops and discussions focused on social-emotional learning, individuals can cultivate self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, fostering empathy and understanding within communities. In essence, the journey towards healing from trauma and reconciling with those who have caused pain is multifaceted and requires a collective commitment to address past wounds, promote understanding, and build a more inclusive and empathetic society (Koh, 2021).

### Justice and reconciliation

Since 2012, Colombia has been engaged in a peace process involving the two major guerrilla groups, FARC and ELN, in discussions with the government. The Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Building of a Stable and Lasting Peace was signed in 2016. This process aimed to involve all individuals who had participated in these organizations, but Boyacá (Chita's department) and Chita specifically had low participation. This peace process could have been a valuable tool for many to cope with their trauma and contribute to the process of "moving on." I discussed this with Angel, who explained that

people were too afraid to participate. In some cases, individuals who join these negotiations have been targeted and killed, making the participants' list a de facto hit list. When individuals are too fearful to participate in such initiatives, it becomes an obstacle to the process and hinders those who could have been of great use in participating (Skaar et al., 2005). Angel expressed his desire to participate in the negotiations but did not want to risk his life.

Transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions, tribunals, and trials, are often premised on the belief that these formal processes will help societies confront and overcome the complex legacies of violence. However, this assumption can be challenged by the local practices of memorialization and commemoration developed by victims' groups.

These grassroots initiatives, rooted in the experiences and perspectives of local communities, may diverge significantly from the official approaches adopted by the state or the priorities set by sponsored transitional justice institutions. Local communities are actively seeking to move beyond the violence and conflict in ways that may differ markedly from the top-down strategies employed by formal mechanisms. This contrast highlights the potential disconnect between the assumptions underlying transitional justice discourses and the lived realities and aspirations of those most directly affected by the violence.

While official processes aim to facilitate societal healing and reconciliation, local communities may pursue alternative paths that better align with their unique experiences, cultural contexts, and visions for the future.

By acknowledging and engaging with these local practices of memorialization and commemoration, transitional justice efforts can become more inclusive, responsive, and attuned to the diverse needs and perspectives of victims and communities. Recognizing and embracing these initiatives can contribute to a more holistic and sustainable process of societal healing and transformation in the aftermath of violence and conflict (Manning, 2017).

The peace process and the truth commissions are by some seen as a huge success, because it has been for some of the people who did participate (Ury & Hübl, 2017). The practices used nationally have been focused on listening to the victims, instead of punishing the oppressors and a big diversity of victims and participants in the war have been invited to participate. But

for many participants there have been a feeling of not really being heard, and the fear of being a target have kept many potential participants from going.

In Antioquia, an initiative started by the local community, have helped victims find peace and have given them the feeling of having a voice. The March of Light aims to help shape the collective memory of victims, helping the reconciliation process.

*«This creation of memory narratives developed through the March of Light can be categorised in two levels. First at the collective level, where these group of victim's demand truth, justice and reparation exercising their rights in the public arena. The second is at the individual level, where the aim of these victims' groups is to recover the good name of individual victims that had been wrongly accused of being part of some army group.»*

*(Tamayo Gomez, 2022, p. 5)*

An issue regarding analyzing levels of reconciliation is that it is difficult both to define and to measure (Skaar et al., 2005, p. 158). There is no universal definition for measuring reconciliation and among many other factors this makes it challenging to compare. Some sources suggest adopting a holistic and context-specific approach that considers the unique circumstances of each post-conflict situation. This may involve developing tailored indicators, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and engaging diverse stakeholders in the process of defining and assessing reconciliation (Barnes et al., 2003).

A way of seeking justice, without necessarily emphasizing the need for reconciliation or forgiveness is restorative justice, where the focus lays on all participants being allowed to tell their narrative. Restorative justice does not aim for a solution or for reconciliation, only for the participants to get the relief of being heard. The focus is on “putting things right” and for victims to tell their story to the oppressors and express their needs (Zehr, 2002).

If we accept that conflict is unavoidable, but start an open conversation about needs, then maybe it can be an opportunity to change instead of an obstacle. “Conflict is normal in human relationships, an conflict is a motor of change” (Lederach, 2003, p. 4).



## Conclusion

In what way is social fabric and power dynamics visible today in Chita and how does these shape daily life, interactions and relations?

The social dynamics in Chita initially appears to be running smoothly, especially when seen in the perspective of a post-conflict town. But when looking closer it becomes clear that these social dynamics can be fragile and that there is a huge amount of caution involved for the daily life to run as smoothly as it is.

Angel is as an ex guerrillero a part of the oppressive group and must step carefully to avoid conflict and hate. He is lucky in not having been stationed in Chita, as he has not been directly responsible for any crimes committed there. He is still seen as a partaker in the conflict, and partly responsible for the guerilla's actions in the town. As a member of the once-oppressive armed group, he must tread carefully to avoid igniting conflicts or incurring the wrath of those who still harbor deep-seated resentment. Especially considering his profession as a mechanic and the need for people to choose him to repair their vehicle. The cause of the guerrilla and the belief that he did fight for something good is still deeply rooted in his identity and as a result he does often end up speaking his mind about ideology and politics. As a result, he is often the victim of cruel remarks or hatred. Angel is in many ways an outsider, both because of his participation in the losing side of the war and his economic status.

In contrast, Alberto's position within Chita's social hierarchy is more elevated. As one of the few individuals in the town to have attained a university education, coupled with his well-remunerated employment, Alberto commands a certain level of respect and influence. He also actively participates in the church community as well as playing as a mariachi at parties every now and then, further solidify his standing.

Additionally, his parents were influenceable people and Alberto inherited both a house in the center of Chita and a lot of land in the surroundings, where he has his cows. He sees himself as a representant of Chita and cares deeply about how the town is perceived, this is probably

a mix of him being from Chita and caring about the town, as well working for the town, in the public school.

The church itself holds profound symbolic significance within Chita, wielding considerable influence over the community's social- and power dynamics. Engagement in church activities is crucial for attaining social status, particularly among older generations. Historically, the church embodies the divisions that characterized the liberal-conservative conflicts, physically separating the town along ideological lines. Membership and attendance at church functions serve as indicators of influence, while exclusion from these circles can effectively preclude one from the social elite.

Benjamin's relatively elevated social standing is largely derived from his wife's active participation in church activities and other social engagements aimed at maintaining their position within the community's hierarchy. Benjamin himself appears to invest less effort in cultivating this social capital.

Benjamin's lingering resentment towards a former influential guerrilla member who caused him harm without facing accountability highlights the enduring divisions and power imbalances that persist within Chita. The constant strain of coexisting with unpunished perpetrators shapes his daily life and relationships, serving as an "energy drain" that cannot be easily dismissed.

External stigmas associated with residing in Chita drive residents to present themselves and their town in the most favorable light possible. This desire to craft a positive representation shape how they interact and what they choose to disclose, as evidenced by Alberto's reluctance to discuss negative aspects of Chita on camera.

The social dynamics in Chita appears as fundamentally fragile, governed by a palpable fear of conflict that discourages open discussions or the voicing of unpopular opinions. This self-censorship and the need to maintain a delicate equilibrium dictate daily interactions and relationships within the community.

The film itself reflects the participants' desired truths and personal interpretations of the past, rather than an objective historical account. This underscores the power of narratives in shaping perceptions and the subjective nature of memory and recollection, which can profoundly influence social dynamics and relations within the community.

Alberto's avoidance of discussing the conflict and focus on promoting positives about Chita can be described as a coping mechanism to protect himself from trauma. Such coping strategies can shape how individuals interact and present themselves within the community. This pursuit of status shapes daily life and interactions within Chita, adding another layer of complexity to the town's complicated social tapestry.

In essence, the social fabric and power dynamics in Chita are shaped by the lingering impacts of conflict, the church's influence, concerns surrounding stigma and representation, fragile social dynamics, enduring divisions and resentments, the power of narratives and memory and the pursuit of social status – all of which govern daily life, interactions, and relationships within the community.

In what way is the conflict still affecting Chita's community?

The conflict has left deep scars on Chita's social fabric, manifesting in collective trauma, divisions, subjective memories, uneven power dynamics, fragile social equilibrium, representation concerns, shifting political dynamics, and unresolved narratives surrounding key events. These factors continue to shape daily life, interactions, and relations within the community, reflecting the profound and enduring impact of the conflict on Chita's social structure.

The people of Chita have experienced collective trauma from years of violence and conflict. According to Gilad Hirschberger (2018), collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society. The trauma of living in conflict for years has become normalized in Chita. Substance abuse, particularly alcoholism, is prevalent, with alcohol consumption deeply ingrained in the social fabric from a young age. This normalization of violence and coping mechanisms like alcohol abuse can be seen as a result of the collective trauma experienced by the community.

Certain aspects of Chita's social interactions and communal bonds can be a result of the trauma left after prolonged exposure to conflict and violence. There are many strong,

unresolved feelings bubbling right underneath the surface of everyday life. The aftermaths of the unresolved emotions and tensions, a testament to the enduring psychological scars that have yet to be fully addressed.

In Chita there seems to be a common agreement to “forgive and forget” to avoid uncomfortable situations and conflicts. Both Angel and Alberto argue that this approach is the right one for Chita to finally leave the conflicts in the past and move on in a more peaceful way. Benjamin seems to struggle more to accept this and craves some kind of justice for the pain that he has endured.

The idea of leaving the past behind and moving onward with life, can seem like something that have worked for Chita and their healing process. But in reality the past is not forgiven and certainly not forgotten, and this repression of the past is something that Ruiz Romero (2012) argues destroys the core of community life. Even if they are suppressed in society, the feelings of hurt and injustice still exist and keep on bubbling underneath the surface in everyday life. The balancing act of keeping it together and avoiding bringing up the past is not sustainable in the long run and will most likely lead to more conflict and hurt.

While the approach of leaving the past in the past may provide a degree of temporary respite for some, others grapple with an unsatisfied thirst for justice, retribution, or at the very least, a constructive dialogue that could catalyze a meaningful process of reconciliation,

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Although Chita may outwardly appear unaffected by its tumultuous past, there are still remnants of the conflict that continue to affect the village. These residual effects manifest in the need for delicate interactions and a reluctance to address past grievances openly.

The process of reconciliation in Chita is a complex and multifaceted endeavor, one that involves navigating deep-seated divisions and fostering a genuine sense of peace and understanding within the community.

There have not been created a collective memory of Chita's history, something that has led to conflicting memories of past events and responsibilities. As seen in Tamayo Gomez (2022) research in another Colombian town heavily affected by the conflict, the creation of a collective narrative is essential for communities to move on from trauma.

Individuals like Angel emphasize the importance of moving forward peacefully, yet an underlying tension persists, suggesting that unresolved issues continue to simmer beneath the surface.

Measuring the extent of reconciliation in Chita involves assessing not only the absence of overt conflict but also the presence of genuine harmony and mutual understanding among community members.

It is crucial for the well-being of society that individuals find peace and closure from past traumas to foster a cohesive and thriving community. While there is an impressive degree of harmony in Chita, considering the lack of opportunities to work through traumatic experiences or engage in formal reconciliation efforts, there remains an undercurrent of resentment and hurt that cannot be easily dismissed.

The conflict has left an indelible mark on Chita's social structure, shaping interpersonal dynamics and underlying tensions within the community. Despite outward resilience, there is a palpable caution when broaching difficult conversations, reflecting the lingering impact of the conflict on social relations. While Chita may appear unaffected by its tumultuous past, remnants of the conflict persist, manifesting in the need for delicate interactions and a reluctance to address past grievances openly.

True reconciliation is not necessarily the answer, but to open a dialogue that can potentially improve the healing and promote responsibility would be a step in the direction of a more stable community (Zehr, 2002). For Chita to create a collective narrative of their troubled past could potentially influence a more stable society with a greater sense of healing and harmony.

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