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“I am who I am because of who I was”
– Refiguring childhoods through
Colombian former child soldiers’ stories
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Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Sociology
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where the thesis states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

A discussion on the creative method selection for this PhD was published as a SAGE Research Methods Case:

Salamanca Sarmiento, N. (2019). *Autobiography creation and construction of social memory: A tool for conducting ethical research with survivors of the Colombian armed conflict*. SAGE Research Methods Cases.

Signed

Nathalia Salamanca Sarmiento
2019

Abstract

The recruitment and use of children in war are common characteristics of modern conflict. In 2017, the Child Soldiers World Index reported that at least 46 States still recruit and use children under the age of 18 into their armed forces across Africa, Asia and America (CSI, 2018). Researchers both within and outside of academia have striven to understand the phenomenon by looking at the reasons for recruitment, the roles played by children in the armed groups and, for those who survive war, the challenges posed by their reintegration. Central to much research is an assumption that children are victims of war embodied in the figure of the child soldier who sits at the centre of mainstream global policies and interventions as well as academic debate. This figure of the child soldier offers a condensed narrative of their lives, portraying people who were part of armed groups in their childhoods as in fact lacking a childhood, caught up in forced recruitment and military or paramilitary service, and involved in violence, experiences that do not fit normative and predominantly Western visions of ideal childhoods. Now as adults, former child soldiers require protection as victims of war and need interventions to re-integrate in post-war life.

The aim of this research was twofold. Firstly to examine normative understandings of child soldiering in the Colombian context. To do this, I initially investigated how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia, tracing the tensions between global discourses and local practices (following Tsing, 2005) through exploring of the narratives of both practitioners of children's rights and seasoned former child soldiers. Secondly, I engaged in creative fieldwork through writing workshops with a group of Colombian former child soldiers. These workshops, entitled "Mi cuento lo cuento yo" (*I'll be the one to tell my story*), gave space for participants to create alternative accounts of their childhoods. Writing and other creative activities enabled participants to produce accounts of their warrior-selves and their *campesino*-selves; both critical components of their understandings of who they are, in the present, while being reflective and critical about their past, and, in the process, teasing apart the figure of the child soldier. Finally, I contrasted these accounts with the conventional narrative embodied in the globalised figure of the child soldier.

In this thesis, I argue that in the translation, back and forth, of global and local understandings of child soldiering, meaningful childhood experiences are ignored and lost. During demobilisation processes, former child soldiers need to reproduce common victim narratives of child soldiering, of forced recruitment and escape or rescue from the army, in order to make a living in post-conflict time, paradoxically leaving them unable to escape the weight of the figure of the child soldier. From the stories produced in these creative workshops, I claim that people who were soldiers in their childhoods find value in their past, and narrate their lives in a way which draws on the knowledge and experiences they developed during the war. Their accounts resist a clear separation of their time before, during, and after their recruitment into guerrillas and paramilitary groups. In their rewriting of themselves, they rescue and highlight features of their warrior self and campesino self, which they believe should be recognised in reintegration processes. Acknowledging the skills, knowledge and learning they developed through their work as child soldiers, would make material differences to their ability to make a living in a post-conflict Colombia. The normative vision of the child soldier as victim of war limits the success of reintegration processes, requiring Colombian children's rights practitioners as well as former child soldiers to find ways to work around existing practices, with varying degrees of success.

This research draws on unique creative data to provide a novel account of former child soldiers' lives, which call into question the adequacy of existing policies for reintegration. This thesis is a contribution to the literature on childhood studies in general, and to discussions on child soldiering and rural childhoods in particular, that will be of interest to those researching diverse types of childhoods during war, and those working in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes of child soldiers everywhere.

Lay abstract

Children involved in armed conflicts (commonly known as child soldiers) are found on every continent. Whenever a conflict erupts, children and young people tend to become caught in it; this is why the recruitment and use of children in war are considered common characteristics of modern conflict. In this context, researchers have approached the phenomenon of child soldiering by clarifying the reasons for recruitment, the roles played by children in the armed groups and, for those who survive war, the challenges posed by their reintegration. At the centre of this research is the view that children are victims because they are supposed to be innocent and vulnerable, and their stories contest the expectations of a “normal childhood”. The conventional global figure of the child soldier exemplifies these views, and, in consequence, it is a main element of mainstream global policies and interventions as well as academic debate. However, this figure offers a limited narrative of former child soldiers’ lives, showing them as people who had their childhoods stolen. As a result, reintegration processes attempt to give them back what they have apparently lost: their childhoods.

In the thesis *“I am who I am because of who I was” – Refiguring childhoods through Colombian former child soldiers’ stories*, I challenge the conventional global figure of the child soldier by examining how the figure comes to life in a local context, Colombia, paying attention to frictions (Tsing, 2005) between places, people, and practices. I argue that in the translation, back and forth, of global and local understandings of child soldiering, meaningful childhood experiences have been lost, such as their lives before becoming soldiers, and features of their daily lives inside the armed groups that are not combat-related exclusively. During demobilisation processes, former child soldiers have been compelled to reproduce common narratives of child soldiering, in order to make a living when they are out of war, for example to gain access to basic services such as health, and education, or to help them with their job hunting. This situation leaves them either unable to escape normative accounts of child soldiers, or, alternatively, forces them to neglect their past completely, including their childhood before soldiering, to try and escape those stereotypical expectations of them.

Drawing on creative fieldwork with a group of Colombian former child soldiers, I argue that people who were soldiers in their childhoods find value in their past experiences, and narrate their lives in a way which relies on the knowledge and skills they acquired during the war, resisting a separation of their time before, during and after their recruitment into guerrillas and paramilitary groups. In their rewriting of themselves, they rescue and highlight features of their roles inside the armed groups that are not restricted to their combat experiences (warrior-self), and of the impact that rurality has had in their lives, considering that most of the Colombian child soldiers come from *campesino* communities: people who have a special and direct relationship with nature and the land through the production of agricultural products (*campesino*-self). According to former child soldiers themselves, reintegration processes should recognise these features, as they would make material differences to their ability to make a living in a post-conflict Colombia.

This research provides a novel account of former child soldiers' lives, which call into question the adequacy of existing policies for reintegration. This study is a contribution to the literature on childhood studies in general, and to discussions on child soldiering and rural childhoods in particular, that will be of interest to those researching diverse types of childhoods during war, and those working in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes of child soldiers everywhere.

To my dad.
My first book.
Mientras tanto.

“The ‘once upon a time genre’:
once there were children, then they became soldiers,
now, please, if you will,
just bring back the children”

Barbara Harlow (2010, p. 196) *Child and/or Soldier?*
From Resistance Movements to Human Rights Regiments

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Acronyms

ACR	Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (<i>Colombian Agency for Reintegration</i>), which in 2017 changed its name to ARN.
AECID	Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (<i>Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation</i>).
ARN	Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización (<i>Reincorporation and Normalization Agency</i>), previously ACR.
CAE	Centro de Atención Especializada (<i>Specialized Care Centre</i>).
CNMH	Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (<i>National Centre for Historical Memory</i>).
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child.
CSI	Child Soldiers International.
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (<i>National Liberation Army</i>).
EPL	Ejército Popular de Liberación (<i>Popular Liberation Army</i>).
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (<i>Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia</i>).
ICBF	Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (<i>Colombian Family Welfare Institute</i>).
INGO	International non-governmental organisation.
NGO	Non-governmental organisation.
NNA	<i>Niño, niña y adolescente (boy, girl, and adolescent)</i> .
OPAC	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.
SRSR-CAAC	Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.
UN	United Nations.
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund.

Preface. “A la orilla del río” [Down by the Riverside]

May 2016. We, the workshop facilitators, were in a rural hotel near Bogotá in the second weeklong gathering of the group of eight members of the creative writing group “Mi cuento lo cuento yo” (“*I’ll be the one to tell my story*”). The participants were invited to explore their life journeys with the support of a relief map; it was a big one and, as I could not hang it on a wall, it was laid flat on a table. The initial idea was for each one of the participants to approach the relief map so that they could paint their own, by hand, on a piece of paper. However, they all gathered around the table, and while they were trying to find a specific place (a river, a small town, a mountain) in the 1.142 million km² of the Colombian area reduced to a 75cm x 50cm piece of cardboard, they started to share stories. Initially, some of them appeared surprised, realising the long distances they crossed in the territory, moving from one region to another on long walks that usually would take months. When they started to share their stories aloud, they would joyfully share a smile when they found out that another member of the group said that he or she had been at the same spot once. They marvelled at the map while appearing to have found a different way to relate to their journeys. We, the workshop facilitators, listened to them, quietly, trying to imagine some of those places that we had never seen, nor even heard mentioned in the media.

May 2018. I was working at my office in Edinburgh, focused on the apparently never-ending task of trying to make sense of my data. While transcribing the conversation they had during the mapping exercise, two years earlier, I found myself on Google Maps trying to find the correct spelling of a small town by a river that seemed essential to one of my participants. The internet gave me a highly enhanced digital map in which I was able to follow his journey, step by step. His narration had such a level of detail that I was even able to follow the turns of the river, while the screen would also show me some small houses by the banks of the stream. It was my turn to marvel at the map that I was ‘visiting’ thanks to his story, his memories, his experiences.

I believe that that is the whole purpose of this thesis: that some people will be able to travel to uncharted territories guided by a so-called over-researched group of people, people who were, amongst other things, soldiers in their childhoods. Some of their stories have been unheard because of, perhaps, our habit of asking the same questions and exploring their memories in the same way. This thesis is an invitation to be aware of what we know – and how we know what we know – about child soldiers, to challenge that knowledge or those understandings, and to make space for different and complementary ways to understand *their* world that, if we look carefully, either in our online maps or in our territories, ends up being *our* world.

21st July, 2018.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In 2013, at the panel on Colombia at the Salzburg Conference “Children and War: Past and Present”, one of the presenters finished her intervention on child soldiers and posed this question to the audience: “What are we going to do with these people, with these lost generations, with these useless people?” (*¿Qué vamos a hacer con esta gente, con estas generaciones perdidas, con esta gente que no sirve para nada?*). The auditorium, composed mainly of Colombians and people working and researching in the country, remained in silence. At first, I thought it was because they were challenged, as I was, by the idea of former child soldiers being “useless people”, but as they would prove some moments later, they were trying to find workable answers to the question. This thesis *is not* an account of lost childhoods. On the contrary, it is an account of diverse and nuanced memories and experiences of childhoods from and about Colombian former child soldiers, who instead of thinking of themselves as a lost generation or as “useless people”, think of themselves as, and paraphrasing the line that gives the title to this thesis, they are who they are *now*, because of who they were *then*. Colombian former child soldiers portrayed in this thesis, through their own words and those of people working with them, appear as complex, even knotty, individuals who navigate their lives based in the present (tracing their routes) while engaging in meaningful conversations with their past and their memories (mindful of their roots). Their collected tales show how while former child soldiers’ lives were irremediably determined by their experiences as soldiers, their adult outlook on their childhood memories is not constrained by war. Their tales do not hide the war from their lives, but, somehow, put it in the right place: in the background. Colombia’s protracted armed conflict affected their lives in so many different ways, but still, provided a background in which they, as children, found their place, learnt from it, grew up from it, navigated it, tried to escape it (physically and through childhood imagination), and regardless of whatever anyone would say, they made do.

Child recruitment is not a new phenomenon, neither in Colombia nor elsewhere. The long-running nature of many current conflicts, either permanent or sporadic, means that for great numbers of children and young people war is the norm rather than the

exception (Brett & Specht, 2004, pp. 10-11). Historically, children and young people have joined armed groups, legally or illegally, willingly or forced (Drumbl, 2012; Shepler, 2005b). What a child is supposed to look like has changed over time; with local understandings interweaving with global ones, although Minority World's version of it seems to prevail (*see* Definition of terms) – mainly through a socially constructed image of how an ideal childhood should look like and, hand in hand, how a lost childhood should look as well. A few centuries ago, children joining wars was not abhorrent, it was just life: armies needed a workforce and children provided it (Rosen, 2013; Podder, 2011; Ariès, 1962). Yet, over time, child protection movements came and called for a revision of what children should be allowed to do, so their innocence could be protected and safeguarded (Pupavac, 2001). In this thesis, I argue that the idealisation of childhood prevents a more complex understanding of diverse childhoods, regardless of how morally and ethically challenging they might seem; experiences that fall into what the anthropologist Sharon Stephens describes, throughout her work, as “children out of place”: marginalised or children in difficult circumstances, such is the case of child prostitution in Thailand (Montgomery, 2007), child domestic workers in Tanzania (Klocker, 2007), and former child soldiers' roles in peace building processes in Colombia, Sierra Leone and Uganda (Berents, 2009).

The mainstream discourse on child soldiering, or the figure of the child soldier (*see* Chapter 2), portrays a generic image of a child that facilitates seeing him/her as a child at risk, in need of protection and help. The generic children were, in fact, “imagined in the Cold War Consensus as white, middle-class children at the heart of American society” (Malkki & Martin, 2003, p. 217), and to grasp childhood complexities such generalisations must be challenged (Derluyn et al, 2015). Just saying children should not be there (fighting wars) has not changed the fact that they have been and remain there, and general understandings of child soldiering and war could be radically improved only by not considering them as elements out of place. Recognising their value and the role they play, asking them, individually and collectively, how did they feel and see themselves in such contexts, regardless of how immoral it may appear, could provide a more precise understanding of their

experiences and their lives. To see them, to acknowledge them, without depoliticising them, is not about encouraging recruitment but, when unpreventable, understanding it differently. With my work, I open up an invitation to consider former child soldiers' narratives of childhood as accounts of diverse childhoods in Colombia. The point of this discussion is not to condone child soldiers, or war, nor to gesture away from the abuses it occasions, but to challenge traditional understandings of these phenomena, such as child recruitment, to allow people working in the field to make meaningful and well-informed contributions.

I joined the child protection movement in Colombia in the late 2000s. As a journalist and a researcher, I was familiar with the child recruitment phenomenon from that perspective: children belong in schools, not in work, and not in war; children are supposed to be playing, not fighting. There was a shared sense of urgency in saving children, as a faceless mass, from the evil of war. I joined that movement; I became an advocate of child protection and, over six years, fulfilled my duties by working locally with journalists, social movements, and government officials, and internationally providing information to several agencies of the United Nations System through the non-governmental organisation (NGO) I was working with. In that movement I encountered former child soldiers, young women and men who joined the calling of ending child recruitment in the country and elsewhere, so other children would not experience what they did. The people I met, mostly young women, former members of guerrilla groups, shared a singular narrative that, at times, sounded identical. Regardless of whom I was with, I would hear accounts of forced recruitment, physical punishment, forced contraception, and sexual abuse. They were clearly victims of crime(s); however, that way of talking vanished when the 'lights went off', when we were no longer conducting interviews, presenting a new report, or accompanying advocacy campaigns to raise awareness on the topic. Then, we would walk together, share a meal or a cup of coffee, and our conversations were no longer about work on raising awareness on child soldiering. And, it was there precisely where the child recruitment paradigm started to bother me: former child soldiers were not solely victims; they were more than that. In the *present*, they were students, parents, entrepreneurs, citizens, and victims too.

In the *past*, they were students, workers, siblings, daughters and sons, committed members of an armed structure, soldiers, and victims too. It was that dissonance, that noise between the child protection speech and the lived experiences of the people I met, that pushed me back into academia almost ten years after finishing my undergraduate studies on journalism. I needed to distance myself from my topic – intellectually and physically –, so that I could think about it differently. My MSc dissertation “‘I’m not making up this story. This is my life’. Exploring agency and identity in former child soldiers’ autobiographies” (2013) and this PhD thesis are now written testimonies of that quest.

In his suggestive work, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy*, Mark Drumbl (2012) challenges contemporary humanitarianism that portrays children and young people as passive victims, to keep on weaving a revisionist tapestry on the phenomenon that would position children differently with respect to their (hi)stories. Cheney (2005) and Miljeteig and Ennew (2017) join that call, arguing that meaningful reform requires reimagining child soldiers by conducting historically, culturally, and geographically situated research. Only in that way will it be possible to escape the tendency that demands that children are studied with respect to childhood institutions (such as the school or the family), but not with respect to other systems (like war). The materials presented in this thesis present a critical reading of child soldiering, and consequently make a relevant argument to a range of practitioners as well as policymakers, including child rights activists and researchers, development practitioners, and social workers. I hope this dissertation will bring forward valuable insights that can contribute to better disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former child soldiers, and to make their transition into civilian life a bit less difficult.

This introductory chapter will first set the scene for the research by briefly outlining the global and the Colombian context on the phenomenon of child recruitment. I will then define the research, making a few points about the use of language before setting out the structure of this thesis.

1.1. Global context

Child soldiers are found on every continent and, whenever a conflict erupts, young people tend to become caught up in it (Drumbl, 2012). The total number of child soldiers in each country, let alone the global figure, is not only unknown but also unknowable (Hart, 2006). Under the Geneva Conventions (1949) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children under fifteen may not take part in war. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (known as OPAC) raises the age limit to eighteen. It prohibits the compulsory military recruitment of people under the age of eighteen and establishes that “armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of eighteen years” (UN General Assembly, 2000, art. 4). African states have been at the epicentre of the child soldier phenomenon, and several countries in Central, West, North East and Southern Africa have been the sites of conflict since the end of the Cold War (including Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Northern Uganda, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan) (Wells, 2014). However, Africa is not the only region where children have fought or are fighting in wars, and there is a need to stop “Africanizing” a global phenomenon (Dudenhoefer, 2016). Children have fought and, in some cases, continue fighting in the Middle East and Central Asia (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine); in Central and South America (especially for the leftists guerrillas Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, and the National Liberation Army, ELN, and the rightist paramilitary forces in Colombia); in Europe (in Serbia, Kosovo and Turkey); and in Asia (especially in Northern Sri Lanka with the Tamil Tigers and in Myanmar) (Wells, 2014; Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Honwana, 2005; Singer, 2005). Colombia, as a country that has endured a war for more than 50 years, provides an interesting opportunity to investigate child soldiering in a context that has facilitated the emergence and maintenance of a functioning social order. While the average length of civil wars is four years (Acemoglu, Vindigni, & Ticchi, 2010), because of its duration, the Colombian war is considered the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere (Segura & Mechoulam, 2017). That order, labelled by Arjona (2016) as “wartime social order” refers to the normalcy that people living in

war zones experience, contradicting the idea that civilians are victims trapped in a state of uncertainty, where ‘normal life’ does not exist (p. 21). The scholar explains that despite violence and fear, “new rules of behaviour often operate, and civilians plan their daily lives around them” (p. 21). Therefore, the Colombian case allows us to see how war transforms a country not only through its direct effect on victims, but also by transforming social order at the local level.

Literature on child soldiers tends to identify some common features such as the majority of child soldiers are adolescents, mostly boys, with some as young as seven years old (Bardin, 2005). Children are usually taken from their homes (typically at night), schools or while they are playing outdoors (Somasundaram, 2002).

Sometimes recruitment is voluntary; children may join to avenge the death of a family member or for political, economic or cultural reasons (Brett & Specht, 2004). Children are reported to join wars to fight as soldiers or to be used as cooks, spies, and for sexual purposes, and there is discussion of whether armed groups forcibly recruit children or the children themselves volunteer (UN General Assembly, 1996). Illegal armed groups include the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, those without traditional families to protect them, those with little or no education, and those from marginalised sectors of society (Bald, 2002). “Children are cheap, easily trainable, less likely to disobey and fearless. They are more likely to kill when they are under the influence of drugs” (Bardin, 2005, p. 266). Present discussions on the recruitment and use of children include the exchange of views on small weapons, which proliferated due to their low cost, and as they are light to carry, and easy to operate, facilitate children’s access to them (Vermeij, 2014), although children are still able to participate in wars without technologically advanced weapons: “In the Rwandan genocide, for example, many victims were murdered by use of *panga* (machete) and *masu* (club studded with nails)” (Drumbl, 2012, p. 63). Some researchers have even labelled 20th century child soldiers as a new class of combatants (David-Ngendo, 2013), a term that goes hand in hand with popular media accounts of the phenomenon: “amoral, merciless and dangerous, illiterate, armed with an automatic or semi-automatic weapon and a knife; they rape, steal and pillage without compunction or remorse” (Pearn, 2003, p. 169). They are killed in crossfire,

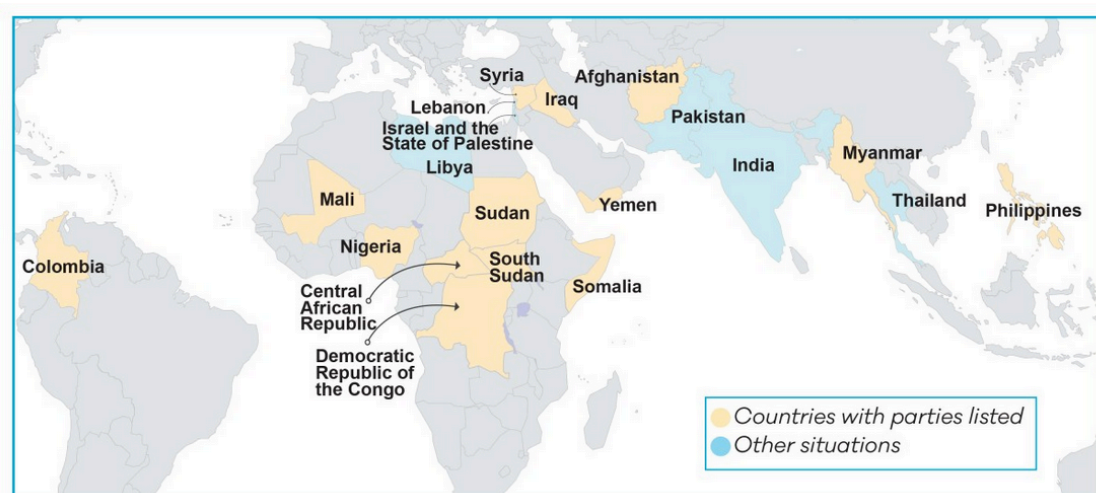
attacks, and more recently, by drones (Blattman, 2012). In the case of girls and young women, reports focus on matters of sexual assault and the traumatisation and stigmatisation attached to women and children born of these rapes (Sánchez-Parra, 2018). These approaches, nonetheless, prioritise adults' perceptions of the phenomenon, and neglect former child soldiers own accounts which would challenge such simplifying perspectives (like the ones collected by Brett and Specht, 2004), such as political awareness, economic motivation, and attraction to guns.

The phenomenon of child recruitment has been mainly documented through African conflicts (Achvarina & Reich, 2006), as this continent has the highest prevalence of civil war¹ (especially when combining the prevalence of war in Sub-Saharan and North Africa), and its frequency has increased in the last twenty years, while it has dropped or remained stagnant in other regions. According to the work of Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000), wars in the African continent are, on average, relatively short although they tend to be among the bloodiest (p. 249).² However, in 2018, Child Soldiers International (CSI), reported at least 46 states that still recruit children under the age of 18 years old into their armed forces and at least 20 conflict situations in which children have participated in hostilities since 2016 (CSI, 2018) (*Picture 1*). Precisely because of the focus on African conflicts in the portrayal of child soldiering, authors like Hart (2006) and Wessells (2006) warn us of the complexities that are lost when researchers working in such contexts shuffle quotes from children in those settings with those from somewhere entirely different “to build up a generic picture of child recruitment in which the worst stands for all” (Hart, 2006, p. 218).

¹ A civil war is understood as an armed conflict that has (1) caused more than one thousand deaths; (2) challenged the sovereignty of an internationally recognised state; (3) occurred within the recognised boundaries of that state; (4) involved the state as one of the principal combatants; (5) included rebels with the ability to mount an organised opposition; and (6) involved parties concerned with the prospect of living together in the same political unit after the end of the war (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000; Licklider, 1995).

² In their research based on a review of the overall prevalence of civil wars in 161 countries between 1960-1999, the authors challenge the common belief that Africa's civil wars occur because of its ethnic and religious diversity, and state that the relatively higher prevalence of war in the continent is not due to the ethnolinguistic fragmentation of its countries, but rather to high levels of poverty, failed political institutions, and economic dependence on natural resources (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000, p. 244).

Picture 1. Map of the countries where the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC) has identified conflict situations where children are recruited and used by armed groups.



Updated: November 2018. Source: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/>

1.2. Colombian context

Colombia is located in the northwest of South America and is divided into 32 departments (administrative or political subdivisions in many countries) (*Picture 2*). The five-decade conflict, fought predominantly in rural areas, is considered the longest-running armed insurgency in the Western Hemisphere (Davis & Trinkunas, 2016). It has left more than 220,000 people dead, forcibly displaced a staggering 6.8 million, and seen an estimated 11,000 child soldiers recruited by the FARC since 1975 and thousands more by other groups (CSI, n.d.). According to Gómez and colleagues (2003), the war in Colombia is difficult to explain due to its longevity, the transformation of the actors involved, the multiplicity of interests at stake, the diversity of reasons that caused it, the participation of multiple legal and illegal actors, its geographic breadth, its illegal means of financing, and its connection with other violence such as drug trafficking. Therefore, the goal of this overview is to introduce the country and its conflict, particularly emphasising the rural nature of this protracted war, as it has been the primary context in which child recruitment occurs.

Picture 2. Capitals and regions of Colombia.



Source: Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi. Atlas de Colombia. 1999.

Colombia’s armed conflict is traditionally traced back to the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a popular politician and presidential candidate. Gaitán was killed in 1948, during his second presidential campaign, and his death led to massive riots in the Colombian capital, Bogotá, which later extended through the countryside, leading to a violent period of political unrest known as La Violencia (approx. 1948 to 1958) (Anderson, 2016; Braun, 2003). Gaitán’s Liberals and the rival Conservatives (the two main political parties) engaged in a dispute that lasted a decade and led to the death of as many as three hundred thousand people (Anderson, 2016). When the confrontations gradually slowed, most groups demobilised, but others kept operating in several rural regions. One of the Liberal groups that remained was the “Fuerzas

Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia” (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC), formed by Pedro Antonio Marin in 1964 (Kraul, 2016). Since the 1960s, the country has suffered from a low intensity and asymmetric armed conflict between government forces, leftist-guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitaries. Over the years, some guerrillas have given up the battle in separate peace deals, including the FARC (that signed the final peace agreement in 2016), but the smaller “Ejército de Liberación Nacional” (National Liberation Army, or ELN), which was inspired and initially backed by Cuba, has remained in the field with about two thousand fighters (Anderson, 2016). Guerrilla groups have financed themselves through kidnapping for ransom and extortion; for years, mining and oil companies have paid the guerrillas to stop them from sabotaging their pipelines (Cuéllar, 2016). Historically, these fighters have been spread out across Colombia, mostly in rural areas, where they have survived by taxing merchants as well as coca farmers. In recent years, they have also become directly involved in the business of cocaine production and trafficking (Mcdermott, 2018; Matiz, 2016).

In the crossfire are the *campesinos*, the rural poor (Power, 2011). Historically, Colombia has faced a severe problem of unequal land distribution. Previous attempts at land reform have failed to deal adequately with this problem, which has become substantially worse because of the country’s protracted conflict, especially its recent dynamics of massive forced displacement and land appropriation (Gutiérrez Sanín, 2009). The cycle of physical violence, displacement, exile, and dispossession results in what has been termed the “*campesino* tragedy”, due to its threats to the lives of *campesino* communities, their traditions, citizenship, and survival (Lederach, 2017; CNMH, 2010). The rural population of the country was 11.4 million people in 2016, of whom 3.5 million were children between 0 and 14 years old: 30.7 per cent of the population living in rural areas were children (CONtexto Ganadero, 2017).

Colombian armed conflict has a *campesino* origin. Although the violence began in the country’s capital, it was fuelled and kept alive in the rural areas, stressing the gap between rural and urban life that lies at the heart of the internal armed conflict in the country. Such a divide was clearly represented, for example, by the 2016 results of the Colombian peace plebiscite that asked Colombians to ratify or to reject the final

deal on the termination of the conflict between the government and the FARC guerrillas: in the peripheral regions, those most affected by the armed conflict voted overwhelmingly in favour of the peace accord (Lederach, 2017; Lombana, 2016). However, it failed overall with 50.2% voting against it (6,431,000 votes) and 49.8% voting in favour (6,377,000) (Idler, 2016), making urban votes decisive to an armed conflict mostly fought in rural areas.

An important characteristic of the war is its irregular character, in the sense that it has not evolved into an open civil war involving the whole nation, but has been marginal, concentrated in rural areas – the poorest and most forgotten by the state, while also being the richest in natural resources – a fertile area for any armed organisation to take control by force (Lugo, 2018; Gutiérrez Sanín & Vargas, 2017). In Colombian rural areas, it is usual to experience violence every day, which weaves itself into the backdrop of ‘ordinary’ life’ (Lederach, 2017, p. 592). However, as explained by Das and colleagues (2001), even when violence is not present in a dramatic form (like the dropping of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), when it is long-lasting it slowly erodes communities and severely disrupts the life-worlds of people. And yet, the authors stress, “in the midst of the worst horrors, people continue to live, to survive, and to cope” (Das et al., 2001, p. 1).

1.2.1. Colombian rural childhoods and child recruitment

“On May 30, 1999, amid the confusion caused by the kidnapping of 285 people in La María³ a church in Cali, a young man complained to the guerrillas of the ELN responsible for the kidnapping, saying: *Why are you doing this to me? I’m just a boy, I’m fourteen years old.* Almost immediately, another young man, in an ELN uniform, replied: *I am fourteen years old and I am a man.*” (Duque, 2017, p. 6).

³ This is considered the largest mass kidnapping in the country. The ELN guerrilla forcibly took more than 200 people from the temple, located in the south of the capital of the Valle del Cauca region, and transported them in two trucks bound for the mountains of Jamundi, 24 kilometres south of Cali. In the middle of the chase by the National Army and the police, about 200 people were released, and the rest remained held hostage in order to demand money from their families (El Tiempo, 2001).

The exchange occurred between two fourteen years old males, almost 20 years ago, and was documented by Claudia Julieta Duque, a human rights journalist. In twenty-two words, in Spanish,⁴ these two boys, at the moment actors of the conflict, put in a nutshell, how diverse and nuanced the understandings of childhoods in Colombia can be, and how it can look for children themselves. Although it is important to avoid any oversimplification, this brief exchange between a guerrilla member, who described himself as an adult, and a member of the religious community, who described himself as a boy, depicts how Colombian children living in rural areas have had to coexist with the phenomenon of violence and the presence of armed groups and, according to their experiences and perceptions, have taken sides in the conflict (CNMH, 2017). In Colombia, the recruitment of children and young people into political violence did not start suddenly. To different degrees, recruitment occurred throughout the country's history, and the recruitment and use of children are a historical phenomenon that is not static and much less homogeneous (ibid, p. 23). For example, narratives recently collected from old people who fought in La Violencia in their childhoods (Pachón, 2015) present stories of children joining the fight to defend their families and their towns. Those stories also portray them as children who before entering one of the contending parties, had also joined, at an early age, the labour force to support both the domestic and the regional economy. These stories of their past, says Pachón, speak of children who share, hand in hand, spaces and activities with adults.

A report produced jointly between the Ombudsman Office (Defensoría del Pueblo) and the Colombian office of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2006) asserted that, in some cases, the only indicators that children have of the presence of the state and its role of applying justice are the armed groups, which has facilitated processes of positive identification towards them and their warlike and coercive means. In many remote or recently populated areas, the army, the police, welfare and education officials have only a tenuous presence. By contrast,

⁴“(…) un joven reclamó a los guerrilleros del ELN culpables del plagio: ‘¿por qué me hacen esto?, yo solo soy un niño, tengo catorce años’ [*thirteen words*]. Casi de inmediato, otro adolescente, uniformado, le respondió: ‘yo también tengo catorce años y soy un hombre’ [*nine words*]”.

the guerrillas or paramilitaries may be well-known and respected (HRW, 2003). Ana Arjona's exploration of the social order of the Colombian war highlights that much more than violence happens during war, that violence is not only killing, but also can be insidious and mundane:

(...) armed actors do not only kill, but also create institutions, endorse ideologies, form alliances with local actors, provide public goods, recruit, and, in so doing, transform the societies in which they operate. Civilians, on the other hand, do not only suffer from war – they also cope with it, adapt to it, and shape it. (2016, p. 2)

The systematic recruitment of children in the country is evident not only by the numbers of children and young people who have entered the official reintegration programs or who have received some form of assistance from the State welfare programs since 1960 (CNMH, 2017), but also by reports that show that at least 40 per cent of the adult demobilised population joined the ranks when they were children (ICTJ, 2014). These statistics come from the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (*Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración*, ACR), which in 2017 became the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency (*Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización*, ARN). The agency welcomes women and men coming out of illegal armed groups, guerrilla and paramilitaries. For the period 2001-2018, the ARN reportedly registered 60,089 people in their reintegration program (2018). Due to the longevity of its armed conflict, Colombian governments have been systematically running the demobilisation of former combatants, both under and over eighteen years old (Colombia's age of majority), through the creation of programs such as the one from the ACR/ARN and one from the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar*, ICBF) focused on children.

Many of the children joining illegal armed groups had broken off their schooling by the fifth grade (HRW, 2003, p. 21). At the end of 2015, there were more than five million children outside the national education system, one third of the total number of children living in the country (CRIN, 2016). Of those people who did not attend school, 40 per cent lived in rural areas affected by the armed conflict; gaps in quality and access to education between rural and urban schools remain very deep (Hernández-Bonilla, 2018; García, 2018). The situation is aggravated if we take into

account that one in four Colombians is part of the rural population and that 44 per cent of them are in a situation of multidimensional poverty⁵ (UNDP, 2011). Rural youth have felt more strongly the effect of the armed conflict: between 2013 and 2015, one child was recruited per day (CNMH, 2017). Human Rights Watch (2003) report that children are an especially vulnerable group in Colombia's war between guerrillas (who claim to be representing *campesino*'s interests), paramilitaries (who claim to exist because of their right, mainly landowners, to defend themselves from the guerrillas, and who have worked collaboratively with the armed forces), and government security forces (who have the President of Colombia as their military's commander in chief), and that their lives and welfare are at risk even if they do not join an armed group. Children and their mothers make up the majority of the Colombian families forcibly displaced by war, and number in the hundreds of thousands. The age of recruitment is between 12 and 14 years; the average age of separation from the armed groups is between 15 and 17 years; the stay in the groups ranges from six months to three years and there is a ratio of one girl to four boys (Lugo, 2018; Springer, 2012; Watch List, 2012).

1.3. Research problem

Researchers both inside and outside academia have studied the phenomenon of child soldiering by looking at, for example, the reasons for recruitment, the roles played by children in the armed groups and, for those who survive war, the challenges posed by their reintegration. These approaches have been mainly governed by the child-victim perspective (due to their protection as war victims and also because their stories contest the expectations of a "normal childhood"), embodied in the global figure of the child soldier that tends to portray people who were part of armed groups in their childhoods as an account of lost-childhood. This doctoral research explores how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia, tracing the tensions between global discourses and local practices through the exploration of narratives by and

⁵ Multidimensional poverty consists of a number of factors that constitute poor people's experience of deprivation (e.g. poor health, inadequate living standard, poor quality of work, lack of education, lack of income, and threat from violence) (OPHI, n.d.).

about former child soldiers with the objective to assess whether it is possible to see a different type of childhood, instead of an experience of lost childhood.

This thesis investigates normative understandings of child soldiering in the Colombian context conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, I propose that a (re)take on childhood which facilitates approaching these accounts as experiences of different childhoods, rather than lost ones, is necessary. For this, it is essential to challenge global and local understandings of the figure of the child, focused on the idealisation of children's lives, and the figure of the child soldier, a contradictory mix of victim and perpetrator that exposes constant tensions. Empirically, the thesis undertakes two tasks:

1. It challenges the global figure of the child soldier by examining how it is enacted in the Colombian context, paying attention to frictions (Tsing, 2005) between places, peoples, and practices, focusing on two key actors: a group of children's rights practitioners (whom I have called *niñólogos*), and a group of former child soldiers spokespersons on the phenomenon (whom I have called *seasoned* child soldiers). This research applied qualitative research methods (unstructured interviews and two creative writing workshops with a group of eight people who grew up in heavily war affected areas of the country). I argue that in the translation, back and forth, of global and local understandings of child soldiering, meaningful childhood experiences are lost because they do not fit in stereotypical depictions of the phenomenon. In order to make a living post-conflict, during demobilisation processes former child soldiers have been forced to reproduce common narratives of child soldiering, leaving them unable to escape normative accounts of child soldiers, or, alternatively, they have had to neglect their past completely, in order to try and escape the weight of the figure of the child soldier.

2. Drawing on creative fieldwork with a group of Colombian former child soldiers, it argues that people who were soldiers in their childhoods find value in their past experiences, and narrate their lives in a way which draws

on the knowledge and experiences they developed during the war, resisting a separation of their time before, during, and after their recruitment into guerrilla and paramilitary groups. In their rewriting of themselves, they rescue and highlight features of their warrior self and *campesino* self, which they believe should be recognised in reintegration processes, and which would make material differences to their ability to make a living in a post-conflict Colombia.

While this thesis focuses on the case of Colombian child soldiers, it speaks to the larger concerns of childhood studies and contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to reconceptualise childhood. This research provides a novel account of former child soldiers' lives, which consequently, calls into question the adequacy of existing policies for re-integration. This thesis is a contribution to the literature on childhood studies in general, and to discussions on child soldiering and rural childhoods in particular, that will be of interest to those researching diverse types of childhoods during war, and those working in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes of child soldiers everywhere.

1.4. Definition of terms

A discussion of terminology is useful at the outset:

- I use the terms *child soldiers* and *former child soldiers* for ease of readability, and also because they relate to the figures crafted and kept alive by the humanitarian world. However, ideally in my work my research participants should be called “people who experienced soldiering in their childhoods”, as a way of describing the many features and experiences that make them who they are now, and to highlight, simultaneously, that child soldiering is indeed an important event in their lives, but it should not be treated as the most defining one. Generally agreed upon terms state that “child soldiers” should be referred to as “children associated with armed forces and groups”, as used in “The Paris Principles” (UNICEF, 2007), and “former child soldiers” should include people who were initially associated with armed forces or armed groups while under the age of eighteen, even if that person is eighteen

or older at the time of release, demobilisation, escape, or rescue (Drumbl, 2012).

- The *figure of the child soldier* is a key term in my thesis, as I argue that there is a global mainstream discourse on the phenomenon of child soldiers produced collaboratively by international humanitarian organisations and local actors, in which former child soldiers themselves are an essential part not only as sources but also as spokespersons. This figure provided a starting point for my research, from which I began questioning the on-going dialogue that keeps a global figure alive locally, Colombia. Furthermore, such a figure also encouraged me to explore creative ways to escape its rules to explore childhood narratives of people who experienced child soldiering. In a way, in this research, the global figure operated as a roadmap that allowed me to explore the understandings of child soldiering in its own Colombian dialect.
- A *campesino* or *campesina* is a person who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and other agricultural products. “When you live, work, and feel the land, when you taste the harvest that comes from the land, you have a connection to the land”, wrote The Youth Provocateurs of the High Mountains of El Carmen de Bolivar in a letter addressed to urban Colombians in 2016. The policy of agro-rural *campesinidad* states that *campesinos* work the land for themselves and depend above all on family labour and other artisanal forms of work organization (Bill 013/2014). I maintain the original word in Spanish because, as done by Burnyeat (2013), *campesinos* may be workers on the farms of others, or may own their land [...], and the term can be translated as peasant or rural farmer, which not only sounds potentially derogatory, but also because “*campesino* is a whole cultural category in Colombia and other parts of Latin America that is not accurately conveyed by these translations” (p. 437)
- The terms *Majority* and *Minority Worlds* are used following Tisdall and Punch (2012b) and Punch (2003) argument that we need to shift the balance of our worldviews that frequently privilege ‘western’ and ‘northern’ populations and issues. Throughout this thesis, I adopt the terms *Majority*

world (for the ‘Third World’) and *Minority* world (for the ‘First World’) to acknowledge the ‘majority’ of population, poverty, land mass, and lifestyles in the former, located in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and thus seeking to shift the balance of our world views that frequently privilege ‘western’ and ‘northern’ populations and issues (Tisdall & Punch, 2012a; Panelli, Punch, & Robson, 2007; Punch, 2003).

- Throughout this thesis I use several words in Colombian Spanish, with the intention of keeping my work as close to my data as possible. Two of those words will appear frequently: *La civil* and *niñólogos*. The former refers to how former combatants tend to refer to civilian life, once they have left the armed forces, and the latter to the casual Colombian way to talk about people who are considered experts on childhood. Its equivalent in English could be ‘childologist.’
- As done by Brett and Specht (2004), I use the term *war* throughout this thesis as a general shorthand to cover situations of international and internal armed conflicts, and situations of militarized violence that may not amount to armed conflict in the strict legal sense.

1.5. Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organised as follows. *Chapter Two* reviews the literature, focusing particularly on the figure of the child and the figure of the child soldier. It also exposes the lenses through which this research was conducted: Tsing’s frictions and her ethnography of global connections (2005), Haraway’s figures and their potential to be “refigured” (1994), and Fassin’s reading of victimhood (2012, 2009).

Chapter Three explains the methodology used to answer the research questions and achieve the research aims. This chapter presents the aim of this project, introduces the research questions and outlines the methods adopted for this study in order to answer those questions. This chapter elaborates on seeking to conduct ethical research with over researched populations.

The findings are presented in three chapters, where *Chapter Four* focuses on how the figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia by approaching a group of key people (ten practitioners in children rights and two seasoned former child soldiers). Multiple conversations with this group of informants allowed me to simultaneously find *tensions* between the depictions provided by the UN portrayal of child soldiering and Colombian professionals' experiences with it (noises or dissonances which are approached in more depth in the two upcoming chapters), and to be able to appreciate the existence of a combination of people, places, and practices that keep the global figure alive, while vernacularising it.

Chapters Five and Six are an invitation to question, based on former child soldiers' first-person accounts explored through literary and creative devices, diverse experiences of childhood, and their own experiences as accounts for a different kind of childhood instead of merely a lost one. *Chapter Five* discusses how Colombian former child soldiers portray their childhoods, sharing stories of their time inside the illegal armed groups, and representing themselves as *warriors*, a selfhood that includes military and political features, which go beyond their combat expertise. Their accounts challenge the victimhood approach that characterises the figure of the child soldier, and which depoliticise them. *Chapter Six* presents narratives of childhood collected on and from Colombian former child soldiers, which reveal how rurality is a primary dimension of their sense of self, and that their past as part of *campesino* communities is an experience or part of them that expands throughout their childhoods, spanning from their time before joining armed structures and their time inside the armed structures.

Chapter Seven discusses implications and contributions to debates in the literature, as well for policy, practice, and future research.

1.6. Note to the reader

New ideas happen outside our comfort zone: this book is a portrayal of that and a mix of who I have been and who I am now, a mix of all my worlds in one: research, creativity, social justice, and interdisciplinarity. This book portrays my complex and

multi-layered sense of self, as Appiah (2018) would put it: I, the journalist, trying to think and to write with academic rigour. I, the PhD researcher, trying to bring to life my ideas, my questions and my findings, through a language that has only been “mine” since 2012, in a sort of tailored-made narrative style. This book is like a rite of passage in which I force myself to stop being the one who gathers all the key experts in a room to talk about a topic (the journalist), to actually recognise that my work and all this time of collaboratively thinking about my questions gives me a place in that fruitful and on-going conversation (the academic).

Chapter 2. The production of the global figure of the child soldier in context

In cases of child recruitment, it is common to hear that children *should not* have experienced what they experienced, that they should not have been abused, exploited, neglected, required to abandon their families, and forced to learn how to kill and to defend themselves in order not to be killed. The “they should not have” approach, nonetheless, comes with an understanding of what “they should have”: they *should have* been playing, learning at school, eating healthy foods, and living in loving and caring environments. They should have had what it seems to be an ideal or desirable childhood. But, how did these general ideas come to exist? The constant dialogue of international and local non-governmental organisations (INGOs and NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, donors, and activists (“a constellation of actors”, as Drumbl [2015] calls them, or the “international child rights regime”, as Pupavac [2002] does) are in charge of the production and maintenance of the global figure of the child soldier, and of sensitising the public worldwide on the phenomenon through media outreach, film, and literature. Contemporary humanitarianism has conceptualised children through the notion of vulnerability (*see* Rosen, 2013; Drumbl, 2012; Denov, 2010a), following one basic ground rule: “Save the victim, but also plead their cause” (Fassin, 2011, p. 200).

However, this “constellation of actors” faces what Hart (2006) calls the “activist paradox”: by considering child recruitment through “the narrow framework of an avowedly neutral and impartial humanitarianism” (p. 222), they give ground to those with a partisan political agenda, while obscuring diverse and nuanced experiences of childhood.⁶ As this chapter discusses, the humanitarian approach is insufficient to address comprehensively the diversity of childhoods throughout the world, including those of child soldiers. For this reason, it contributes to the idea of “children out of place” (Stephens, 1995) as a good enough category that covers children and childhoods that deviate from the norm and that do not fulfil what the Western adult

⁶ For example, in his book “Children at war” (2005), P.W. Singer contests the use of child soldiers focusing on the damage that they produce to the US Army because it is “especially demoralizing for professional militaries to be forced to fight and kill children” (p. 169).

world expects from them. It is urgent to move beyond what Hart calls a sterile debate, to engage more fully with the complex realities of children's lives, "which are inevitably shaped by ideas, practices, and power relations that are both local and global" (Hart, 2006, p. 223). Stephens also joins this call by drawing attention to how these days the more and more children are seen as deviations from the norm of the ideal child living an ideal childhood, inviting to question if the accumulation of deviations constitute a crisis for modern, widely circulating definitions of children and childhood? (Malkki-Stephens personal communication [1994], as cited in Malkki [2015, p. 101]). A critical reading of child soldiering is in order to reject the naturalisation of humanitarian figures and normalised understandings of the experience, which is the purpose of this review and this thesis.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the conceptual framework I have used throughout the thesis, discussing the impact that ideal and non-ideal childhood constructions have had in the creation of the humanitarian figures of the child and of the child soldier. The second passage focuses on how the literature has approached the global phenomenon of child soldiering, paying particular attention to those works that have challenged normative understandings of the experience. Throughout the chapter, I discuss core concepts that guided my research, such as Fassin's reading of victimhood and humanitarianism, and Douglas's take on "pollution" that supports the category "children out of place". I dedicate the last section to expose the analytical approach I used to research the topic: Haraway's (1994, 1997, 2004) depiction of the *figure*, and Tsing's (2005) ethnography of global connections and how they come to life in the friction of practical encounters of people, places, and practices.

2.1. Ideal and non-ideal childhoods

Childhood is a contested concept and its understandings are produced within existing historical and cultural discourses that vary in form and content across cultures and social groups (Osgood, 2012; Qvortrup, 2009). The modern conception of childhood as a separate stage of life (and so having its own time) emerged in Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, together with bourgeois notions of privacy,

home, individuality, and family (Stephens, 1995, p. 5). Though the “luxury of childhood” was originally accessible only to the upper classes, notions and practices characterising this new domain were dispersed throughout society (ibid). Many different kinds of criteria, beyond age, are used to determine childhood, such as the commencement of work, end of schooling, the onset of menarche, betrothal, and marriage, amongst others (Hardgrove, et al., 2014; Boyden & Levinson, 2000, p. 28). Within the same society, children in different social classes may reach adulthood at different ages, depending on their social and economic roles. The ways in which immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1990, p. 7), and developmental theories of childhood have been criticised for their failure to acknowledge the importance of socio-cultural and other factors, such as gender and ethnicity (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 1999).

The idea of a normal and natural childhood, which comes to be portrayed as ideal, romanticises the early years of a person’s life and depicts it as leisurely, unproblematic, and dilemma free, while it remains segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world (Douglas, 2006; Malkki & Martin, 2003). The ideal image of childhood tends to depict a close relationship to nature (Bushin, et al., 2007; Wiborg, 2004), a healthy and traditional lifestyle (Dunkley & Panelli, 2007; Matthews, et al., 2000; Jones, 1997; Bunce, 1994), and a sphere clearly separated from the adult world (Smith, 2015; Jenks, 1996; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1990). In this portrayal, adults are supposed to protect children’s innocence from the corrupt (adult) world out there, and teach and guide them to be successful (productive) adults (Smith, 2015). Places like home, school, and designated play areas (Stephens, 1995, p. 15) are considered to be appropriate for children to be in, and when their experiences deviate from this trajectory (i.e. working to support the family instead of attending school), they experience the adult world “too soon” (not at the right time), which, in consequence, make them lose their innocence and childhood (Williams, 2015; Rolfe, 2008; Boyden, 1997). Williams (2015) explains it as it follows:

Whether a child attends school, for example, may be a calculated decision on the part of the family involving trade-offs concerning household work, employment prospects, and so on. Yet, the social significance of a young person who fails to attend school may be dire: a child who is not in school is seen as problematic, for failing to attend school contradicts how a 'good' childhood ought to look (Williams, 2015, p. 4).

As it happens to children who experience soldiering, who are asylum seekers, who are victims of sexual exploitation or labour, who live in the streets, or who are slaves, they are considered "unchildlike" (Aitken, 2001), "abnormal" (Punch, 2003) or, as Stephens (1995) and Ennew and Swart-Kruger (2003) call them following Douglas's take on pollution (2001): "children out of place", a concept that I also adopt in my thesis. In her work *Purity and Danger* (2001), Douglas argues that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order (p. 3), and claims that ideas about demarcating, purifying, separating, and punishing transgressions have as their core function to organise an "inherently untidy experience" (p. 4). "It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created" (ibid). For example, transitional and marginal states (such as illness, death, and crime) are also considered to be "polluted" because they suggest displacement from permitted categories, and transgression of boundaries and accepted rules (see Todeschini, 2001). Children in difficult circumstances, in general, and child soldiers, in particular, are considered a disruption to the agreed-upon order, and therefore are seen as being "out of place". Such an approach affects severely how their experiences are seen, researched, and understood, precisely because of the tendency to try to restore the order by returning them to the right places.

The field of Childhood Studies emphasises the importance of studying childhood in its own right (James and Prout, 1997), facilitating new research into the nature of childhood and the multiple roles children play in society, constantly challenging them and questioning them (Berents, 2009). The 'new' social studies of childhood, also known as Childhood Studies, are a research paradigm that emerged in the 1990s as a critical response to dominant developmental takes on childhood (Qvortrup, 1994; Prout & James, 1997; Mayall, 2002; James & James, 2004). The adjective 'new', as explained by Kustatscher (2015), serves to position the field as an

alternative to these previous ways of conceptualising and researching childhood (p. 8). The key views of Childhood Studies include:

1. Childhood is seen as a social construct, and “the institution of childhood provides an interpretive frame for understanding the early years of human life” (James & Prout, 2014, p. 3);
2. Childhood operates as a variable of social analysis, and comparative and cross-cultural studies expose a multiplicity of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon (Prout and James, 1990, p. 8);
3. Children are conceptualised as competent and active social actors who take part in the construction of their own childhoods; and
4. Children’s relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right (Qvortrup et al., 1994; Jenks, 1996; Prout & James, 1997).

This conceptualisation of children and childhood(s) denotes a change from seeing children as ‘becomings’ to viewing them as ‘human beings’ (Qvortrup, 1994).⁷ This shift has also led to a greater acknowledgement of children’s human rights, particularly political and civil rights (Tisdall, 2012). With his work *The Future of Childhood* (2005), Prout argues that the ‘new’ paradigm of sociology of childhood emphasises the notion of children as ‘beings’ in their own right, taking the risk of endorsing “the myth of the autonomous and independent person, as if it were possible to be human without belonging to a complex web of interdependencies” (p. 67). Children cannot only be ‘active’, competent and independent agents who can express their views about their lives, but also interdependent (dependent on each other), belonging to a “complex web of interdependencies” (p. 67), incompetent and immature (Konstantoni, 2010; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Prout, 2005).

Moving away from dualistic thinking, I would argue that we should avoid treating all children as either ‘competent or incompetent’ or ‘mature or immature’, and merely as agents. Children should be seen as both competent/incompetent, mature/immature and showing agency and interdependency at the same time. (Konstantoni K. , 2010, p. 307)

⁷ This distinction has been criticised for being unhelpful (*see* Lee, 2001), due to the fact that both adults and children can be seen as ‘becomings’ in response to the nature of their “ever changing and unstable lives and identities”. (Kustatscher, 2015, p. 9)

James, Jenks and Prout (1990) link a crisis in the sociology of childhood since the 1970s, with increasing international media coverage of children's lives, strikingly divergent from idealised Minority world concepts of childhood. These notions perpetuate white, Western and middle-class values, historically linked to strong religious and moral discourses, which denigrate alternative views to the category of "other" (Osgood, 2012; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 1999). Contemporary discourses of childhood privilege understandings of the innocent and the developing child, creating unique representations that, in turn, could be seen as fairy tales of what an ideal childhood should and can be (Smith, 2015), while keeping children in a separate space, away from the public domain of active citizenship (Marshall, 2014; Osgood, 2012). For example, when it comes to child soldiering, although through much of the 19th century, children were frequently present in the military (Ariès, 1962), by the middle of the century, most Western nations begun to reduce or eliminate the presence of children in their armed forces. The change happened so slowly that even during World War I, "the heroic and patriotic child soldier, typically a boy sailor or soldier remained a central image in the ideology of war and conflict" (Rosen, 2013, p. 93). In the same century, in Colombia, children are remembered for bravely taking up arms and playing an important role in the Colombian independence from Spain, their former colonial master (Pachón, 2009, p. 17). The most iconic case is that of Pedro Pascasio Martínez, a twelve year-old soldier who participated in two decisive battles for independence, and was responsible for the capture of the commander of the Spanish troops (Pieschacón, et al.; 2006, p. 4). In 2001, the government decreed by law the National Day of the Fight against Corruption, and included the creation of a medal under Pascasio's name:

The Congress of the Republic of Colombia creates the "Pedro Pascasio Martínez Medal of Republican Ethics", with the name and the effigy of the child soldier, which must be delivered on August 18 every year (...) to a Colombian, under 25 years old, who, through individual or collective initiatives, has worked on the recovery of citizen ethical values that lead to the prevention of corruption. (Bill 668/2001, art. 4) [author's translation]

The story of child soldiers in the western imagination is a story of symbolic reversals, asserts Rosen (2013): while in the 19th century heroic children were praised for their actions and are still remembered as such by history books,

contemporary child soldiers are one of the most transgressive form of fighter. Child soldiers have left the ranks of Western and European armed forces and groups – although countries like the UK, Germany, the US and Canada still enlist into their armed forces people over 16 years old –, and remain visible into the armed groups and forces of the poorest nations on earth. “This shift, this change in place, is the setting for the modern production of the figure of the child soldier” (Rosen, 2015, p. 174): Majority world children in need of help, and Minority world humanitarians in need *to* help (see Malkki, 2015).

2.2. The figures of the child and of the child soldier

The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has played a critical role in how childhood is perceived. The Convention defines a child as “every human being below eighteen years old, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger” (Article 1). The UN’s agency that works exclusively on childhood matters is the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and it elaborates on how childhood should look like thusly:

Childhood is the time for children to be in school and at play, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an extended community of caring adults. It is a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and protected from abuse and exploitation. As such, childhood means much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood. It refers to the state and condition of a child’s life, to the quality of those years (UNICEF, 2005, para. 1).

In its preamble, the Convention declares that children should grow up in a family environment (although it is not clearly defined, the Convention states in its article 2 that children should not be discriminated against, regardless of “whatever type of family they come from”), in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, and points to adults and governments to help fulfil various rights of children (UN General Assembly, 1989). Despite intellectual discussions about the definition of childhood and cultural differences about what to expect of children, there has always been a substantial degree of shared understanding that childhood implies a separated and safe space (UNICEF, 2005). In 1990, a year later, in what at that time was called as the largest gathering of world leaders in history assembled at the UN, 71 heads of

State and Government and 88 other senior officials attended the World Summit for Children, where the Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and a Plan of Action for implementing the Declaration in the 1990s were adopted (UNICEF, 1990). The Declaration stressed that world children are innocent, vulnerable and dependent, and that their time “should be one of joy and peace, of playing, learning and growing” (UNICEF, 1990, para. 2). Still, the Declaration acknowledges, for many children, the reality is completely different (para. 3). Children’s suffering can take many forms: disease; hunger; abuse; neglect; lack of access to schools or medical care; incarceration with no access to a fair trial; fear of being killed (by mines, bombs or physical abuse); witnessing violence; being abducted or kidnapped for sexual exploitation or domestic work; being sold for marriage, organ donation, or illicit activities; having to work; and surviving alone (e.g. AIDS orphans) (Bardin, 2005, p. 264).

The UN pays attention to a long list of children’s rights violations, in what has become a varied iconography of victimhood (Burman, 1994). Poretti and colleagues (2013) reviewed a corpus of 328 texts (including treaties, resolutions, thematic and annual reports) produced between 1989 and 2009 by the UN system and selected international non-governmental organisations,⁸ and identified at least “seven icons of stolen childhoods” (non-ideal childhoods): “*the child victim of violence*, which comprises physically and psychologically abused children; *the child soldier*; *the commodified child*, including the sale of children or their organs; *the sexually exploited child*; *the street child*; *the abandoned child*; and *the orphan*, counting for children having lost at least one parent” (p. 24). The phenomenon of child soldiering caught the humanitarians’ attention with Graça Machel’s report in 1996, while representing them as a problem to be ‘fixed’ (Villanueva, et al., 2017). In her ground-breaking report, “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children” presented to the General Assembly, Machel, a former Minister of Education of Mozambique,

⁸ The sample of actors comprised: the Committee on the Rights of the Child; the UN General Assembly; the United Nations Children’s Fund; Save the Children International (formerly the International Save the Children Alliance, including two of its affiliates with the largest field presence: Save the Children UK and Sweden); the International Secretariat of Defence for Children International; the International Catholic Child Bureau and Human Rights Watch.

highlighted the disproportionate impact of war on children and identified them as the primary victims of armed conflict. The main topics of the report were child soldiering, refugees and internally displaced children; sexual exploitation and gender-based violence; and landmines and unexploded ordnance (UN General Assembly, 1996). Regarding the recruitment of children, Machel stated that it was one of the most alarming trends in armed conflicts:

Children serve armies in supporting roles, as cooks, porters, messengers and spies. Increasingly, however, adults are deliberately conscripting children as soldiers. Some commanders have even noted the desirability of child soldiers because they are “more obedient, do not question orders and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers”. (UN General Assembly, 1996, p. 16)

Machel’s report led to the adoption of the General Assembly’s Resolution 51/77, which recommended that the Secretary-General appointed a Special Representative on the impact of armed conflict on children (SRGS-CAAC, n.d.). The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC), presents itself as the “global advocate for children affected by armed conflict” and “the moral voice for children in conflict zones” (UN General Assembly, 2012), and lists six grave violations that children suffer in armed conflict, such as: 1. Killing and maiming; 2. Recruitment or use as soldiers; 3. Sexual violence; 4. Abduction; 5. Attacks against schools or hospitals; and 6. Denial of humanitarian access. A decade after the initial approach to the phenomenon, characterised by the rigid term “child soldiers” – which oversimplified children’s roles in combat, made no particular differentiation between boys and girls, and did not include other forms in which children are used in modern warfare, such as acts of terrorism –, was replaced by a more comprehensive one: “child associated with an armed force or armed group”. The new and still current term, contained in the Paris Principles, speaks of “any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes” (UNICEF, 2007), or as it is better described by the SRSG-CAAC:

In many conflicts, children take a direct part in combat. However, their role is not limited to fighting. Many girls and boys are also used in support functions that also involve significant risk. Their tasks can vary, from combatants to cooks, spies,

messengers and even sex slaves. Moreover, the use of children for acts of terror, including as suicide bombers, has emerged as a phenomenon of modern warfare. Each year, the UN receives reports of children as young as eight or nine years old associated with armed groups. Girls, also recruited and used by armed forces and groups, have vulnerabilities unique to their gender and place in society and suffer specific consequences (including, but not limited to, rape and sexual violence, pregnancy and pregnancy-related complications, stigma and rejection by families and communities). No matter their role, child soldiers are exposed to acute levels of violence – as witnesses, direct victims and as forced participants. Some are injured and have to live with disabilities for the rest of their lives (SRSG-CAAC, 2016, pp. 3-5).

Regardless of how children are recruited and the many and diverse roles that they play inside legal or illegal armed groups, the UN claims that all child soldiers are *victims*, and that their participation in conflict has severe effects on their physical and emotional well-being. As with other human rights violations in wartime, people who suffer these are labelled victims and are mostly approached as survivors of trauma (Fassin, 2012; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). With their work *Empire of Trauma* (2009), Fassin and Rechtman carefully portray how humanitarian organisations began treating victims to deal with their psychological wounds – hence the mental health approach that still dominates the understandings of victimhood –, while avoiding any political discussion that could jeopardise their work in war affected areas. Dr Beatrice Stambul from Médecins du Monde, an international humanitarian association that brings relief to the most vulnerable populations through the provision of medical services, explains their work as follows: “Treating psychological wounds means first of all putting the unspeakable, the ordeals, and horrors that people have undergone, into words” (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 176). Because of humanitarian practices that narrate war in the language of suffering, and translate oppressive conditions into wounds of the soul, the particular story of a child has become the voice of the child soldier: “there is no child soldier’s voice; it is the child soldiers’ voice expressed in a quote by a child” (Monforte, 2007, p. 189). Nonetheless, what seems to be a very well controlled language tends to present a monolithic vision rather than the diversity of experiences (Bodineau, 2014). In the humanitarian discourse, children appear exclusively as needy victims who are made out to be the objects of aid programmes, which allegedly possess superior knowledge as to what children need and what is good for them (Liebel, 2017, p. 79), and therefore they can safely claim to be, as the SRSG-CAAC does, the moral voice

for children in conflict zones. The risk of this approach, hidden behind traits of compassion and a universally shared, basic humanity, is that it treats people, like child soldiers, as ahistorical subjects, depoliticising them, and hinders the understanding of their actual circumstances (Malkki, 2015, p. 199). Humanitarianism has a perverse result, says Malkki (2015): “it dehumanises its objects by reducing actors in a complex and meaningful historical process into nakedly human objects of compassion” (ibid).

Although in this research I focus on how child victims are particularly viewed from a humanitarian perspective, since the 1960s the field of victimology has developed as multicolored discipline with its own theoretical and methodological traditions (Spencer & Walklate, 2016), such is the case, for example, of feminist victimology. This victimological perspective operates as a lens through which to intervene with both female and male victims and offenders, and it is concerned mostly with achieving gender equality, combating sexism, and struggling for women’s rights (Barberet, 2010). As there are many feminist approaches, there are many feminist victimological perspectives, but in general, Barberet (2010) explains that most of these lines of inquiry involve recognizing victimization as the result of unequal power relations, exposing the gendered nature of victimization, working toward the empowerment of women, and contesting sexism and other forms of prejudice in criminal justice and law. “Among this type of feminist victimological perspectives, the most radical versions are those that reject the terms victimology and victim, although most feminist approaches acknowledge that gendered victimization reflects a power imbalance” (Barberet, 2010, p. 406). However, there is a revisionist stance with the term victim, which tries to counter the impression created by early feminist activists that the only victims of crime are women. Historically, the relationship between feminism and victimology has faced several difficulties, which have centered on the problematic nature of the totalizing effects of the term victim, rooted within the field of victimology itself (Walklate et al., 2018, p. 2). “According to this stance, the word victim has become feminized, implying passivity (a stereotypical quality of women), and thus labeling women ‘victims’ sends the message that women tolerate being victimized or that their fate is to be victimized” (Barberet,

2010, p. 407). For some feminists working in victims' services, the label "victim" serves as "a self-fulfilling prophecy to prevent women from recovering from victimization and leading normal lives" (ibid). What we can see in the feminist victimology literature is a similar struggle to navigate the complex boundaries of victim/perpetrator, so peculiar in the case of child soldiers.

Child recruitment as a category is challenging. Children are not only victims of recruitment, but also perpetrators of violence. For that reason, humanitarians have taken extra care to prevent the "victimiser" discussion by adopting terms like "voluntary forced", which gives some nuances to children's accounts that claim to have joined the war willingly. Humanitarians, therefore, have precise terminology which allows them to keep a certain control over their practices and their representations of the global figures of the child and of the child soldier. For example, during the launch of the report *Why 18 Matters. A rights-based analysis of child recruitment* from Child Soldiers International (17th May 2018, Palace of Nations, Geneva, Switzerland), Sabine Rakotomalala, Senior Adviser of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, said "Children will be children, whether they like it or not". In ten words, the UN technical officer summarised how the intergovernmental organisation understands and works with children worldwide, Ironically imposing the same kind of oppression they claim to oppose. UNICEF – created by the United Nations General Assembly on December 1946, to provide emergency food and healthcare to children in countries devastated by World War II – , handles a generally rigid category from which the system bases its work, and "their children" (part of their programs and campaigns) will be children (as in their definition) regardless if their own subjectivities and their way of understanding the world do not relate completely to how they are being conceptualised.

However, as Lee (2009) states, humanitarians take a rights-based approach to the issue of child soldiers, conceptualising children in a way that "renders all forms of children's military participation barbaric and abhorrent" (p. 4). Such an approach institutionalises the predominant Minority World social risk-management model of childhood development that *emphasises* individual causation and professional

intervention and *de-emphasises* the influence of the wider social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances (Pupavac, 2001; Boyden, 1994). For example, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed and ratified more quickly and by more states parties than any other UN convention, has been the target of criticisms because it is said to promote an ahistorical, illegitimately universalising vision of “the child” and its needs, rights, and “best interests” (Stephens, n.d.; Malkki & Martin, 2003). The very humanitarian gesture that appears to grant recognition to victims, child soldiers included, ends up reducing them to something they are not “by reifying their condition of victimhood while ignoring their history and muting their words” (Fassin, 2012, p. 254). “Humanitarian reason”, the term that Fassin assigns to moral and political discourse and practices, pays more attention to the biological life of victim, “the life in the name of which they are given aid, than their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their existence” (ibid).

In the midst of all this action, the UN as an imagined world community has craftily created a “generic composite” that has been transformed into an archetype of the child and of the child soldier experience that has rapidly spread throughout the media and popular culture (Rosen, 2015, p. 178). Humanitarian institutions, such as UNICEF, have crafted such archetypes by creating “observably standardized representational uses of children” (Malkki, 2015, p. 80), through useful images that go beyond visual material to include textual (written) and oral representations of the children themselves (such as images that the children have made, words that they have written, and songs that they have sung) (Burman, 2008). These representational uses of children cover at least five interrelated registers: 1. as embodiments of a basic human goodness and innocence, 2. as sufferers, 3. as seers of truth, 4. as ambassadors of peace (and symbols of world harmony), and 5. as embodiments of the future (Malkki, 2015, p. 80). Public awareness of the UN “child” and “child soldier” comes primarily from media accounts, novels, films, and the reports of humanitarian and human rights organizations that report and advocate on the issue (Rosen, 2015, p. 184), and both figures help to convey reactions in the public, so

they can support and participate in advocacy events (such as Universal Children's Day every 20th November, and the Red Hand Day, every 12th February).

UN language is often divorced from the experiences of real children and youth, and clashes with local understandings about the involvement of young people in war (Rosen, 2015). Their representations of children in war portray them as just too young or too profoundly traumatised, challenging former child soldiers' perceptions of the matter, and usually relying on secondary sources to understand these children's experiences, such as social workers, psychologists, school teachers, religious leaders, and parents or guardians (Brocklehurst & Peters, 2017).

Considering that the reintegration of former child soldiers into civilian life is an essential part of the work of humanitarians all around the world (SRS-CAAC, 2016), UN language has a further meaningful impact in how children and young people are dealt with once they are out of the armed groups. By victimising them and making them "nakedly human objects of compassion", former child soldiers encounter in their reintegration processes professionals who attempt to give them their childhoods back, by infantilising them, neglecting their past, and approaching them mainly as trauma survivors, ignoring other, more nuanced approaches to their experiences.

2.3. Understanding child soldiers

The experience of childhood has never been universal and, in part, childhood studies appeared as a response "against tendencies towards a false universalisation and normalisation of childhood" (Tisdall & Punch, 2012b, p. 243), inviting us to see childhood in context and as culturally and socially constructed. In contrast to the global figures previously discussed, many academic fields involved in the study or representation of children state that there are a multiplicity of concepts of childhood and adulthood, codified and defined by age, ethnicity, gender, history, location, and more factors. Scholars have contested generalised humanitarian views that sometimes lead to more harm than good (Kaufman & Rizzini, 2002; Burman, 1996) or to further marginalise or 'other' Majority World childhoods that do not conform to

notions of appropriate childhoods (Tisdall & Punch, 2012a; Kesby, Gwanzura-Ottmoller, & Chizororo, 2006).

Child soldiering is an over researched phenomenon (a quick search in Google Scholar reports 2,160 papers published in 2018 and 129 in eighteen days of 2019). The number of research studies on former child soldiers has increased substantially in the past decade in fields such as international affairs, global security, war and culture studies, peace studies, and modern African studies. Largely, research on child soldiers has focused on African cases (*see Introduction*) and on three main areas:

1. Psychological wellbeing, with an emphasis on trauma and on victimhood,
2. The reasons why children join armed groups, and why they leave them, and
3. How former child soldiers reintegrate to civilian life.

In the first, a majority of studies focus on traumatic stress in child populations (e.g. Kohrt, et al., 2008; Bayer, Klasen & Adam, 2007; Derluyn, et al., 2004), and although needed, research with this approach risks psychologizing victims' suffering, deflecting attention away from larger historical, political, and moral issues (Todeschini, 2001, p. 122). The second area explores what are known as *push* and *pull* factors: the circumstances in a child's context that drives them to join an armed group (e.g. household poverty, unemployment, hunger, or the need to seek refuge), and rewards or incentives that children know they will receive by joining an armed group (e.g. access to money, protection from harm, improved societal status), respectively (e.g. Podder, 2011; Wessells, 2005; Somasundaram, 2002). In this area, the work of Brett and Specht (2004) is particularly iconic, who conducted a groundbreaking research by directly asking former child soldiers in nine different countries why they *chose* to fight. Lastly, in the area of how former child soldiers reintegrate into civilian life, academic and non-academic literature focuses primarily on family reunification, involvement in education, and provision of psychological assistance as key measures that need to be addressed in order for the reintegration process to be successful and sustainable (e.g. Henderson & Wessells, 2009; Williamson, 2006; Hill & Langholtz, 2003).

Still, there are accounts of former child soldiers who claim that researchers do not get their experiences quite right (Miljeteig & Ennew, 2017; CCVS & War Child, 2013; Salamanca, 2009). Rosen (2015) claims that anyone who studies child soldiers enters into a conceptual as well as legal and moral minefield because of their protection as war victims, their stories that contest “normal expectations of childhood”, and the prevailing belief that children are incapable of extreme violence (Martins, 2011; Grétry, 2011; Bhabha, 2006; Hart, 2006). The humanitarian approach to child soldiers as abused and vulnerable contrasts sharply with the modern understanding of children found throughout the humanities and social sciences, which positions children as active players and participants in society (Rosen, 2015, p. 176). However, approaching the field by recognising them as players would imply seeing them as conscious agents and not as passive pawns, and to validate somehow war as a place for children.

One of the most controversial approaches to the topic is to explore former child soldiers’ experiences as legitimate warriors. Ben-Ari (2009) is one of the few authors who has vigorously challenged the global figure of the child soldier, mainly reflecting on perceptions and actions of the professional soldiers who have to face them (as done also by Hughes, 2006, and Singer, 2005). According to Macmillan (2009), references to child soldiers’ physical features invariably provoke comparisons with adult soldiers to underscore their inappropriateness for the life of soldiering (p. 42). Although the idea that children’s physical weakness is a key disqualifier from soldiering has been naturalised, it has also been pointed out that modern warfare’s favourite weapon, the AK-47, requires little strength to operate and is “perfect suited to a boy’s physique” (Kapuściński, 2001, p. 149). According to Ben-Ari (2009), the standardised figure of the child soldier is complex and “does not work as straightforward as children’s rights defenders from the humanitarian world would want them to do” (p. 3). Malkki (2015) finds controversial that while children as soldiers are considered an abomination, “normal soldiers”, who may be just a few years older, are taken for granted fact:

The “normal” soldier can be decorated for valour, but decorating the child soldier thus strains the **imagination**. The trouble with child soldiers is that they cannot be set apart, made sacred, in allochronic time (by adults); and they can no longer be

(for adults) innocent in the other sense of a blameless not-knowing. They cannot be imagined as transcendent figures. They are profane, a category mistake that disturbs the poetics of “our common humanity” [emphasis added]. (Malkki, 2015, p. 84)

Alongside Malkki, Rosen (2015) and Drumbl (2012) have also called for a re-imagining of child soldiers’ experiences, because, precisely as Rosen says, what appears to be at the heart of the modern child soldier crisis is a problem of both imagination and place (Rosen, 2015, p. 174). To think about the phenomenon differently requires recognising the existence of the legal and moral minefield, and prepare to walk around it instead of avoiding it. For example, besides focusing on children as combatants, paying attention to the effects that violence, intimidation, and indoctrination have on child soldiers, the literature could do more to address the broader set of socialization processes within rebel groups (Vermeij, 2014). While it is true that war is “all about control of spaces and humans” (Podder, 2011, p. 145), in these places, children are not only forced to be there (Lee, 2009), but they are also actors in such a space, and they navigate it and respond to it. To approach them in such a manner could elicit reflections such the ones found by Fassin and Rechtman (2009) when exposing the case of young Palestinian stone-throwers (a very subtle category of child soldiers). The authors claim that people exposed to various forms of oppression and terror, domination and dispossession, have different, complex, and polysemic experiences, and that their representations of the past and their expectations of the future are not fixed in the landscape of trauma. In Palestinians’ case, they may see themselves as combatants and not as victims. The victimhood description tends to be rejected by the so-called stone-throwers, as they may think of their daily life in terms of resistance rather than submission, in terms of political violence rather than psychic suffering (p. 211). To stop seeing child soldiers as elements out of place, without necessarily making war the right place for them, could effectively open the door to documenting their lives beyond combat, and identify other soldiering tasks that allow them to acquire key life skills and useful and transferable knowledge when (if) they go back to civilian life.

Furthermore, although research has also focused its attention on understanding child soldiers’ childhoods, the focus remains on the factors which facilitated their

recruitment. By reading former child soldiers accounts thusly, we transform their childhoods as “child soldiers to be” and, again, prevent diverse readings of their experiences in the years prior to their recruitment. *Children’s Geographies*, for example, an area of study within human geography and childhood studies which involves researching the places and spaces of children’s lives, has merely published five articles between 2005 and 2012 related to childhoods of former child soldiers, and child soldiers appear mostly connected to child labour,⁹ and there is not a single piece of research related to their childhoods before soldiering. Punch (2003) has criticised how Majority World children have been largely perceived in relation to their work, and how the overlapping arenas of their everyday lives tend to be ignored (p. 277). To disregard such approach, appears to be supporting the generalised idea that soldiering is one of the worst things that can happen to a child. However, former child soldiers’ childhood accounts narrate stories of neglect, poverty, lack of access to basic services and rights, among other characteristics that prove that they come from anything but ideal childhoods. Research that challenges idealised constructions of free, adventurous, healthy, and safe rural childhoods, without also portraying children as a vulnerable subjects requiring protection and a range of guidance or services are also uncommon.

There is a much-needed critical turn in the vast and still rapidly growing child soldier studies (Beier, 2011), which must come with the inclusion of former child soldiers personal accounts of their experiences. Current research is raising awareness on the importance of taking former child soldiers’ own accounts and perceptions into consideration through innovative research methods that transcend the go-to-method of the qualitative sciences: life stories interviews (e.g. Watchlist, 2012; Springer, 2012; Keairns, 2004). With this perspective, there are two studies especially relevant for my research: Lugo (2017), and Baines and Stewart (2011). Both pieces attempted to explore former child soldiers’ experiences in a different way, by methodologically opening the space for new discussions about the experiences of recruitment and

⁹ Child soldiering is considered one of the worst forms of child labour according to the International Labour Organisation’s “Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour” (1999).

childhood memories. In the first, Lugo wanted to understand the importance of social relations in the transition to civilian life faced by former child soldiers in Colombia, and opted for creating a “Green Zone” that she described as “a physical, emotional and relational space in which joint narratives took place” (2017, p. 2). Lugo ran a series of collaborative narrative and art-based workshops in which the participants produced different kinds of narratives (performative, visual/oral, written, and life stories), and highlighted that these activities proved to be “an adequate space for dialogue” as it provided a safe space for everyone involved. Particularly, as a researcher, she stressed how her daily relationship with them allowed her to “deconstruct some social discourses about them, to question the way experts have appraised them” (p. 17), which, in return, led her to see them as “disarmed warriors” and not victims.

In the second case, Baines and Stewart (2011) conducted twelve storytelling sessions in northern Uganda, using the assistance of a local non-governmental organisation, with a group of 27 formerly abducted women who returned as mothers. The women spent, on average, more than eight years in the bush, and returned with between one and five children. They met every month or two over a period of 18 months. Baines provided a research topic per session (e.g. justice, children, marriage), but the sessions were structured so the women could choose what specific stories they wanted to relate to this general topic. The dialogues were recorded and transcribed by a Luo (local dialect) and English-speaking research assistant, and translated into English. The facilitators were also formerly abducted women from their peer groups, and the researcher was not present. Both examples show the researchers’ clear intentionality to approach former child soldiers accounts in a different way: Lugo, as a Colombian who speaks the language and handles certain social and cultural codes, got involved in a long lasting relationship with her participants; Baines and Stewart, as foreign researchers in northern Uganda, opted to facilitate a space in which only former child soldiers would be present in the data collection, and also conducted long term research. Both methodological decisions facilitated the emergence of nuanced accounts of child soldiering in which former child soldiers, creatively reinterpreted their past and reflected about their place in the society.

Lastly, while certainly rich research on child soldiering has been conducted in the African and Asian contexts, because of the scope of this research I will highlight how Colombian scholars have explored and approached the phenomenon. The topic has also been over researched inside and outside academia, and because of how systematic child recruitment is in the country due to its protracted armed conflict, it has been investigated as a space in which children live and are socialised, without saying that it is an *ideal* place for children. The main approach remains humanitarian (children as victims), and there has been a growing trend that attempts to read their experiences as:

1. Political actors (Niño, 2017; Mago, 2011),
2. To look at their childhoods in a continuum, without fractioning them in before, during, and after their time as soldiers, exploring, for example, their childhoods in rural areas (Bello, 2003), and
3. To explore their self-representations as warriors (Lugo, 2017, CNMH, 2017).

Most of the advances in the Colombian research on child soldiering have been promoted by academics, both renowned scholars and early career researchers. Since 2015, with the launch of the doctorate program in Social Sciences, Childhood and Youth at the University of Manizales, new fields and topics on child soldiers are being researched, including generational and gender approaches. Local and international researchers produced two of the most recent researches on the topic. The first one was conducted by the Colombian anthropologist Ximena Pachón (2019), who has documented child soldiering in a historical perspective (focusing in the period of La Violencia and the beginning of the guerrillas, *see Introduction*), by interviewing older people who were soldiers in the 1960's, and reviewing archival materials. The child that has emerged from her work contests the idealised images of what a child is, and she asserts that the innocent child, dependent and in need of protection, incapable of having responsibilities and making decisions, does not appear in her research. The second was the result of a collaborative work between the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium) and the Universidad Católica Boliviana (Bolivia) that explored the discourse of people involved in the reintegration

programs of Colombian former child soldiers (Villanueva, et al., 2017). The researchers categorised two forms of discourse, Law-oriented and Alternative-oriented: the former portrays children as victims; while the latter argues that society sees children as helpless, lazy, delinquent, and passive, while armed groups propose more positive characteristics of children like creativity, activeness and purposefulness (p. 95). After the discussion on the context in which the figures of the child and of the child soldier are produced and investigated in the humanitarian world and in academic research, I will now present how I positioned myself to conduct this research.

2.4. Approaches to the research

In this final section, I expose the analytical approach I used to research the topic: first, the *figure* as depicted by Haraway (1994, 1997, 2004), and secondly, Tsing's (2005) ethnography of global connections, and how they come to life in the friction of practical encounters of people, places, and practices.

2.4.1. Figures

This study explores how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia, tracing the tensions between global discourses and local practices. Although several scholars in the field of child soldiering have explored and discussed child soldiers' public representations (Drumbl, 2012; Denov, 2011; Martins, 2011), I engaged with the term *figure* following Donna Haraway's take on it, not only as "material entities", but also because of their potential to be "refigured", to challenge what is taken for granted as normal (Haraway, 1994). Figures collect hopes and fears, and show possibilities and dangers (2004, p. 1). They are not only material entities, but embodied "material-semiotic actors" (1997, p. 11), which "root people in stories and link them to stories" (Haraway, 2004). Haraway uses the string game of cat's cradle to demonstrate how, through connections and encounters, apparently strict figures (such as the one of the child soldier), are informed and challenged by others (Colombian *niñólogos* and former child soldiers' own accounts of their childhood experiences). The concept of figure is flexible enough to allow me to explore how global and local practices and discourses are engaged by Colombia's own

constellation of actors (following Tsing's frictions), but also to facilitate the unpacking of the figure, to refigure it, by allowing Colombian former child soldiers' stories to work with and against the global figure of the child soldier, to create new knots, in an attempt to inform the global with the Colombian dialect.

To recapitulate, the *global figure of the child* is often invoked by leading international advocates as a kind of sacred icon of global civil society (Nieuwenhuys, 2010). "The child is made to appear as the exemplary human, and as politically neutral and harmless—the most neutral of neutrals, hors combat—and is thus able to do a great deal of work in the affective imagination" (Malkki, 2015, p. 79). The most striking features of the figure of the child are its mobility, transferability, and disconnectedness from history (Rosen, 2015, p. x). By using this model, children's rights advocates have little difficulty in codifying simple, universally applicable, bright line distinctions between childhood and adulthood. The *global figure of the child soldier* is grounded in the discourse of humanitarian, human rights, and children's rights advocacy, and law (Drumbl, 2015; Rosen, 2015), and portrayed by the widely documented African cases (Martins, 2011; Grétry, 2011). This figure covers a range of characteristics of the reasons for the recruitment, the roles played by children inside armed groups and, if they survive the armed conflict, what type of needs they have and how (if at all) can violence be taken away from them, so they can return to experience their "ideal childhoods".

2.4.2. Frictions

When I set out to research how a global figure was enacted in a local context, I encountered Tsing's work: an ethnography of global connections. In *Friction*, anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005) produces an ethnographically nuanced analysis of the social processes by which the discursive, spatial, and metaphoric places that are known as the local and the global are made by each other. Tsing argues that global connections operate as reminders that "universal claims do not actually make everything everywhere the same" (2005, p. 1), although they do give grip to universal aspirations: "Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions I call 'friction': the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection

across difference” (p. 4). Tsing explains that universals (such as the global figures I have discussed in this chapter) are indeed local knowledge in the sense that they cannot be understood without the benefit of historically specific cultural assumptions. However, seeing them in a totalitarian way makes dialogue impossible (impossible to play with the strings, in Haraway’s terms), because the mission of the universal (what cannot be contained in a single country) is to form bridges, roads, and channels of circulation:

The universal bridge to a global dream space still beckons to us. The bridge might take us out of our imagined isolation into a space of unity and transcendence: the whole world (...) The bridge of universal truths promises to take us there. **Yet we walk across that bridge, and we find ourselves, not everywhere, but somewhere in particular.** Even if our bridge aims toward the most lofty universal truths – the insights of science, the freedom of individual rights, the possibility of wealth for all – we find ourselves hemmed in by the specificity of rules and practices, with their petty prejudices, unreasonable hierarchies, and cruel exclusions. We must make do, enmeshing our desires in the compromise of practical action. We become hardened, or, alternatively, we are overcome with grief and anger. The bridge we stepped off is not the bridge we stepped upon. Yet to cast away the memory of the first bridge denies desire. To pretend it is the same as the second bridge is the baldest lie of power. (...) It is only in maintaining the friction between the two subjectively experienced bridges, the friction between aspiration and practical achievement, that a critical analysis of global connection is possible [emphasis added] (Tsing, 2005, p. 85)

Global figures always begin somewhere in particular, and administratively and logistically there is a significant amount of routinisation, standardisation, and, in a technical sense, “universalisation that goes into everything associated with the humanitarian” (Malkki, 2015, p. 206). Universals are knowledge that moves. While a straightforward approach to the concept could suggest that what opposes the universal are local perspectives (endorsing local or indigenous knowledge, for example), Tsing insists that drawing attention to cultural specificity misses the point: “The knowledge that makes a difference in changing the world is knowledge that travels and mobilises, shifting and creating new forces and agents of history in its path” (2005, p. 8). In this study, the possibility of detecting and witnessing the existing frictions in the existence of the global figure of the child soldier in a local context (Colombia) was facilitated by understanding that the existent dialogue between the global and the local was not unidirectional, and that it was also an on-going conversation. Universals and locals, as imaginary places (as Malkki would

say) are made real by *people* (practitioners and former child soldiers), *places* (constellation of actors headquarters), and *practices* (research, advocacy, production of narratives). In this section, I exposed the analytical approach I used to research the topic. Now, I will summarise the main themes of this section, and I will present my research questions.

2.5. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented both how an ideal and non-ideal childhood should look from the perspective of the humanitarian discourse, specifically the UN (UNICEF and SRSG-CAAC), also stressing how ideal and non-ideal childhoods are not mere mirror images of each other, but how they are rather inextricably linked. Osgood (2012) and Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006) have highlighted that such Westernised views of childhood act to effectively marginalise socio-cultural groups that may have alternative ways of viewing and understanding children and childhood, and Western ideas of childhood should inform, and interact with, locally and culturally specific notions of childhood, instead of silencing them. Failing to identify such differences prevents a much-needed tailor-made understanding of the recruitment of children in the long-lasting Colombian armed conflict, which, in the end, affects how public policy understands them as recipients of attention and citizens. The urgency of saving the child from the soldier, of protecting idealised and pristine childhoods from the evils of war, crime, and abuse, has influenced the way in which research on the topic has been done. Approaching child soldiers mainly as victims of trauma obscures the opportunity to see this group of children and young people's own tailored made representations of their experiences. It is urgent to think critically and imaginatively about how the figures of the child and of the child soldier can be informed, to provide a critical reading of child soldiering that reject the naturalisation of the concept, and invite to reject normalised understandings of the experience.

My conceptual framework, the way that the literature has approached my topic, and my analytical approaches informed my PhD research questions (an overarching one and two complementary):

- 1. How do former child soldiers' own articulations of their experiences open up or diversify our understandings and theorisations of childhood?*
- 2. How is the global figure of the child soldier rendered or vernacularized in Colombia both by local humanitarians and by former child soldiers themselves?*
- 3. How does this vernacularisation in turn speak to humanitarianism and its practices around the figure of the child soldier?*

The following chapter will present the methodological considerations required to research an over-researched topic.

Chapter 3. How to research an over-researched topic – Methodological considerations

The aim of this research was to examine normative understandings of child soldiering in the Colombian context. To answer the overarching and the two complementary questions introduced in the previous chapter, I applied qualitative research methods, which allowed me to focus on in-depth, context-specific accounts to answer each one of them. These methods were the most appropriate tool for my study because this research is concerned with how individuals describe and understand a phenomenon instead of trying to quantify it. To answer the research questions, I firstly explored how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia, tracing the tensions between global discourses and local practices through the exploration of narratives from practitioners of children's rights (whom I call *niñólogos*) and *seasoned* former child soldiers (young people who act regularly as spokespersons for such a figure). Secondly, I draw on creative fieldwork (with the creative writing workshops “Mi cuento lo cuento yo” [“I’ll be the one to tell my story”]) to document narratives of childhoods from a group of eight people who grew up in heavily war affected areas of the country. The selected qualitative research methods allowed me to unpack the figure of the child soldier to allow accounts of their warrior-self and their *campesino*-self, both critical components of their present self-understandings, while being reflective and critical about their past. Finally, I analysed to what extent these accounts conform to the figure of the child soldier.

This chapter begins by reflecting on my positionality in relation to the study, and how it influenced my methodological decisions. Then, I highlight some of the pragmatics of my fieldwork, such as when and where it was conducted, how did I choose and recruit my participants, and which were the methods adopted for this study. In this section, I pay specific attention to the process of approaching, interrogating and adjusting the methodology Autobiography Creation and Construction of Social Memory (created by the Colombian scholar Patricia Nieto) to be applied, for the first time, to a group of people who grew up in heavily war affected areas of the country. Then, I describe how the collected stories were analysed and reflect on the ethical considerations throughout my work and the challenges and limitations of the chosen research method.

3.1. The researcher-traveller

One's choice of research topic is a reflection of the positionality of a researcher, her personal values, interests or preoccupations (Jacobs, 2011). How I designed and conducted this research relates strongly with who I am, as a person and as a professional. I approached my subject in a way that Nieto-Valdivieso (2014) would describe with the metaphor of the researcher-traveller, as my journey into the field has been twofold: a coming back and a going away. As a Colombian woman who has experienced indirectly the effects of the socio-political violence, inequality, insecurity, and the social and cultural consequences of a protracted armed conflict, I am an *insider*. As a female academic researcher writing this story across the Atlantic Ocean, miles away from home, studying at a university in the Minority World, and as a Colombian marked by privileges of ethnicity, class, and education, whose family has neither been a direct victim of the armed conflict nor a direct actor of the confrontation, I am an *outsider* (Nieto-Valdivieso, 2014, pp. 21-22). Also, in the past ten years, I have worked closely to the topic of children and armed conflict in Colombia, and I have had the opportunity to meet people who were soldiers in their childhoods. My own perceptions of child soldiering have been formed working directly in a Majority World context, and because of my work experience within the humanitarian field, I had a particular stance on the subject that needed to be challenged, what Moynagh (2011) describes as the need "to save the child from the soldier" (p. 672). Furthermore, and also because of my experience, I was aware of former child soldiers being an over-researched population that has informed research with many and diverse purposes. Therefore, my challenge with this research project was also to find ways to investigate their stories without taking methodological decisions that could benefit the researcher over the people to be researched (*see* Nayel, 2003) and, to approach their stories while keeping them, as research subjects, obscure to myself, the researcher.

3.2. Pragmatics - Participants selection and methods of inquiry

The fieldwork for this project extended from February 2015 until May of 2016.

I conducted the interviews from February to April 2016 and ran the creative writing

workshops in two stages. First, I ran a pilot workshop in January 31st 2016, and then the two definitive workshops over two long weekends (six days): April 15th, 16th and 17th (first workshop) and April 29th and 30th and May 1st (second workshop). The majority of data collection took place in Bogotá and nearby towns. While national humanitarian offices are all located in Colombia's capital, I was concerned about not having access to a diverse group of former child soldiers, coming from different regions. However, the Reincorporation and Normalization Agency's (ARN) practices took care of that concern. For security reasons, the official reintegration program displaces former combatants, children and adults alike, from the region where they are captured or surrender to the national army, to another one, usually an urban area. For this reason, it was possible to encounter diverse groups of people from all over the country within one geographical location, as was the case of my participants.

I will now describe my two groups of participants: Colombian *niñólogos* (children rights' practitioners) and young people who grew up in heavily war affected areas of the country (eight of them attended the workshops, and three of them were interviewed).

3.2.1. *Niñólogos* – unstructured interviews

As I said in the introduction of this chapter, I was interested on in-depth, context-specific accounts to answer my research questions, therefore I needed qualitative methods, as it is in their nature that both the number of situations covered and the size of the sample in each are small (Brett and Specht, 2004, p. 2). For my participant selection, I used a purposive sampling technique. This technique, commonly employed in qualitative studies, consists of selecting individuals based on specific purposes associated with a research question (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, p. 77). In this sort of sampling, particular persons are deliberately selected for the information they can provide that cannot be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 1997, p. 235). My choice of *niñólogos* was deliberate, answering to the following criteria:

1. People working in the field of child soldiering in Colombia over several years, ideally from the beginning of the children's reintegration program in 1999, or close to it.

2. People who would know former child soldiers personally, and not just those familiar with the topic by reading about their experiences in books or reports.

Besides those criteria, and as my project sought to explore how a global figure is vernacularised in Colombia, I decided to approach child rights practitioners' members of state offices, NGOs and INGOs, who have also been members of the discussion group Children and Armed Conflict convened by UNICEF's Country Office (present in Colombia since 2004). This group is a key interlocutor on the matter of child soldiering with the Colombian government, and with international agencies such as the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. I conducted ten one-on-one interviews with children's rights practitioners, taking care to identify people who would cover a diverse range of experiences from the Colombian *constellation of actors*, and with practise handling the humanitarian script, both in and outside the country. The following table presents a brief overview of the participants (eight women and two men) and information about their identities and careers. I will discuss the specificities of the interviews in a later section.

Table 1. List of niñosólogos interviewed

#	Initials	Profile	Years of experience on the field ¹⁰	Interview date
1	IF	Woman. Social worker involved with the Colombian reintegration program of former combatants.	12	16/02/2016
2	IM	Woman. Social scientist with work with international non-governmental organisations that promotes children's rights.	6	21/03/2016
3	AC	Woman. Political scientist who has worked with national and international organisations on the topic of child soldiers, and have directly supported their reintegration processes.	10	21/03/2016
4	HM	Woman. Lawyer who works on the field of child soldiering, focusing on research, coordination of national organisations and on international advocacy, particularly within the UN system.	13	21/03/2016
5	RR	Woman. Anthropologist and researcher on child soldiering. Has worked for national child protection offices and UN agencies based in the country.	10	30/03/2016
6	LA	Woman. Social worker with work mainly in state offices. Member of the first group of professionals in charge of designing the first reintegration program for child soldiers in the country.	17	01/04/2016
7	DC	Man. Pedagogue. Works with a national NGO that assists the reintegration of former child soldiers.	14	05/04/2016
8	SD	Woman. Psychologist, founder of a national NGO working collaboratively with the government reintegration program.	17	07/04/2016
9	JC	Man. Pedagogue. Founder and director of a national NGO that works with vulnerable children, among them former child soldiers.	17	08/04/2016
10	AJ	Woman. Lawyer and social researcher. Has worked with national organisations on the topic of child soldiers, and has experience on international advocacy on the topic.	11	13/04/2016

¹⁰ Number of years at the date of the interview.

I conducted ten interviews with children rights' practitioners, ranging from approximately half an hour to almost three hours in length. I decided to conduct unstructured interviews, as I was interested in allowing my respondents to engage in their own personal and professional journeys without steering from me (Davis, 2014; Rapley, 2001). The interviews attended to the following issues: their personal and professional journeys on the issue of child soldiering, in a chronological order. I conducted most of my interviews in homes and offices, and three of them in coffee places and restaurants, as it was more convenient for my interviewees. In those cases, although the topic was sensitive, none of my interviewees appeared self-conscious about it, although, to be fair, the public places where we met were loud enough to make it hard for someone else to hear. My background as a former *niñóloga*, and the fact that I knew personally most of my interviewees because of that work, facilitated the discussion on difficult topics, such as inviting to challenge the notion of child soldiering as an experience of “out of place”.

3.2.2. *Former child soldiers – informal encounters and creative writing workshops*

My research approached two groups of former child soldiers: 1. Seasoned former child soldiers, with work as spokespersons of the figure of the child soldier. 2. Former child soldiers with an interest in the creation of narratives. The stories I collected do not come from children, per se, but from adults who lived in heavily affected war areas and most of them were soldiers in their childhoods. Riessman (2004) asserts that ageing brings a quest for coherence that prompts people to “stitch together fragments of memory, to relate to past events to present actions, to re-imagine what ‘really’ happened” (p. 35) so they can understand their current self and values. Therefore, I have representations of childhood from people who “compose and recompose their pasts” (Mishler, 1999, p. 5) and not children’s accounts.

Most researchers who work on topics involving former child soldiers in Colombia gain access through state institutions (such as the ICBF and the ARN) or NGOs.

However, due to restricted access procedures from state institutions, which required, for example, sharing not only the whole research design with them but also the results before publication, I opted to approach my research participants through three different stakeholders who did not have that level of control over the process:

1. Coalition against the involvement of children and young people in the Colombian armed conflict (COALICO in Spanish, a platform of NGOs working on the phenomenon),
2. Taller de Vida (NGO that provides services for women and young people recovering from war), and
3. Benposta (communal charitable organisation for children and young people in difficult situations).

Both organisations are members of the COALICO, where I worked for four years as a journalist and a researcher. I took extra caution in separating who I used to be (the practitioner) from who I was (the PhD researcher) at the time of conducting my research, by being outspoken about my new role as a researcher. For that reason, for example, even if representatives of the organisations gave me key contacts, I always talked directly to former child soldiers, stressing my role as an academic researcher. My stakeholders opened the door for me to have access to some of my participants, but I was extra cautious to cross that threshold alone, and to make my independence as clear as possible.

I started to approach former child soldiers who had shared their personal stories publicly (as part of national and international humanitarian campaigns), and who have produced narratives of their past (in the form of books, theatre plays, or short stories) with the intention of inviting them to participate in the creative writing workshops. Although not all of them were able to attend, everyone contributed meaningfully to this work. Because of those ongoing conversations, for example, I was made aware of their need to stop attending spaces like my workshops where only “former child soldiers” attended, as this was a regular practice which they were tired of. In the following table, I present three names of former child soldiers whom

I met and although they were unable to attend the workshops, they contributed to this research:

Table 2. List of possible workshops participants and their contributions to this research

#	Initials	Profile	Contribution to the research
1	YM	28-year-old, mother of a child. When we met, she was finishing her undergraduate studies in social work. She was a member of an art collective founded by former child soldiers in Colombia. When she was a child, she was part of a guerrilla group.	Participant in the pilot workshop. She provided meaningful comments on the broad research, and informed the process of finding participants for the writing workshops.
2	Santiago ¹¹	26-years-old, father of a child. Author of the first autobiographical memory written by a former child soldier in the country: <i>A born winner</i> (2008), and published by UNICEF. When he was a child, he was part of a guerrilla group.	Santiago was one of the seasoned former child soldiers who informed this research, particularly Chapter 4 of this thesis.
3	IR	28-year-old, social worker. She has participated in diverse activities to raise awareness on the phenomenon of child soldiering in the country. When she was a child, she was a member of a guerrilla group.	IR informed Chapter 4 of this thesis.

Of those three gatherings, I only conducted one formal interview with Santiago, the sole author of the first autobiographical account written by a former child soldier in Colombia, in which I explored his creative and writing processes. In the case of María, the other seasoned former child soldier who informed Chapter 4, and who also participated in the writing workshops (see Table 3), I selected two of her published accounts: *El árbol de María* (María's tree, 2014) and *María en el trabajo de conseguir trabajo* (María in the job to get a job, 2015). I chose those narratives because, as it was the case of Santiago, I wanted to know more about the creative and writing processes when a person decides to publish a personal account. Both of María's text were printed and shared publicly by two institutions in Colombia, one local (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, CNMH) and one international

¹¹ Although participants' anonymization was sought throughout this thesis (see Ethics), I have kept the pseudonym he used to sign his book, which is public.

(Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, AECID). I met with María to talk about her writing process, before the workshops, but I was unable to record that encounter because we talked while walking; she asked me to join her while she was trying to find a place to rent. In the other gatherings, as the main purpose was to have informal conversations about my research, particularly my fieldwork, I sustained informal encounters that were registered in my field notes but not recorded. For the workshops, I was interested in a group of no more than ten people, as the number made the group more manageable for the activities (more details in the upcoming description of the workshops). Here, I present the list of the eight people who participated in the writing workshops. Although I aimed for a gender-balanced group (to allow reflections on gender, considering that the figure of the child soldier is mainly masculine),¹² the day when we were going to start the first workshop, a woman cancelled, and a man replaced her. The group was composed of three women and five men:

Table 3. List of workshops participants

#	Initials	Region of origin	Profile
1	CC	Norte de Santander	28 years old, mother of two children. She has worked with several NGOs as a workshop facilitator. When she was a child, she was part of a guerrilla group.
2	MM - María ¹³	Cauca	26 years old, mother of a child. Artist. When she was a child, she was part of a guerrilla group.
3	MS	Huila	25 years old, mother of two children. She has participated in diverse activities to raise awareness on the phenomenon of child soldiering inside and outside the country. When she was a child, she was a member of a guerrilla group.

¹² I am aware that the figure of the child soldier (as happens with understandings of soldiering in general) is perceived as a male experience due to the fact that “scholarship on political violence and armed conflict has long been gender-blind” (Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013, p. 473). For that reason, even though my research did not directly investigate gender, I decided to maintain and highlight the differentiations between accounts of women and men throughout the thesis, as they can provide valuable insights for those researchers who have explored that aspect further, while inviting more investigation on the matter.

¹³ María is one of the seasoned former child soldiers that informed Chapter 4. She has published several autobiographical stories, which she signs with her full name. As it was the case of Santiago, I have kept her first name in *Chapter 4*, as it is known, and in chapters 5 and 6, where her workshops’ narratives are included together with those of the other participants; I have kept her initials to standardise the way in which all authors are presented throughout the narrative.

4	DP	Caquetá	30 years old, father of two children, When he was a child, he was part of a guerrilla group.
5	FR	Sur de Bolívar	28 years old, father of a child. He has worked with the ARN as a <i>re-integrator</i> (a former guerrilla or paramilitary combatant in charge of sharing her/his life story as a cautionary tale and to sensitise multiple audiences as part of the government reintegration program). When he was a child, he was a member of a paramilitary group.
6	RE	Bogotá	30 years old, born and raised in Bogotá. He was a member of the National Army, and forged his papers to join before turning eighteen years old.
7	DM	Atlántico	30 years old, father of a child. He was a member of the National Army, and forged his papers to join the military before turning 18 years old.
8	TP	Cundinamarca	22 years old, artist, and student of graphic design. He and his family were forcibly displaced when he was a child. He never joined an armed group.

Since the project's inception, it was important to me to be able to explore childhood narratives of former child soldiers, preventing, where possible, the promotion of normative portrayals of the experience. Not because I was not interested in those, or that I would prevent or reject listening to them, but because I was trying to find ways to elicit unexplored accounts from an over researched population. For that reason, I intentionally designed this part of my fieldwork to make my participants opaque to me, as the researcher, to facilitate the emergence of unexpected accounts (see Lugo, 2018; Baines, 2011; Hecht, 1998). Doing so involves great risk, as participants might discuss topics completely unrelated to the objective of the research. However, and as was discussed in *Chapter 2*, researching child soldiers to try to unpack an apparently stiff figure, a great deal of imagination is required.

A detailed review of the literature on child soldiers shows that the most common method used to research former child soldiers' childhoods is in-depth interviewing with a focus on life stories (e.g. Watchlist, 2012; Springer, 2012; Brett & Specht, 2004; Keairns, 2003; HRW, 2003). However, as explained by Denov (2010b), one of the risks of in-depth interviewing when researching childhood memories in this community is that because of fear of recrimination or stigmatisation, participants may feel hesitant to openly disclose their experiences or be driven into exaggerating or altering their stories. This method might also expose people to a secondary

traumatisation (Boyden, 2004) or to additional distress (Woodby et al., 2011). Akello (2010), who has researched former child soldiers in northern Uganda, insists that in order to properly investigate their life-world, numerous in-depth interactions are needed, as short-term research is not effective. However, and because of how intense a research process can be according to the research objectives, some researched populations have said they have felt like “lab rats” (*see* Todeschini, 2001) and, therefore, abused. Because of these practices, former child soldiers experience what Zack-Williams (2006) calls research interrogation fatigue: “Telling the story is not enough to make people feel better, especially if it means telling it for the fifteenth time” (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 212).

My considerations took me to creative methods with which I could explore autobiographical accounts of former child soldiers. To work with memories enables the researcher to tap into participants’ past, while they are involved in an active act of reflection on their memories, having a conversation with them, and responding to them (Onyx & Small, 2001; Crawford et al., 1992). Subjectively meaningful events that are remembered, and the way in which they are then constructed when narrated, play a key role in the construction of the self (Crawford, et al, 1992, p. 37). Haug and Carter (1987) argue that the idea that people’s own past experiences may offer some understanding into the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing relations, contains in itself an argument for a particular methodology:

If we refuse to understand ourselves simply as a bundle of reactions to all-powerful structures, or to the social relations within which we have formed us, if we search instead for possible indications of how we have participated actively in the formation of our past experience, then the usual mode of social-scientific research, in which individuals figure exclusively as objects of the process of research, has to be abandoned (...) Since however we are concerned here with the possible means whereby human beings may themselves assume control, and thus with the potential prospect of liberation, our research itself must be seen as an intervention into existing practices. (Haug & Carter, 1987, pp. 34-35)

The reconstruction of the past, people’s trajectories, and of individual biographies is an essential condition for the rebuilding of life projects within survivors’ communities (Riaño-Alcalá, 2005; Riessman, 1990), and creative methods could prove therapeutic and cathartic for the respondents, in offering them an opportunity

to reflect and discuss their experiences and emotions (Davis, 2014, p. 225), while also being an enjoyable and valuable process to participants. Furthermore, in a complex context of on-going armed confrontation and a highly polarised society, the use of innovative methods as well as a multi-methods approach has the potential to allow the emergence of silenced experiences, adding depth to the research (Nieto-Valdivieso, 2014). Particularly, creative written methods turn the research subject into an author, with authority to write on her or his own life, and allows the researcher to explore aspects that could not be examined by traditional methods. Thus, to investigate my participants' memories and life experiences through writing was a way of inviting them to select what to tell, while also welcoming their reflections about their past experiences and recognising their status as social actors actively involved in constructing their experiences (as done by Sirriyeh, 2010). Wills (2012) explains that what individuals decide to tell a researcher in a writing exercise about any topic can reveal more about a person's life history than what they are invited to answer in an interview, no matter how unstructured and open this is.

In this quest, I encountered a methodology explored by the scholar Patricia Nieto (2010)¹⁴ with survivors of the Colombian armed conflict, named *Relato autobiográfico y construcción de memoria social (Autobiography Creation and Construction of Social Memory)*. This methodology comes from a local need to tell different stories contesting dominant narratives and to give narrative tools to survivors of the armed conflict to facilitate their storytelling. This method leaves the door open to welcome any story, as they would help to draw researchers into the context-specific world of the participant (Nieto, 2010). The individual act of selecting a memory and the sharing of those memories, in a communal validation of individual knowledge, constitute a critical moment of this workshop method; individual memories enter into a group register where listening, dialogue, tensions, and negotiation of meanings take place (Riaño-Alcalá, 2008). Nieto's methodology involves activities of self-representation (body mapping, storytelling, musical sensitivity), while also providing valuable insights and skills to participants that have

¹⁴ To start planning the workshops, I interviewed Nieto on Skype (July 29th 2014), and I met her personally in Medellín at the beginning of my fieldwork (April 25th 2015).

the potential to be useful later on (e.g. to study or applying for jobs). This methodology was valuable because it has been tried with survivors of the armed conflict; it empowers participants by giving them tools to author their own stories; it recognises the importance of long-term research projects; and it welcomes all sort of stories. Nieto stressed that the workshops proved to be enjoyable for the participants, as some of them either discovered or enhanced a talent, and regardless of the result, they claimed to enjoy gathering to have conversations and to try creative exercises so uncommon to their daily lives (Personal Communication, April 2015).

A concern related to my method selection was my participants' literacy level. Even if Colombian national data show that former child soldiers and people who have grown in rural areas have low levels of literacy (as tends to happen globally), I was aware of the interest of a group of potential participants on exploring writing as a particular skill. I was mindful, for example, that some former child soldiers kept journals from their time inside the armed groups, or have written and published short stories about their experiences once demobilised. Former child soldiers' literacy may have restrained researchers from exploring a completely new set of narratives to avoid exposing them to stressful situations, not just because of their memories but also because of their apparent lack of skills. However, as this project shows, a qualified process of participant selection can safely address that concern.

To adjust Nieto's methodology to my group of participants, I started to meet regularly with Adriana Ferrucho (an expert in social theatre who has worked with survivors of armed conflict through the arts for several years) and Pilar Lozano (a Colombian writer and journalist who has worked closely on the issue of child soldiering and has published several fiction and non-fiction books on the topic. She is a trained facilitator of writing workshops and visits regularly different Colombian regions with the Minister of Culture). My intention was to get valuable insights from people who had worked with vulnerable population in Colombia, and who were knowledgeable on creative methods and writing strategies. However, after running the pilot workshop (31st January 2016) and facing issues with attendance, it was clear to me that I needed to make some changes. For that reason, I designed a proposal in

which my participants could learn valuable skills from trained professionals (so they would not feel they were attending just another workshop, like the ones state institutions, NGOs and INGOs invite them to regularly), and as a result, Adriana and Pilar joined me as workshop facilitators. Their involvement heightened my ability to focus on the data produced during the encounters.

Bearing in mind that the main objective of the workshops was to use methodologies that would allow me to elicit memories among the research participants (a sort of Proust's Madeleine experience), while giving them reading and writing tools to explore and express their selected memories, with the constant feedback of my supervisory team in Edinburgh, I created a matrix that included ten encounters with an introductory and a closing session, and eight sessions divided in the following categories: Memories through senses (*Remembranzas a través de los sentidos*), What are you good at? (*Saberes*), Territory –my house, my body– (*Territorio –mi casa, mi cuerpo–*), and Support networks, circles of strength (*Redes de apoyo, círculos de fortaleza*) (*Table 4*).¹⁵

¹⁵ The original design of the workshops included a guest writer for each one of the sessions, following multiple models of creative writing workshops, in which participants were guided by fellow writers, who share their real-life experiences with them and motivate them to produce their own stories.

**Table 4. Original design and pragmatics of the creative writing workshops
“Mi cuento lo cuento yo” (ten sessions)**

Theme	Objective	Methodology	Pragmatics
Introductory session	Time to getting to know each other. Trust building process.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Letter for my future-self: What do I expect to get from this process? 2. To make the 'cartonera' (workshop notebook). To bring an object to attach to the cover. 	<p>This first section is about building confidence and beginning to explore participants' writing and creative thinking skills. By suggesting the writing of a letter for 'a future-self', I am hoping to make a connection for the process: it has a beginning and an end, and they should bring expectations to the workshops.</p> <p><i>I, as the researcher, will be clear about my own expectations of the process and why I have set up these sessions as a data collection process for my research.</i></p>
Memories through senses	To start the participants' connection with their life stories through their five senses.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To cook a recipe in a rural traditional style. In the previous session, the participants agree on the recipe and they divide the ingredients to bring for the session. When it is time to cook, each one will share his/her own way to cook the recipe in their families or in their region. 2. With the support of smells and sounds related to the rural life (such as wet earth after a rainstorm, the smell of coffee, animal sounds), to elicit conversation amongst the participants. 	<p>I chose to start with the 'senses' as an attempt to trigger memories or emotions that would connect my participants to their past. By suggesting odours such as coffee (which is traditionally made at dawn in the rural areas and it is a signal of 'time to get to work' in the fields), I am hoping to start conversations about memories or connections they have with that life.</p> <p>Something similar happens with the proposal of the food cooking. Rural populations tend to have their own crops and to</p>

			make the most out of the food they have at hand. I have thought of a particular recipe that is quite common in rural areas because of its ingredients. With this exercise, I will attempt to trigger discussions and memories and, hopefully, creative thoughts to narrate such stories.
What are you good at?	To provide a space in which participants can identify their own knowledge beyond formal studies and training.	<p>1. Identify a personal knowledge, deemed particular, and to organise a way to share it with the group.</p> <p>2. Fair of knowledge. Each one of the participants share with the group his/her knowledge.</p>	Based on my previous work, I have identified how former child soldiers and, in general, people coming from rural areas tend to not identify their own skills or abilities, as they cannot certify them through traditional training or diplomas. When thinking about these workshops, I thought it would be a good opportunity to make them reflect about what they now that it is useful for them, regardless any title or accreditation. I suggest to first reflect on it, personally, to proceed later to share it with the group.
Territory (my house, my body)	I intend that participants will connect with the place they live: their bodies and territories. The first, as a way of self-recognition, and the second, as a way to reflect on the place they inhabit in the present.	<p>1. Cartography - maps, locate their birthplace and how have they have moved through the years (before arriving in Bogota, where they currently live) on a map of Colombia.</p> <p>2. Body mapping. Each participant traces the outline of his/her body in a sheet of paper, and then decide what to highlight in the image.</p>	<p>At this stage, and after four sessions of ‘inner-thinking’, I want to suggest taking the ‘memories’ out of their minds to their bodies and their territories (places that are meaningful to them).</p> <p>To place themselves on a map, and tracing their movements, could operate as a story trigger. The body map</p>

			should allow them to recognise the impact that their own story has had on themselves (e.g., many of them have scars from previous wounds, and because of their rural background, their hands and backs are stronger and thicker).
Support networks, circles of strength	Participants will identify their support networks, in whom they can trust; memories of those who are not with them anymore but who have been decisive in their lives. They can also recognise themselves as providers of support to other people.	<p>1. Writing letter to a person who want to thank for his/her role in their lives.</p> <p>2. Writing a letter: When older, what do they want to remember about when they were young?</p>	These two sessions are about thinking about others, their support networks in life. These sessions seek to initiate a conversation on the kind of support they have received throughout life, and to recognise the key part that such people played in their lives.
Closing session	Space to close the activities. Opportunity to reflect on the process, what did they gain from it, what could be done better, how do they expect to use their new acquired skills during the workshops.	To finish the 'cartonera' (workshop notebook) while sewing it.	<p>This last workshop is about closure: the end of the process, the end of their narrative work throughout the activities. That is why I am suggesting the 'ritual' of sewing the workshop notebook.</p> <p>This will be a time to agree on what to do with the stories produced, and to inform further, based on their reflections, how do they see and portray themselves.</p> <p><i>Agreements on the texts produced and clarities about what comes next in the research process.</i></p>

After the pilot workshop, I decided to run the workshops over two long weekends instead of one per week, as done by Nieto. In that way, it would be easier to have all my participants focused on and committed to the activities, while also having them all concentrated in one place. It was also important to make my proposal clear on how the activities would be beneficial for them, and not just for me, as the researcher – one of the main learnings of the pilot workshop. In my call for participants, I was as clear as possible on how the creative writing workshops were not only a research strategy, but also a learning opportunity for those with an interest on exploring their narrative skills (Appendix B – invitation to participate in the workshops). The invitation letter, in Spanish, included information such as: who would be running the workshops (the facilitators); that participation would be certified by the University of Edinburgh, and that childcare would be provided for those who needed it.¹⁶ The decisions taken after the pilot workshop proved to be worth it. After finding the funding for the workshops (*see section Challenges*), I decided to run two weekend writing retreats, leaving Bogotá on Friday and coming back on late Sunday. The initial matrix (Table 4) composed by ten sessions, was divided in two journeys with five themes. Tables 5 and 6 present a detailed account of how each workshop was organised.

¹⁶ Former child soldiers have reported to be unable to attend activities because they cannot find someone to take care of their children. Also, and as my workshops were designed to be run over two weekends, the activities would take time away from my participants and their children, therefore, in my proposal, the children's attendance was non-negotiable.

Table 5. First Workshop – April 15th - 17th 2016
Place: Sopó, Cundinamarca. Participants: eight people.

Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	8-9 am Breakfast	8-9 am Breakfast
	9 am – Group start – breathe in a circle. (20 min)	9 am – Group start – breathe in a circle. (20 min)
	9:30 am – Personal letter to read once the workshops are over, what do I expect from this process?	9:30 am. Senses journey. Writing exercise and group conversation (2 hours)
	10:30 - 12:30. Pilar’s session (writer): reading and writing exercises. She read a story by the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo entitled <i>No oyes ladrar a los perros</i> (You do not hear the dogs barking).	11:30 am. Cooking of Sancocho (traditional Colombian soup). (1 hour).
	12:30 - 2:00 pm. Lunch	2 pm. Lunch / Sancocho
	2 pm – Knowledge/skills: What do I know to do with this? (e.g. plants). (20 min).	3:00 pm. Closing exercise and pending tasks for the next workshop. Reading and writing exercises. (40 min)
	2:30 pm. Writing exercise: To identify personal knowledge or a skill that the participant thinks is particular or special and to describe it. Individual writing exercise. (1 hour)	
	3:30 - 4:30 pm. Group exchange. (The group is asked about the possibility of including the children in this part of the exercise).	3:40 - 4:30 pm Free time
		4:30 pm. Return to the city.
Meeting point and trip to Sopó	Wood fire (chimney) – Reading stories to the children (Pilar’s book: <i>Así vivo yo: Colombia contada por los niños</i> (2011) / This is how I live: Colombia told by children.	

Table 6. Second Workshop – April 29th, 30th, and May 1st 2016
Place: Tabio, Cundinamarca. Participants: Seven people.¹⁷

Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	Breakfast	Breakfast
	9 am – Group start – breathe in a circle. (20 min)	9 am. Group start – breathe in a circle. (20 min)
	9:30 – 11 am – Exercises with poems. Letter writing to a meaningful person in their life (support networks). Group sharing of one experience with the person they selected.	9:30 am. Letter to themselves, when older. How do you want to remember yourself when you are old?
	11:00 - 12:30. Creation of ‘cartonera’ (notebook workshop). Each participant brings an object to place in the cover (1 hour)	11 am. What is next? Group discussion: Do they want to continue the process, and if so, how.
	12:30 - 2:00 pm. Lunch	Lunch / Group cooking.
	2 – 4 pm Mapping Exercise (to talk about travels, journeys; associate a territory with a body part). To write one page with a personal autobiographical story by choosing one path.	3:00 – 4 pm. Workshops closing exercise. The letters that they wrote for themselves during the first workshop are returned to them (with Adriana, we placed each one in an envelope and added a stamp). They read them individually, in silence, and those who wanted, shared it aloud.
	4 – 5 pm. Review last week exercises (texts).	3:40 - 4:30 pm Free time
		4:30 pm. Return to the city.
Meeting point and trip to Tabio.	Wood fire – Free time.	

¹⁷ One participant was unable to join this workshop due to personal reasons.

3.2.3. “Mi cuento lo cuento yo” - Final reflections

While I decided not to ask questions about childhood experiences directly during the writing workshops, I did get accounts relating to that almost exclusively. Even if they did not refer directly to memories of their time inside the armed groups, they also shared stories related to that period of their lives. After much planning, designing and thinking, the workshops proved to be an innovative and respectful method to try out with this group of people. As the participants shared with me during the activities, they found it to be a safe space where they could share any kind of memories or reminiscences without fear of judgement or stigma. For those of them who did not know each other previously, finding a diverse group with people from different regions and life stories was also a valuable part of the experience. Even for the sole participant who was never recruited by an armed group, this was an enlightening experience where he felt he could relate to his peers, without being judgmental. All participants said that they were excited for the opportunity to think about their stories in their own way, without being forced to talk about specifics from their past, such as how they were recruited or how their lives were within any of the armed groups' ranks. All of them (participants and facilitators) recognised that the setup of the encounter, itself, eased conversations and closeness. For example, sharing communal meals, cooking Sunday's lunch together, traveling together from the city to the venue and back, having free time to spend lying on the grass or playing with the children (for example), and being able to bring their offspring to a weekend away, were elements that definitely made a difference in the experience (*Picture 3*). The selection of the venues was also critical. There, I was not only able to keep my participants isolated in one place, while providing them a close experience of how a writing workshop looks like, but also created a sort of liminal place between their urban present and their rural past (what Das, 2001, calls an alternate sphere) where stories and memories silenced by officially sanctioned narratives can see the light.

Picture 3. Writing Workshop - group reading stories.



Note: the picture was modified to protect the identities of the participants and their children.
Picture taken by the author. April 16th 2016.

Another key element of this process was to keep the methodologies flexible. We were open to exchange *body mapping* (as it was recalled by some of my participants during the preparatory interviews as a regular method of therapy) for a *letter writing exercise*. All of them were quite excited with the idea in the first workshop and some even claimed to have never written or received a letter before. We also experienced a kind of obstacle with the *Sense journey* during the first workshop. When we explained to our participants that the idea was to blindfold them during the exercise, at least three of them manifested fear - as the activity reminded them of their military training inside the armed groups. Although my first reaction was to try to change the activity, one of my co-facilitators reassured them of the safety of the space and the group of people involved in the exercise. It then became not only an exercise of reminiscence, but also of trust. They were able to face that fear and at the end of the exercise reported being proud because they tried it. This methodology allowed me to witness my participants' attitudes towards the storytelling process, dealing with the past, and making sense of experiences at present, and their multiple reflections when producing their own narratives. In addition, the dynamic of sharing stories aloud facilitated conversations that would not have happened any other way. For example, one of the participants was sharing one of her stories in which she gave herself a

different name, and we, the facilitators, thought that she was recounting her story in that way to take distance from it. However, another member of the group found the truth:

Facilitator (to MS): it is very interesting that you have chosen to tell your story creating a different character, with a different name. That is a very valid and exciting possibility to narrate, as you take more distance from the story.

MM: Was it like that or was that your name of war?

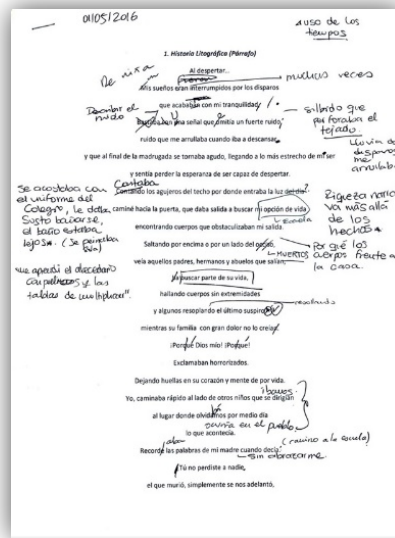
MS: it was my name in the [guerrilla] group.

MM: when you are in an armed group, they give you a different name. I did understand that when I heard her story, that it was her name.

(Second Workshop, 30th April 2016)

Without a group dynamic, I could have missed an important factor such as the participant's *nom de guerre*, which is one reason why the approach to these exercises as a collective was crucial. Another valuable factor was the exercise of writing, reading aloud, having meaningful conversations in the group, and having the opportunity to go back to the text, as happens in structured writing workshops. All the texts reproduced in this thesis are the finalised version of the participants' stories. *Picture 4* shares an example of the sort of writing and re-writing process that all texts endured, as part of the workshop. These notes, taken by myself over a writing exercise printed by MS, show certain suggestions to improve the clarity of the text, and also comments on the story, such as it has "narrative richness, moving beyond the facts".

Picture 4. Editing process of the story *Historia litográfica (Lithographic history)* written by MS.



Notes taken by the author while stories were read aloud (Second Workshop, 1st May 2016).

To summarise, the methodology Autobiography Creation and Construction of Memory was adapted to be run with a group of people who grew up in heavily affected war areas of the country. These modifications allowed the researcher to elicit memories related to their childhoods, although not restricted to that period. Factors such as certifying the activity, and getting them close to a professional writer, made my participants feel like they were proper writers, learning and enhancing their skills, and they even had trouble remembering that the activities were related to a PhD research project. This research methodology changed the rules of engagement: removed labels and altered the order. My participants did not attend a workshop as “former child soldiers”, but as writers with an interest in working on their skills. They were invited to enter an uncharted territory, together with the researcher, and while keeping my participants obscure to myself, unexplored narratives were able to come into the light.

3.3. Analysing the stories

The data generated from the interviews and the creative writing workshops (written and oral) were examined using thematic analysis, which is a procedure that examines and records themes or patterns within the collected data that are associated to a phenomenon and to specific research questions (Guest, et al., 2011). I selected this type of analysis because it is a flexible technique that allows the researcher to find and categorise emerging themes from the data, while gaining an understanding of the information (Braun, Clarke & Terry, 2014). This type of analysis consists of multiple phases to establish patterns, such as getting used to the data, creating initial codes, exploring themes within codes, reshaping and defining themes, and writing up the findings (Saldaña, 2009). Building on these stages, to start the analysis of my data I used a five steps technique recommended by Richards (2015):

1. Take a first review of the data documents and read. Skim read, then start again, and read the text very thoroughly, line by line.
2. Record (on paper or on the computer) anything interesting about any of the text.
3. When you find yourself saying something is interesting, ask ‘Why is it interesting?’ and record your answer.
4. Focus on any passages that are especially interesting and play with them, to open them out and find what they are about. Compare with other situations where this might happen.
5. Ask ‘Why am I interested in that?’ and record your answer (Richards, 2015, p. 89).

I recorded the interviews and the conversations we had during the workshops, when participants were sharing their stories and comments on the exercises. I also kept digital copies (JPG) of the stories that participants decided they wanted to share with me, and I kept a fieldwork journal. All those materials were personally revised and transcribed in Spanish, which facilitated my process of getting close to my data, and to start identifying recurrent themes. Prior to beginning any formal analysis, I listened to all the recordings at least twice each to gain familiarity with the narratives. This process was extremely helpful in allowing me to recall specific topics and statements from various interviews and conversations. I organised my approach to the material collected, by first revising and coding the interviews to *niñólogos* and *seasoned* former child soldiers, as a way to understand how the global figure is enacted in Colombia. All audio files were transcribed. Once that data was

analysed, and I had a clear image regarding how the mainstream discourse on the experience of child soldiering was understood and criticised by my interviewees, I moved to the other set of data: the material collected from the workshops.

Picture 5. Picture of the matrix created by the researcher to organise the stories

	Workshop 1			Workshop 2		
	Primer texto	Yo qué sé hacer	Sobre el recorrido sensitivo	Ejercicio con palabras	Cartas (persona importante)	Ejercicio mapas
1	Vida o muerte: pierna A.R.	Experta en hogueras	Tierra	Trapiche	Hijo A.R.	Rescatándome de mis escombros A.R.
2	Mi infancia - camino a la escuela B.R.	Pasar tiempo con hijos y trabajar con la comunidad (añadió, hablando: asado) A.R.	Tronco, papá en la mesa B.R.	Truenos	Jhon Jairo (ex pareja - fallecido) A.R.	Páramo de Boqueche Boqueche B.R.
3	Hacia el colegio, muertos contra la puerta B.R.	Aseo casa A.R.	Mamá, arepas, hermanos hamaca B.R.	Río B.R.	Abuelito A.R.	Esperanza R.
4	Historia de mi infancia (río) B.R.	Experto en instalaciones A.R.	Andanzas en medio de la selva: pisa suave B.R.	Fuego	Ex jefe A.R.	Cruzada del Araracuara a La Chorrera R.
5	Carta amor / escribe para otro	Pisar canchas de tejo	Duende, esconderse con papá Río Guavió Childhood			
6	5 años de edad a blanco y negro B.R.	Adobar carne B.R.	Agua en las mañanas B.R.	Selva	Papá B.R.	Reclutamiento AUC B.R.
7	Callejón de los muertos Childhood	Sancocho de carne asada	Lluvia mientras ordeña	Oscuridad	Hijo	Cuando era soldado, si los montes hablaran
8	Para-calidas	Aplicar inyecciones	Recorrido interno	Felicidad	Abuelo	Parto mujer zona aislada

Rural
 Urban background
 Time of leaving school
 B.R. Before recruitment. (7)
 R. Recruitment. (5)
 A.R. After recruitment. (9)

I started to analyse the workshops' stories by taking an inductive approach, the bottom-up procedure described by Greig, Taylor and MacKay (2007), paying particular attention to common themes among narratives. As a way to start organising my data, I chose to use the recurrent organising categories when researching the topic: 'before', 'during' and 'after the recruitment' (as proposed Veale & Stavrou, 2007) (Picture 5), although quite quickly, their narratives fought back against such categories, and forced me to think imaginatively about their words and their worlds, opening the space to two of the main findings of this research: their warrior and their campesino self-representations. To keep close to my data, and to see narratives as a whole I chose not to use NVIVO, but to use a journal that I could keep close, and in which I would write down my reflections, both in English and Spanish. In this way, I started to identify patterns and common themes. As I did not use qualitative data analysis software that helps to store, organise and retrieve data, I took care to organise my data dividing it, initially, in four folders: Interviews, Pilot Workshop, Workshop 1 and Workshop 2; each one of my participants had their own

folder with pictures of their finalised stories, their transcriptions, and attached notes taken from the group discussions. In this section, I have described my approach to the analysis of the data collected, in the upcoming one I will reflect specifically on the challenges imposed to the process because of translation.

3.3.1. Translation

The translation process goes beyond just moving from one language to the other; rather it will challenge concepts, theory, positions, and cultural readings, amongst other considerations (Loipponen, 2007). My main body of data was collected and managed in Spanish, although the analysis was done mainly in English. On the one hand, I consider it an asset to be able to approach all these materials in their original language, as well as working with my participants without the need of a translator. On the other hand, I needed to set up a regular practice of translating of my fieldwork notes into English. All my document coding was done both in English and Spanish, and in that way I also prevented problems with time management that could have an impact during the writing process. Nevertheless, I decided to include several names and contents throughout the thesis in Spanish, as I believe that its original language speaks more closely to the actual meaning of the encounters and conversations. Furthermore, in an attempt to make the most of the voices of the young people, direct translations and the proximal meanings of phrases are given, where possible, and every attempt was made to present their perspectives as they themselves would like them represented. As done by Akello (2010), some specific written stories were adapted and presented verbatim. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine. Now, after discussing how my data was analysed, and reflecting on the translation process, I will present the ethical procedures that accompanied this PhD research.

3.4. Ethics

To anticipate and address ethical issues, I followed ethical research guidelines to ensure safety, dignity, rights and well-being of all the people involved in the research. I was granted approval from the Research and Ethics Committee at the School of Social and Political Science of the University of Edinburgh when

submitting my board paper before beginning fieldwork (Appendix A). Although in the initial design of this research, I did not foresee the presence of children in my research, the fact that they attended the workshops with their parents (to facilitate my participants' attendance), required that their safety was also guaranteed and their anonymity maintained. None of the children were present in the rooms where the creative exercises were run, and they only were present for communal meals or leisure collective activities, where research topics were never discussed. None of my participants had shared with their children their past as soldiers and they asked specifically to take care with that information (it was the first ground rule adopted by the group at the beginning of the workshops, and it was respected throughout). We never discussed sensitive topics if the children were around, and as part of the logistics of the workshops, I budgeted a fee for childcare, so the children would be occupied elsewhere during the activities.

The purpose of the research was shared clearly with every one of my participants, not only the ones who attended the workshops, but also the people I interviewed, and all of them had information on how to contact me if any issues arose after our encounters. When I established the first contact with any one of them, I shared my credentials as a University of Edinburgh PhD researcher and described my project. I took extra care in not using sensitive wording in the printed or online material related to my project, so instead of saying that it was a project about former child soldiers' childhoods, I said that I was interested in exploring autobiographical accounts of people who grew up in heavily impacted war areas. All the information about my project was shared online, through email, in PDF form. While the invitation for the pilot workshop was open, the final invite for the two workshops was addressed directly only to people whom I had met before and who had shown interest and willingness to participate (Appendix B). The informed consent was obtained verbally at the beginning of each interview and at the start of each workshop, each day. All the contact details of the former child soldiers invited to participate in the research (either the pilot workshop or the two subsequent workshops), and who did not attend, were eliminated. The group of workshop participants decided to keep in contact through a Facebook group, which I created and of which I am the sole administrator.

Since I returned to Scotland from my fieldwork, we have kept in contact through that platform, sharing some inspiring texts to keep the writing group going, and I have kept them updated about the progress of the research and the thesis. This group is private, therefore it is not listed in any search engine, and I am the only person allowed to add people.

As stated in my Ethical Review form level 2 and level 3 presented to the School Ethics Committee, all the recorded activities from the workshops were transcribed and safely deleted. All digital data was stored on a computer without network connections and backed up on an external hard-drive. Following the completion of the research, after the submission of the PhD thesis and the publication of a book, all digital materials will be permanently deleted. My participants gave permission to keep the files for up to a maximum of five years, so that the material can be revisited or re-analysed if needed. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, issues such as confidentiality and vulnerability were addressed. As these matters were deeply impacted by the changing social and political context in Colombia, I present them separately in the following subsection.

3.4.1. The politics of representation and anonymity

In 2012, the Colombian peace process between the FARC guerrillas and the government started, and talking about members of the guerrilla groups was no longer taboo. The negotiations opened not only the possibility to put an end to the conflict but has also allowed for political voices of dissent to emerge (Nieto-Valdivieso, 2014). Unexpectedly, guerrilla members, who used to be seen as a faceless group, began to be seen as individuals, people with expectations, plans, and stories, and those accounts historically silenced, poured through the mainstream media (Mendoza, 2017). Once journalists and researchers were given access to former guerrilla camps, and to their assigned spokespersons (“to that hermetic and completely mysterious world”, as described by Maldonado [2016, p. 7]), these meanings started to be tangled with the mainstream discourse on the experiences.

This clarification is required because when I designed the present research such a panorama was not yet possible. However, when the data collection started, such options appeared to have given confidence to my participants to speak openly and critically about the topic, to reflect about human experiences of people demobilising and to think about possible ways to live together, once the war was over. Because of this contextual change, I started working with my data without anonymising it. All my participants were excited to participate in the project and, particularly the group of former child soldiers, were interested in having their names attached to their writing exercises. Then, the Colombian plebiscite happened (2nd October 2016), and after four years of public negotiation with the FARC guerrilla, the country lost a historical opportunity to ratify a peace deal to end a 50 year old civil war, and forced former guerrilla members to renegotiate their openness as a way to avoid stigmatisation and protect themselves and their families.

When I started to write this book in 2016, the country appeared to be walking confidently towards a post-conflict stage. However, while I work in the editing and the final versions of my thesis, Colombia has elected a new government, and its far-right speech is threatening not only the stability of the peace implementation but also targeting social leaders, and human rights defenders, people like my participants. People who saw in the peace process an opportunity to raise their voices to ask for social justice, truth, and the return of their lands, amongst a long list of claims, have seen their lives endangered and since the signing of the peace deal until mid-2018, 311 social leaders and human rights defenders have been assassinated in the country (Alsema, 2018). The uncertainty of the Colombian political climate, and also considering that my participants' decision to appear with their names in my work dates to 2016, to my great regret I have decided to anonymise this work, because even if while I was conducting my research there was a shared feeling of the winds of change, current events sadly prove otherwise. Now that I have reflected on the ethical issues that accompanied this research design, I present two of its main challenges.

3.5. Research challenges

There were two main challenges in this research: funding, and keeping my participants obscure. In the first case, even if I had support from the University's Fieldwork Fund and my scholarship program (the Colombian Administrative Department of Science Technology and Innovation), the decisions made involving leaving Bogotá with a group of twelve people, finding a proper place to conduct a writing retreat, guaranteeing the presence of participants' children (full-time child care), providing transportation, and also paying fees to professional facilitators, which although highly valued, were also significantly expensive. As I decided to keep my research independent, I avoided funding from organisations or institutions that could have been interested in financing the activities, while also demanding information from or influence on the research in return. Therefore, I took a several short-term jobs, I ran a short campaign of crowdfunding among relatives and friends, and took a personal loan. In the second case, the selected method and the sort of decisions I took to conduct what I call ethical research with an over-researched population, prevented me from having access to more detailed data about certain aspects of this group of Colombian people and their childhood memories. However, such decisions allowed me to find new topics and different ways to look at their accounts, and those approaches give clues to keep the investigation going, for example in fields like rural childhoods, children geographies, and war studies.

3.6. Chapter conclusion

This chapter sought to highlight various research approaches, methods and design elements that affected and influenced this research. In exploring the background of the research and framing researcher perspectives and approaches, this chapter offers critical insights into the processes undertaken to conduct the present research. The following chapter will present the first of my findings chapters, where I explore how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia.

Chapter 4. Colombian *niñólogos* and seasoned former child soldiers: practical encounters

Bridges connect knowledge, allow it to move, to create communities; for “universals” and “locals” understandings are informed by each other, challenged, affected and, when possible, enhanced. The ongoing dialogue between universals and local experiences allow people to recognise themselves as not unique in their experiences, and to belong, somehow, to a specific kind of community; even if in the process some specificities are lost, silenced. In this chapter, following Tsing’s take on frictions (2005), I explore how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia. I do this by approaching a group of key people (ten practitioners in children rights, whom I call *niñólogos*, and two former child soldiers, spokespersons on the phenomenon, whom I call *seasoned* former child soldiers) in charge of the ongoing dialogue between the global discourse (articulated by the humanitarian “constellation of actors” discussed in Chapter 2), and Colombian realities. Multiple conversations with this group of informants allowed me to simultaneously find *tensions* between the depictions provided by the UN portrayal of child soldiering and Colombian professionals’ experiences with it (noises or dissonances which are approached in more depth in the two upcoming chapters), and to be able to appreciate the existence of a combination of people, places, and practices that keep the global figure alive, while vernacularising it. In this chapter, I argue that people involved in the creation, circulation, and reproduction of the global figure of the child soldier in Colombia are aware of its existence and its limitations, and have learnt how to make the best out of it either to further public policy (*niñólogos*) or to make a living (*seasoned former child soldiers*).

This chapter has three main sections. The first one, *Niñólogos’ institutional journeys*, exposes one of *niñólogos* main practice, the vernacularisation of the global terminology. It does so by sharing the example of how the term *child soldier* was made tangible through a linguistic translation (that goes beyond just changing from one language to the other, challenging concepts, positions, and cultural readings, Loipponen, 2007), that facilitated the emergence of the Colombian term: *niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados*. Then, it focuses on the dissonances or narrative

tensions identified by this group (what Tsing, 2005, calls the suppressed truths resulting of their incompatibility with the global discourse) through their direct encounters with former child soldiers themselves. The second section, “*Can you escape the story of being a child soldier?*” draws particularly on narratives of two Colombian former child soldiers who are experienced spokespersons for humanitarian organisations, arguing that the telling of their stories operates as a means of earning a livelihood (see Brocklehurst & Peters, 2017; Utas, 2011; Shepler, 2005b). I argue that their accounts are not only informing the figure of the child soldier, but that the figure is also feeding into their tales, and therefore, it is an on-going dialogue. The third and last section presents the discussion of these findings.

4.1. *Niñólogos*’ institutional journeys¹⁸

When I began working on the topic of child soldiering in 2006, I was a project assistant for a national NGO working on media ethics in wartime. I coordinated a series of weekend workshops for local journalists on media and child recruitment. My first trip was to Florencia in the department of Caquetá.¹⁹ Before that weekend, I had never visited the area. I was then 24 years old. The city, which is also the capital of Caquetá, is located in the Amazonas region. At that time, mostly spent indoors meeting local journalists, I remember feeling challenged by participants’ understandings of the ‘war crime’ (I had, of course, learnt the required script which consisted mostly of United Nations guidelines, and some local policies). My then colleagues did not seem to comprehend what was wrong with the recruitment of children by guerrillas and paramilitary groups, as it was regular and local authorities failed to pay attention to it. Child recruitment was typical for the local journalists who attended the workshop, and my reaction was one of surprise and annoyance. How could this group of people fail to protect children by ignoring the fact that

¹⁸ Out of all finding chapters of my thesis, I found this one to be the closest to my experience as a practitioner before coming to Scotland to pursue my postgraduate studies. Because of that, I was cautious to allow my experience to shed light on my analysis but not to guide it. That is also the reason why I have decided to include some personal experiences from my time as a children rights’ practitioner as part of this chapter.

¹⁹ Caquetá borders with the departments of Cauca and Huila to the west, the department of Meta to the north, the department of Guaviare to the northeast, the department of Vaupés to the east, the departments of Amazonas and Putumayo to the south, covering a total area of 88,965 km², the third largest area in Colombia. Source: <http://www.caqueta.gov.co/>

underage people should not be fighting in the armed conflict? Over my six years and many trips working in the field, my initial perception, dictated by the humanitarian discourse I had to learn to do my job, slowly started to shift. Then, what I saw was that for people living in those areas, where most of the Colombian armed conflict has taken place, not seeing child recruitment as a crime was not an act of neglect but it rather showed a complex and specific local context of communities that had not only “suffered” war, but that had learnt how to cope with it, have adapted to it, and been shaped by it (Arjona, 2016, p. 2). In short: with my NGO discourse, I was negotiating a global figure of the child soldier in a local setting that did not speak the same language and, back then, I was unaware precisely of the existence of its multiple dialects.

As explained in *Chapter 3*, most of my interviewees have been involved in the field of child soldiering since 1999, when the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) set in motion the Program of Attention to Boys, Girls and Adolescents Demobilised [disengaged]²⁰ from Organised Armed Groups outside the law (*Programa de atención especializada a niños, niñas y adolescentes desvinculados de los grupos armados organizados al margen de la ley*).²¹ One of them, however, has been involved in the topic since there was no reintegration program for children at all, and it needed to be created. At the end of the 90’s, the Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación*, EPL) guerrilla group demobilised collectively after a peace deal with the government, and “delivered” ten children, mostly girls, to the state. According to LA, a social worker who was part of the team that was assembled to set a program in motion with representatives of ICBF, UNICEF and local NGOs, “there were many trials and errors, because there were no laws, no programs, nothing, even if the problem of child recruitment had existed in the country for decades” (Personal

²⁰ Although it is discussed later in the text, the terms *engaged with* and *disengaged from* armed groups are the formal terminology to refer to child soldiers and former child soldiers in Colombia.

²¹ Currently, the program is called Specialized Care Program for the Restoration of Rights to Boys, Girls, and Adolescents Victims of Illicit Recruitment, who have been Disengaged from Organised Armed Groups Outside the Law (“Programa de atención especializada para el restablecimiento de derechos a niños, niñas y adolescentes víctimas de reclutamiento ilícito, que se han desvinculado de Grupos Armados Organizados al Márgen de la Ley”).

interview, LA, Bogotá, Colombia, 1st April 2016). This experience later informed Machel's iconic report, "Impact of armed conflict on children" (1996), which was "firmly based on conditions and priorities within countries" (p. 11), as a result of her field visits to Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and various places in the former Yugoslavia.

In this section, I follow *niñólogos'* journeys to see how they, lawyers, anthropologists, political scientists, social workers, psychologists, and teachers, in practice, have helped to bring to life the humanitarian discourse on child soldiering, while also trying to make sense to it based on their direct encounters with former child soldiers. When my interviewees started working on the subject, they reported playing their role as required. They learnt the mandatory discourses (e.g. the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other international child rights instruments and discourses implicated in the process of post-war reintegration of former child soldiers), and joined the child protection movement (Lee, 2009), whose leitmotif is that "any person under 18 years old must be protected". Hence, the above-mentioned *journey* focuses on practitioners' institutional path, particularly on the discourses and practices that one learns to be able to do the job (as done by Tsing, 2005). "I started by talking to all 'the usual suspects' in the field", remembers RR, an anthropologist and a regular consultant for an INGO based in Colombia. She began her work by "talking to the ICBF, to the Ministry of the Interior, to the High Commissioner for Peace, to the Ombudsman's Office, to the Procurator's Office, to the Army" (Personal interview, RR, Bogotá, Colombia, 30th March 2016). RR recalls that these conversations, mainly about the international framework of children's rights, were her entry point to the field of child soldiering in the country. Since then, she says that she has somehow moved amongst different institutions and in the last couple of decades, she has rarely added a new organisation or office working on the topic to her local list of contacts. AC, a political scientist who worked with the Ombudsman Office's Human Rights School for former child soldiers and with a INGO based in Colombia, says that her first approach to the topic was with the international framework of human rights. "I had to learn it by heart", she recalls, "thinking more on how to apply it, as a technique, and less on what was the actual

impact that such speech would have on the people I was going to work with” (Personal interview, AC, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016). Her account offers a more detailed description of how Colombian practitioners start to learn the humanitarian discourse and to apply it as part of their job description:

My encounter with that language [humanitarian] was pragmatic. I told myself: “You are going to live from this, you are going to do a consultancy on this, and you have to know these technical contents”. And, there you can say, I gave up [having] a different type of reflection; to give way to this whole thing that makes the life of the consultant, a life full of repeated speeches. Discourses that also have a value to repeat, because they pay you to repeat them and make the same legal framework, establish the same categories, speak in terms of risks, vulnerabilities, threats, etc. (...) That time, what I did was to learn the ‘handbook’ [the mandatory readings] and I started to collect diverse information to qualify my speech. (Personal interview, AC, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016)

With the exception of LA, who was involved with the inception of the children’s reintegration program, the rest of my interviewees, regardless of their training, were welcomed to the field in a similar way: by studying and learning the international framework on children’s rights (at that time, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [1989] and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict [2000]), and reading about child soldiering in other contexts (in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia in Africa, and Sri Lanka in Asia). In the 1990s, Colombian child soldiering as a phenomenon had not yet been rigorously researched and written about locally, so the sole mandatory reading for anyone working on the matter in the early 2000s was Graça Machel’s 1996 report – commissioned by the UN General Assembly and the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The first prominent piece of research produced on the topic in Colombia would only come six years later, Álvarez and Aguirre’s book (2002), *Warriors without shadows: children and young people in the armed conflict (Guerreros sin sombra, niños, niñas y jóvenes vinculados al conflicto armado)* – commissioned by the ICBF and the Colombian Office of the Attorney General. For the first time, the country had a systematic work that included former child soldiers’ own accounts on their experiences, and it was possible to start making meaningful connections between their *campesino* background and also their willingness to join the war or not.

The *niñólogos* I worked with concurred on the institutional need for a shared knowledge on the phenomenon and for the existence of the figure of the child soldier, “even if it reduces a diverse set of experiences into sameness” (Personal interview, AJ, Bogotá, Colombia, 13th April 2016). This group of experts, however, values the global figure and how useful it is to keep the topic of Colombian child soldiering current in the international agenda (where most of the funding comes from). The group also identifies as one of their victories the ongoing dialogue with the government that has made possible to update Colombian terminology related to children’s rights, child soldiering included. For example, several of my interviewees referred to the moment when the term ‘minors’ was replaced by the acronym NNA (in Spanish: *niño, niña y adolescente*, in English: boy, girl, and adolescent), which remains today. It was about more than not calling children *minors*, which implied their inferior legal status (Mickelson, 2002), but also the opportunity to differentiate boys and girls, and also younger children from adolescents. The Colombian central public policy for children was named the *Código del Menor* (Minor’s Code) from 1989 to 2006, year in which it was replaced by the *Código de Infancia y Adolescencia* (Code of Childhood and Adolescence). RR remembers how important it was to be able to agree on the acronym: “It might sound trivial or insignificant”, she says, “but important advances on national and local policymaking relied on that acronym” (Personal interview, RR, Bogotá, Colombia, 30th March 2016). Therewith, it was possible to name a diverse group of people under 18 years old that were affected by the armed conflict (including other types of violations, such as forced displacement, forced disappearance, torture, maiming, etc.). It was a critical decision that improved the way in which children were named within the existent universe of armed conflict victims in the country. Particularly, the acronym was also necessary because of language. Although the UN states to have several working languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish), their official documents are first produced in English before being translated to other languages. Furthermore, any material produced by local NGOs and INGOs to be shared either in the New York or Geneva headquarters must be written in English to be circulated among key actors for their meetings. Colombia’s national language is Spanish, and it does not have an equivalent for *child*, as a term, which refers to children as human

beings, and not becomings (as *minors* does), and simultaneously includes all genders. HM, lawyer and member of a national network of civil society organisations, also recalls this event as a crucial moment for her job. “Those three letters allowed us, simultaneously, to highlight gender and age diversity among a group of underage people impacted by war”, she explains.

HM, who has worked on the topic of child soldiering for thirteen years, adds that the same happened when the term child soldier (which in Spanish translates as *niño soldado*, literally boy soldier), was changed for *desvinculados* (disengaged). “It was a big win for the children rights’ practitioners, as we were able to separate children’s experiences with armed groups from those of adults” (Personal interview, HM, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016). Grown-ups remained labelled as demobilised (*desmovilizados*) and children were disengaged (*desvinculados*). According to official documents, demobilised refers to “a person who *voluntarily* abandons his/her activities as a member of an organised armed group outside the law, for example, guerrilla and self-defence groups [paramilitaries], and surrenders to the authorities of the Republic” [emphasis added] (Def 128 of 2003); and a disengaged refers to:

(...) a person under 18 years of age who has participated in war actions directed by an irregular armed group, with a political motivation, be it intelligence, logistics or combat, and has been captured, has surrendered voluntarily, or has surrendered through a collective demobilisation of the irregular armed group to the state or any other national or international entity. (...) a person who, in consequence, can request the economic, social and legal benefit that the law gives him/her. (ICBF, IOM & Save the Children UK, 2002, p. 15)

To assign a specific term to former child soldiers allowed children rights’ activists and people in charge of implementing any state program affecting them to highlight that children were forced to join and that they were saved, in a way, from such structures where they were in danger. The term disengaged also allowed them to include former child soldiers as victims, and therefore see them as recipients of benefits (e.g. within the 2011 Victims Law [1448], whose main objective is to provide recognition to the victims of the Colombian armed conflict by securing victims’ rights to access truth, justice and appropriate compensation while guaranteeing these people will never be a victim again). With an enhanced

vocabulary, *niñólogos* had access to better tools to do their job, locally. However, RR is not as positive as HM, because for her, although that label does its job of differentiating former combatants as children or adults, naming former child soldiers as *desvinculados* implies that they are not connected to anything, and she finds it problematic for their sense of self and of belonging during their reintegration process. She also finds it controversial not to straightforwardly call them soldiers, as the government refuses to assign that term to anyone who is not a member of the National Army (Villanueva et al., 2017).

According to Bodineau (2014), who explored organisations working with former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and approximately one hundred documents produced between 1996 and 2011 by international and national institutions involved in the protection of children, the ongoing dialogue between the figure of the child soldier and local understandings of the phenomenon is a “process of translation of values, stakes and representations from documents into practices” (para. 11). Poretti and colleagues (2013) did a similar job to explore “the rise and fall” of iconic figures of ‘stolen childhood’ on the international agenda since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by gathering a corpus of 328 texts (including treaties, resolutions, and thematic and annual reports) produced between 1989 and 2009 by the UN system and selected international non-governmental organisations. Their work also explained how translation is seen as a complex succession of consecutive and/or overlapping communication acts aimed at giving meaning to children’s rights. This kind of work allows the emergence of categories such as child combatants, refugee children, and street children, and it is seen as an achievement within the human rights discourse (*see* Sánchez-Parra, 2018; Oswell, 2013; Moynagh, 2011; Schaffer & Smith, 2004a, 2004b). Such categories represent advances in the struggle to protect children, in their specificities, from the impact of violent conflict and oppression. When the category is unclear, Sánchez-Parra (2018) says that it is impossible to design public policy and programmes to address these children’s needs accurately.

The exercise of translation operates not only from the local to the UN language, but also from universal constructions to local contexts. Colombian practitioners said that, in practice, they adjusted the existent global figure of the child soldier to the local context mainly through language adaptations. “Such rules are necessary to set up the ground for understanding, or for categorising a particular phenomenon, and to place it within a policy and programs framework in which such a population needs to be attended”, insisted RR. AJ, a Colombian human rights lawyer, and one of the authors of the first published guidelines for the investigation of the crime of illegal recruitment of children in Colombia (COALICO & CCJ, 2009), supports her statement:

Such frameworks are needed. We needed to establish a baseline of whom we were talking about when we started talking about child soldiers. How did they look? From where did they come? What kind of experiences must they have had? What kind of tasks did they undertake while they were in the armed groups? What kind of factors led them to join such groups? How did they manage to escape? Who were the others, those who did not escape, who did not survive training, who were captured trying to flee the jungle and then executed? We needed that *figure* adopted locally. [emphasis added] (Personal interview, AJ, Bogotá, Colombia, 13th April 2016)

Tsing (2005) says that universals are indeed local knowledge in the sense that they cannot be understood without the benefit of historically specific cultural assumptions, meaning that the global figure is only able to come to life in a local context by these previously mentioned translations and adaptations. Therefore, naming was essential, even if it reduced diversity into sameness, even if the official definition, either in English or Spanish, did not have a place for children’s accounts of their willingness to join the armed conflict, their feelings of responsibility or guilt because of their actions as soldiers, their good memories inside the armed groups, and their political views about the protracted Colombian war. And naming was also essential because while child soldiering remains a priority in the humanitarian world, resources are available to finance jobs, organisational plans, and public policies, among other activities. Existing scholarship on human rights practice asserts that the matters that reach the top of the international agenda tend to relate to violations of political and civil rights by recognisable perpetrators (Bob, 2009; Keck & Sikkink, 1998), and in order to reach international prominence, “local claims must meet the worldviews and demands of leading organisations and larger systems of values and

beliefs” (Poretti et al., 2013, p. 23). Research into the practices of specific bodies, such as Amnesty International and UNICEF, shows that thematic priorities are also influenced by considerations of efficacy, internal politics, media visibility, and competition for financial resources (Rodio & Schmitz, 2010; Carpenter, 2009; Ron, Ramos, & Rodgers, 2005).

Cheney (2005) discussed the relationship between the humanitarian discourse and the local reality in northern Uganda, and how it affected particularly how local NGOs, for example, constructed their discourse to keep the funding coming. The author said that, at some point, local child protection practitioners thought that they should stop referring to former Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) combatants who joined when they were children as victims, according to universal categories, because it did not match with the realities they were seeing in the field. However, it was hard “to carry out aid and assistance to children in need without necessarily engaging this discourse” (Cheney, 2005, p. 41). Without the global discourse, programs would face a shortage of funding, she stressed. What Cheney reflected in an African country, was also depicted by AC in her interview as part of this research, there is a practical use of that discourse:

We have a functional speech in these institutional bureaucracies that we form in international cooperation, mostly with the NGOs. There, we produce a useful speech to our interests more than to the interests of the subjects of which we are speaking [former child soldiers]. And that speech is so fractured [between considering children as victims and to seeing them as complex subjects who reflect or understand their experiences as something more than that], that we end up prioritising the one that provides us funding rather than the one that could help ex-combatants to make sense of their lives. (Personal interview, AC, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016)

People in charge of producing narratives that feed the humanitarian world tend to focus on creating captivating stories, which, in turn, generate tensions between what is expected and what actually happened (Bruner, 2002), and with that work, and that of many others part of the constellation of actors, my selected group of practitioners is behind the local (re)production of the figure of the child soldier. “As a humanitarian, you follow a guideline that says that you must protect children, that they are the most important”, says AJ, “but then, they end up being represented

solely by adults. To protect them, you remove their voices, hiding them, and, eventually, silencing them” (Personal interview, AJ, Bogotá, Colombia, 13th April 2016). Fassin (2012) and Fassin and Rechtman (2009) explain how humanitarian organisations, as part of that humanitarian world, have a legitimacy that allows them to shed light on the misfortunes, injustices and persecutions endured by the population because of disasters, famines and wars, because precisely that is the most effective way to make their story heard in the international arena. Humanitarian organisations have access to the global public sphere from which this population is excluded, so they translate social realities into other social realities, operating as representatives when they simultaneously have their own agenda.

Globally, the systematic use of the humanitarian discourse is depicted by the campaign to put an end to child soldiering, strongly supported by the figure of the child soldier, which was successful in its efforts, for example, to secure an optional protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Wells (2017) claims that the campaign brought attention to the issue of child soldiers, contributing to:

1. The decision at the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone to treat young rebel fighters as victims rather than perpetrators of war.
2. To shifting public opinion against the Tamil Tigers in the separatist civil war in Sri Lanka (although this shift did not necessarily support a peaceful outcome to the war), and
3. To a change in practice in the UK towards the recruitment of under-18s in the armed forces who are now not deployed until they are 18, although recruitment of under-18s to the British Armed Forces continues if there is parental consent (*see* Wells, 2008 and 2014b).

Locally, Colombian *niñólogos* recognise that the figure and the international pressure that comes with the global discourse facilitated, for example, the inclusion of a chapter on child soldiering in the recent Peace Deal signed between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla army (which, in turn, qualified their reintegration program, see Chapter 6), and how visible the phenomenon has been now that the country discusses the implementation of the deal and works on the

installation of a Truth Commission to explore the impact of war on Colombian children and young people.

This section has described some of the practices through which the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia. The following section will show specifically how this group of practitioners claims to be able to recognise dissonances or narrative tensions between the discourse and the reality of what they see working with children and young people, and their attempts to make those diverse accounts visible to inform the global figure of the child soldier.

4.1.1. Noises: what the figure of the child soldier leaves out

The room is crowded with people who want to know more about the childhood experiences of a group of three former child soldiers. I am at a private university in Bogotá, attending a public event organised by some of the students. The peace talks with the FARC started three years ago, and the panel is part of a pedagogy for peace (*pedagogía para la paz*) strategy. I joined the activity with a colleague with whom I have been working on the topic of child soldiering over the years, and we sat in the back. As we arrived earlier, I got the chance to say hi to Rita.²² She is one of the presenters today. We met in 2007, eight years ago, when I was working as a project coordinator for a journalists' NGO. She was invited to attend one of our workshops on responsible coverage of child recruitment to be interviewed by the participants.

Two women and a man were in charge of the talk. Lucía, the other woman, talks first. She works with the Colombian Agency for Reintegration [Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración, ACR] as a re-integrator (*reintegradora*) [a former guerrilla or paramilitary combatant in charge of sharing her/his life story as a cautionary tale and to sensitise multiple audiences as part of the government reintegration program], and these kinds of activities are “her speciality”: she does it regularly. It is in her job description. She talks and easily engages with the audience. She tells a story of vulnerability and poverty, as a child, then she talks about what she got to learn inside the armed group (her training involved handling explosives, some nursing tasks and intelligence), and also the violence she endured, being a woman. Then, she expands on her experience once she managed to go out of the group and describes the first time she tried a famous ice cream only available in a few Colombian cities. The audience, most of them university students, looked moved, engaged. She tried, as she said, “to summarise 28 years of her life” in more or less fifteen minutes. She used tons of key words, like “to sensitise”, “to give a voice to those who do not have one”, “to think about the children that are still inside the armed groups”. She also shared some tears. She got a loud ovation. While all this was happening, with my colleague we kept on looking at each other, identifying somehow the patterns on her speech, and waiting, perhaps, to be surprised at some point. We were not.

²² All the names of this field note are pseudonyms to protect the women's identities.

Then, it was Rita's turn. Once the auditorium was quiet again, she began. She gave her name, she said where she worked, and then she added: "I don't want to talk about that time of my life anymore [of her recruitment with one of the main guerrilla's groups in the country]. I want to talk about what happened after I got out". I was simply amazed. My colleague then also gave me 'that' look. The look of: 'this has never happened before' in a scenario like this, at least not to us. Not sure if the rest of the auditorium got the same emotion, as somehow those activities tend to be for listening to a particular format of 'life-story', like Lucía's. But Rita, so many years after surviving the armed group, and also the reintegration program [in her own words], and participating in tons of events to 'sensitise' audiences, was able now to say that she did not want to play by those rules anymore. During her intervention, she was critical of the reintegration program and how the society was not ready to welcome people like her, and Lucía, and the man who was sitting next to her waiting for his turn. She said, also, at some point: "I don't want to play the victim's role anymore. We need to see each other in a different way".

(Field notes, 12th March 2015).

This opening account suggests the break that exists between the mainstream discourse and what remains outside of it. I included one of my early field notes to start this section reflecting on how I have also experienced those 'narrative tensions', dissonances, that show how insufficient the figure of the child soldier can be to portray the diversity of experiences of Colombian former child soldiers, and their personal willingness to decide over what to share and what not. In the excerpt, Lucía's and Rita's stories selection show a narrative tension. On the one hand, there is Lucía's account: what people want to hear, what people expect from a person like her. She also works for a state institution in charge of promoting demobilisation and reintegration of former guerrillas and paramilitary members. On the other hand, Rita's account shows what she wants to say, regardless of the audience's expectations. That is why she articulates: "I do not want to talk about that time of my life anymore", and then starts talking about what she wants to share. Then comes my former colleague's reaction and my own: we were amazed, and that reaction symbolises the awareness of 'the noise', the dissonance that this chapter section will discuss.

The *niñólogos* consulted by this research were aware of the limitations of the humanitarian script, and while they kept on using it for their jobs, they were also mindful of how some of the stories they heard from former child soldiers did not

match that script. Every single one of my interviewees was able to recognise these discrepancies, and AJ's account summarises it:

It is about what we can and we cannot say. Regardless of where you work (government, international organisations, national NGOs), each one of these settings has its set of rules. It is the game that we play because we know we have to play it, but we can still recognise tensions between what we are saying and what is actually happening. (Personal interview, AJ, Bogota, Colombia, 13 April 2016)

Such moments, such noises, were of enormous value for my interviewees, as they believe those instants allowed them to step back from an apparently rigid frame, to challenge it, to contest it, and to improving it when possible. By noise, they understood moments in which they questioned, for example, whether former child soldiers were genuinely unaware of their experiences, and whether they were truly ignorant of what they were doing inside the armed groups. RR shared the story of a former child soldier in a paramilitary who told her once about his need to ask for forgiveness from someone, anyone, for his actions:

As part of his reintegration process, he [the former child soldier] watched a documentary by the National Centre for Historical Memory [CNMH] about the impact of the armed conflict on civilians, and he felt responsible and ashamed, and wanted to do something about it. He talked to me about it and I decided to ask one of the experts in the program what could be done about it, and that person just told me: "He is a child, he needs to study, that's his only responsibility". And, that was it. It was impossible to find a way to answer to this young person needs because he, as a victim, was not allowed to engage in a different way with his feelings. Responsibility? Out of the question. (Personal interview, RR, Bogotá, Colombia, 30th March 2016)

That "solely victim" approach is risky because, while it appears to protect children from any liability, it also removes from them any possibility to engage with what happened in a more active way. AJ says that the victimhood discourse is a trap: "the urgency to protect children to prevent that they are found legally responsible for any crime, makes them invisible as their views can't be taken into account because they can be found legally liable" (Personal interview, AJ, Bogota, Colombia, 13 April 2016). *Niñólogos* also recognise that seeing former child soldiers just as trauma survivors, as it happens in general to people coming out of war, was not necessarily the experience in some of them, discovering that some would even value their time within the ranks, considering their soldiering experiences a crucial part of their

childhoods (see Chapter 5). SD, psychologist and director of an NGO that works collaboratively with the state reintegration program, asserts that seeing former child soldiers just as traumatised people coming out of war neglects who they were in an attempt to save them from bad experiences:

Any process that is part of the reintegration program is guided by what cannot be told or spoken because it can trigger a past trauma. But, while working with former child soldiers, I remember talking to them about their knowledge, and how important it was for them to be able to connect with those past experiences to make sense to their present. However, people running the state programs insisted on being careful with them, to avoid any bad memories or traumatic experiences that could delay their reintegration process (Personal interview, SD, Bogotá, Colombia, 7th April 2016).

Because of these dissonances, all *niñólogos* realised that something was missing, like bits of stories that did not fit in the mainstream discourse and, therefore, appeared destined for oblivion. A short list of ignored topics includes,

1. Who former child soldiers were inside the armed groups, their self-representation as warriors and their political interests (CNMH, 2017; Lugo, 2017; Wells, 2009; Rosen, 2005);
2. Experiences that reaffirm their humanity, showing them as resilient, capable, and survivors (Oloya, 2013);
3. Their learning experiences as soldiers, and how they create family ties in the armed groups, which they maintained once they were back to their communities (Baines & Stewart, 2011);
4. A particular type of rural wisdom, which facilitated their life in the rainforest (see several examples included in Chapter 6); and
5. Their reflections on their dreams, their plans, their fears, their relationships, their time for boredom, their inspiration to move on and to resist their alleged fate (Salamanca, 2013a). Accounts that are a testimonial of how armed conflict did not control children's and young people's lives entirely and show an alternative story to violence: "They are more than just their recruitment, more than just the idea of trauma" (Personal interview, SD, Bogotá, Colombia, 7th April 2016).

Practitioners have tried to include such accounts in the discourse they use locally, by strategically adding some texts to the reports that inform public policies and

international studies. For example, AJ managed to “filter some lines on criminal responsibilities and awareness of their wrongdoings” into her guidelines for the investigation of the crime; RR, in her most recent book, included some quotes from child and young ex-combatants claiming to be recognised as warriors and as active and critical members of a paramilitary group that was, as they also claim, forcibly demobilised; DC, a pedagogue working with a national NGO, attached some stories about former child soldiers views on magic and religion to a project report that he sent to an international sponsor. However, they said that all these stories remain hidden behind some other general and more pressing issues. AC was particularly insightful about how working in the field has challenged the way she relates to the topic and her quest for her understanding of former child soldiers’ nuanced experiences:

I feel that the last few years I have been moving ‘backwards’, not working to deepen my knowledge of the subject, but seeking a new language and a more legitimate inner voice. Not the voice of what I had to learn to make a living, but the voice of what I am feeling about what happened (Personal interview, AC, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016).

This section has shared some of the noise that the group of Colombian *niñólogos* consulted for this research pointed out. These narrative tensions speak of the limitations of the mainstream discourse on the phenomenon and also of some of the obscured or neglected features that people who experienced child soldiering consider valuable as part of their life experiences. The following section will discuss, specifically, how two seasoned former child soldiers participate in the construction of the mainstream discourse, focusing particularly on how the figure of the child soldier is a livelihood option for them.

4.2. Can you escape the story of being a child soldier?

Through a diverse range of accounts (i.e. theatre pieces, written autobiographies, and short stories), young women and men who were part of Colombian armed groups when they were children have contributed to the development of the global figure of the child soldier. They have done so not only by being sources for national and international reports, but also sometimes by traveling to UN headquarters to share their experiences, live. In this section, I reflect on the authors’ (two seasoned former

child soldiers) process of production of three public narratives in the country. One of those accounts is the book “*A born winner. The personal story of an adolescent who opted out of a Colombian illegal armed group*” (*Nacido para triunfar. Testimonio de un adolescente desvinculado de un grupo armado ilegal*, 2008), the first autobiography of a former child soldier ever published in the country by UNICEF, and authored by Santiago.²³ The other two stories were written by María: “*María’s tree*” (2014) and “*María in the job to get a job*” (2015). Both of her texts are public; the first one got an honourable mention at the Second Call for Artistic and Cultural Memory Proposals organised in 2014 by the National Centre for Historical Memory (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*, CNMH),²⁴ and the second was a selected story for the project “Tell your story. Re-signifying the right to work of Colombian women” organised by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (*Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional*, AECID). As I am exploring how the global figure is vernacularized locally, in this section I reflect on these two former child soldiers’ narrative production practices and not specifically on their tales (*see* Methodology).

4.2.1. The need to write stories

María and Santiago are two Colombian young people with several shared experiences: they were both born in rural areas; they were both part of a guerrilla group when they were children; at the time of this research, they were both living in a city; and they were also parents. On official papers (for example at the Victims’ Unit or the ACR), both of them are ‘the same’: *desvinculados*. They are even the ‘same’ when they want to apply for a scholarship to study at a university or to have

²³ At the time of writing this thesis, he was working to publish a follow-up of his book, focusing on his reintegration this time. In 2016, when I conducted the interview, his first book was published with a pseudonym (Santiago), and he was planning to publish the new version signed with his real name. Then, he said that Colombia was walking “confidently towards a peace stage”, and hiding his identity did not feel like a requirement anymore. However, and as it was discussed in Chapter 3, the Colombian context has changed significantly over the past two years, therefore I maintain his pseudonym.

²⁴ It is a public entity created in 2005 as part of the National Reconciliation and Reparations Commission. The Centre’s mission was to develop an inclusive and comprehensive narrative of the reasons for the emergence and the evolution of the internal armed conflict and the armed groups (*More*: <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/en/about-the-national-center-about-the-national-center>).

access to services like health care, education, work, and recreation. They are also meaningful to my work, as they portray, each in their own way, the experience of narrating themselves, sharing pieces of their life story and, especially, making those stories public. However, when reflecting on their particular accounts, two different trends emerge: *Santiago's narrative*, on the one side, appears to be crafted by 'fulfilling' some expectations that, in this case, are negotiated through UNICEF. That was the case of his first book. With that story, he expected that a wider audience, mediated by the UN, would have access to a personal account that explains what does it mean to a young person to be part of a guerrilla group in the country. *María's narrative*, on the other hand, looks different. She was not "invited" to write about her experiences, as happened with Santiago, although she did publish them by sending them to open calls from one national and one international organisation (CNMH and AECID) that were looking for accounts: the first from victims and the second from women. Once she got out of the armed group (she was captured), she reconnected with her passion for writing (María kept a diary while she was inside the armed group) while participating in different activities with NGOs. Since she is in *la civil*, she has written short stories, poems and co-authored a couple of stage plays, one about the gendered experience of being a woman in a guerrilla group (*Verde Olivo*) and the other one about her own story as a child (*María's tree, El árbol de María*). Their stories show how one appears to respond explicitly to an outsider's need or requirement (like the UN agency, in this case), and the second appears to be as a vital need of narrating oneself outside a specific context that looks limited or constrained.²⁵

²⁵ Note for the reader. I have chosen to reconstruct narratively their stories based on a mix of my field notes and the recordings of our meetings, without including specific quotes. María's interview was a long afternoon conversation while I joined her to walk around a neighbourhood trying to find a place to rent in Bogotá. Because of the conditions of that encounter, I did not record the conversation, although I took detailed notes once we said good-bye. In Santiago's case, although I do have recordings of the "proper" interview, once we sat at his house's living room, we also engaged in a long conversation that was not always recorded. Therefore, I made a stylistic decision to convey meaning with both stories by narrating them in a journal form.

4.2.2. “What is expected from my experience, what sells?” – Santiago’s story

Santiago is the author of the first (and the only one published until the writing of this thesis) autobiography by a former child soldier in Colombia. He wrote it when he was 16 years old, after being discovered and encouraged by a UN official who met him during an activity led by a local organisation in a Colombian city. He claims that, back then, he just liked writing poems, even no one told him how to write one or how a poem should look. For him, as he recognised during our conversation, writing his first book was difficult. There were multiple memories which were hard to revisit, to try and make sense of. However, he tackled the challenge by narrating his life in a simple chronological structure, giving priority to family memories, at the beginning (and his quest to find a significant other, after being left an orphan at four years old), to move later to his recruitment into the armed group, which he joined willingly, and then to his also voluntarily demobilisation and the difficult and challenging process of remaining outside of a war that, back then, had not yet stopped.

When I met him in April 2016, he was planning a comeback, a second book, focusing this time on “a successful reintegration”. That was the year of FARC’s signing of the peace deal with the government (24th November), and it felt appropriate to change the tone. This time, Santiago decided to sign his book (not to be Santiago anymore) and even to include some personal pictures that he had kept from his years not only as a soldier, but also of his childhood, before joining the FARC. He said it was time to face his own story because it was not traumatic anymore. When he talked about “owning his story”, he referred explicitly to receiving the profits himself. He said that the first time, because he was unexperienced, the UN got “the best” of his book, and that he would like to be in control this time (although the UN does not get money directly by selling the book, which was translated into English, it uses it for its advocacy campaigns). There is a market for his story, and he knew it (*see* “the market for child soldier testimonies”, Brocklehurst and Peters [2017, p. 73]). For this second book, he was focused on contract deals, where to publish, how to be in control of his manuscript. Santiago was thinking about what his audience wanted. Not about exposing his feelings, but to

somehow trading his past, which was more appealing because of the peace deal. He knew that he had something valuable in his hands and he did not want to let it go. Santiago's first book answered to UNICEF's call and mandate, but his second book answered to a current climate and, most of all, to his interests.

4.2.3. “By sharing my story, I share part of the burden” – María's story

For María writing came as a need to reflect on her past, she told me during our conversation, and there was something about sharing what she writes, publishing it. She thinks that by doing so, she manages to “share the burden”, to stop carrying it by herself. She wanted to own her story but also was curious or tempted to recognise the ‘we’ in her ‘I’. María was part of a group of former child soldiers who had access to multiple therapies and strategies in their reintegration processes. There, she encountered the theatre and found a different voice to explore her memories and meanings about her past. She wrote a first piece called *Verde Olivo*, which she played in front of multiple audiences with an art group called *Aliarte*.²⁶ The play portrayed young people's own accounts on how war had affected them, and was praised until the point that was taken by some INGOs to tour in Europe. Her two published written short stories speak particularly about diverse experiences of her past, always grounded in her present, in who she is now. She has not written an autobiographical account, in chronological order, as Santiago and several former child soldiers worldwide have done.²⁷ However, in one case (*María's tree*) she reflected about her life journey comparing herself to a tree that struggles to get through life because of the impact inflicted on it by others and how hard it is for that tree to resist and to keep on flourishing after all sorts of struggles. In her other short story (*María on the job to get a job*), she talks about all the knowledge and skills that she has and how they do not count to society, as she cannot certify her experience,

²⁶ The art collective *Aliarte* was a group of Colombian young people (composed by former child soldiers, victims of forced displacement, and other forms of violence) that from 2010 to 2012 created two theatre pieces and worked with the support of the Dutch NGO War Child and Taller de Vida.

²⁷ For example, *Child soldier, fighting for my life* by China Keitetsi, Uganda (2004); *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, Sierra Leone (2007); and *Tamil Tigress: My Story As a Child Soldier in Sri Lanka's Bloody Civil War* by Niromi de Soyza (pseudonym, 2012) (see Salamanca, 2013a).

because she does not have any diplomas to back her up. This story is set on a bus ride from her house, on the outskirts of the city, to downtown Bogotá, heading to a job interview while carrying her then four-year-old son in her arms.

We met in April 2016 and we discussed the importance and significance of her writing. Then she highlighted how relieved she felt because of being able to share, publicly, her thoughts and personal experiences as a young woman. She was also interested in knowing how to be in charge of her own stories. She asked me questions about copyrights and possible contacts with illustrators. She wanted to be entirely in charge of her creations, because, as Santiago, she was also aware of the market for those stories. Although she did not necessarily voice any monetary interest, as Santiago did, she was outspoken about her need to be in command of her work as a way of guaranteeing the accurate interpretation and portrayal of her views.

4.2.4. How difficult is it to escape their story

María on 'the job to get a job' tells the story of María's difficulties entering the job market as a former child soldier. She was able to write that text, which reveals unknown facts of former child soldiers (like how much they struggle with their CVs, for example, when they are trying to find a job, as they were not supposed to be soldiers and they cannot account for their past experiences as they would like to), because she says that she wrote it without thinking of her experience as a victim, and the call allowed her to reflect on her experiences as a woman, regardless of her former child soldier status. When we met, she also explained how difficult it was for her to leave, to escape her story: "So difficult to get a job, to live without being *just* her story ... of her skills and of who she is now, not her past" (Field notes, 15th March 2016). She tried to escape the 'game' once, to stop living out of her story. She told me that she enjoyed the option of being "nobody" when she left the city – where she arrived as part of the reintegration program – to try a different one, close to her partner's family. It was an opportunity she had to re-invent herself and to work and live as anyone else. She liked it. There, she tried to run the *productive project* that the government approved for her as part of her reintegration process. She had an idea related to creating some handicrafts, and even if she had or understood some

parameters of how a business like the one she had in mind could work, she could not make it happen. On the one hand, she lacked specific business and entrepreneurship skills, and the government did not provide her, or anyone else at that point, any support in this area.²⁸ On the other hand, the people who were assigned by the program to provide her with the required materials gave her the wrong quality and overcharged her: fabrics, threads and sewing machines ended up costing her almost three or four times the market price. In that way, providers ‘made’ some extra money, and María lost hers.

The money she received, as many former child soldiers do, is attached to their monetary compensation – because they were victims of forced recruitment – and to the ‘*reintegración productiva*’ (productive reintegration), part of Colombia’s reintegration strategy for former combatants of illegal structures in the country. The comprehensive reparation takes into account the individual, collective, material, moral and symbolic dimension and it consists of five measures: 1. Rehabilitation, 2. Monetary compensation, 3. Satisfaction, (land, home, resources, jobs, or access to credit), 4. Restitution, and 5. Non-repetition guarantees (UARIV, n.d.). The comprehensive reparation means not only monetary compensation or property restitution, but also state support to ensure the effective enjoyment of education, health care, housing, employment and income generation, among others, as well as actions to return their dignity and memory to them, to restore truth and create the conditions to avoid the reoccurrence of what they had suffered. People who are part of the program are invited to present a project explaining how they plan to make a living with the government’s support. Some of them suggest a small business, such as a bakery or a beauty salon; others, I learnt through my fieldwork, were ‘bolder’ and claimed that investing their allocated money in buying a property could equate to making a living: having a roof over their heads and renting some rooms to make money. The government claims that the program is innovative and ground-breaking,

²⁸ She is part of the first generation of *desvinculados* in Colombia, and since then, the program has been improved and updated. Nowadays, it offers training in entrepreneurship skills, for example, as part of its Productive Dimension, which comprises five achievements: 1. Opportunities of the economic context; 2. Talent Strengthening; 3. Income Generation; 4. Productive Options, and 5. Family and Financial Management (ARN, n.d.).

and some books have been published on the topic portraying success stories.²⁹ With those tales, the program continues receiving funding and support, however in the Colombian reintegration program, according to some of my interviewees, success is not the norm but the exception. During my fieldwork, I obtained information related to the un-readiness of some young ex-combatants to undertake and set in motion a productive project. To be able to become an entrepreneur, overnight, is something that does not happen to anyone, whether coming out of war or not. Successes are few. Some of those cases come from people who were not necessarily “seriously” involved with the armed groups (e.g. people who supported the guerrillas with some work in small towns or cities, without abandoning their families or their areas) (*see* Salamanca, 2015), and the program has been criticised for not taking their individuality into account.

María returned to the city she had escaped because she got an attractive job offer related to her past, to who she used to be: to play a role in a Colombian theatrical project that brings together all the different actors in the half-century armed conflict (civilian victims, members of the military and the police, former FARC and ELN guerrilla groups, and former members of the paramilitary) in an attempt to contribute to the healing process in a post-conflict society. This had just happened when we met early 2016 and, since then, she has focused on her theatrical skills and has been invited to work as an actress in other stage plays, all of them related to her life story. She has been able to explore her creative voice as a former child soldier, and she believes that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a living from who she was, although she hopes to be able to stop being “just her story” someday soon.

In the ten years between Santiago’s first book and the edits and impending publication of the second one, he has also attempted to work detached from his past,

²⁹ For example: *Five exemplary stories* (<http://sostenibilidad.semana.com/hablando-verde/informe-especial/articulo/historias-ejemplares/28847>), *Success stories of demobilized people who created their own micro-enterprises* (<http://www.elpais.com.co/judicial/historias-exitosas-de-desmovilizados-que-crearon-sus-propias-microempresas.html>), *Initiatives with Sense of Life. Before interventions, joint constructions and mutual learning* (<http://repository.oim.org.co/bitstream/20.500.11788/1307/2/COL-OIM0520.pdf>).

and he has successfully lived without sharing his story, orally, although he has found jobs working in private security services, thereby using some of the skills he acquired as a child soldier. He has been able to do this job because of personal contacts, not because of the ACR reintegration program for fear of the stigma associated with his past. He says that he does not particularly like that job, but that at least he is good at it. Nowadays, there are several cases in Colombia of former child soldiers like María and Santiago ‘making a living’ from their life stories. Yineth Trujillo, previously a member of the FARC, was the inspiration for a movie³⁰ and a documentary about girl recruitment; several sources said that she was also writing her autobiography, although I could not find it during the writing of this thesis. Ana Pacheco, also a former member of that guerrilla group, was part of the national version of the TV show *Dancing with the Stars* in 2016 and appeared naked in a controversial national men’s magazine cover next to another naked woman, a former National Police detective. As Trujillo’s, she is also preparing a book on her life experiences as a child soldier. YM, the one participant of my pilot workshop, contributed with her personal story to the making of *La Niña*, a TV series that depicts the life story of a former girl soldier in 86 episodes (the series is now available on Netflix as an original series). Out of the spotlight, ARN also hires former child soldiers as re-integrators (*reintegradores*), to share their life stories (as Lucía’s case in the opening account of *Niñólogos, institutional journeys*). If anything, what all these story-sharing experiences have in common is how they present themselves from what seems to be expected from them: stories of struggle, mistreatment, deception, abuse, without any specific details of their daily life outside their tasks as soldiers. They have stories and skills to share; some of those are welcomed (the sad stories, the survival stories, the ones who speak of resilience, the ones that clearly portray the guerrillas as the ‘bad guys’ and children as innocent). Some others, those that go against the ‘accepted figure’, are rejected, neglected or just ignored.

³⁰ “*War Name: Alias Yineth* tells the history of war in Colombia through the eyes of Yineth, a *campesino* girl who was recruited by the guerrilla when she was 12 years old. Fifteen years later, she works on government programs for demobilised guerrillas. For her, these last years have meant a complete change from life in the jungle to the intention to create her own space in civil society” (More info: <http://aliasyineth.webs.com/>).

Those who fight the rules and do not like being forced to exhibit their labels to become someone in *la civil*, fight hard to be a normal citizen without playing the ‘wildcard’ of who they were. It was the case of a young man that I met in a Specialized Care Centre (*Centro de Atención Especializada*, CAE), a protection institution for former members of illegal armed groups. After learning about my research from the woman who had taken me there to meet one of the program representatives who support the reintegration of former child soldiers, he shared with me his views on how difficult it is to negotiate one’s past when trying to be reintegrated. He told me that he hides his identity to fit in the job market and to be able to support himself; and he relies on his family to support his invented story:

He works in a company, got the job without ACR’s help. They [his employers] do not know that he is a *desvinculado*, that he was recruited when he was 13 years old by a guerrilla group in the north of the country, as it happened to his cousins, and uncles... Although some of them were in a different guerrilla group. Everything is a process, he says, ‘getting used to’ (*amañarse*) the guerrillas, ‘getting used to’ the reintegration, tolerating the ‘moving around’ from one region to another [because of the reintegration process]. Unlearning war. Learning how to live in ‘la civil’. He invents stories to explain the gaps in his life. When he was looking for a job, he asked his brothers to learn these stories too, word by word, in case his employers phoned to check on his past (Field notes, 16th February 2016).

To hide their past operates as a strategy to fit back into *la civil*, and by choosing not to share their stories, some children and young people also decide not to be seen as victims of war. RR argues that neglecting who they were also helps them to fight the stigma related to their experiences as soldiers, as with her research, she found cases of employers reacting to this information with discrimination (Rubio, 2015).

Betancourt and colleagues (2010) and Veale and Stavrou (2007) have researched the impact of community rejection and stigma on children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, the first in Sierra Leone and the second in northern Uganda. Their work has also shown how being outspoken about previous experiences as child soldiers, while providing a livelihood, also put them at risk within the community and, in some cases, rendered them outcasts. These stories reflect those people who want to move on. They want to escape their past as a way to be someone in the present. YM, who was a girl soldier in one of the Colombian guerrilla armies, says that there is a ‘shared feeling’ amongst former child soldiers of being open to reflect on the past but always grounded in the present: “We are who

we are now because of who we were, and we are aware of that. We are, however, first and foremost, who we are *now*” [emphasis added to represent her words accurately] (Personal interview, Pilot Workshop, YM, Bogotá, Colombia, 31st January 2016). And those who they are ‘now’, as in the present, are, fundamentally, former child soldiers, but also normalised citizens. AC summarises their goal by stating that former child soldiers have the “right to be just like anyone”:

I firmly believe that the fundamental right that a human being has after having been through very difficult things in life is the right to be just like anyone. Life, education, and health [human rights]... all these are ‘speeches’ that can be worked on if you can. If you cannot, then no. But that, the right to be anyone. [The right] To take a photo in a park, to eat cotton candy, to ride an urban bus, to have a lousy time in Transmilenio,³¹ to participate in a march or, perhaps, not to do it. To have a child, to have a failed relationship, to cry over a husband, a boyfriend, a loss. To be anyone. That is how I sum it all up (Personal interview, AC, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016).

That fundamental right that AC describes is denied by the same social context that demands from them to repeat who they are continually (Fassin & IAS, 2012; Shepler, 2005a). The humanitarian world relates in a specific way to some former child soldiers. It would appear that some of them (i.e. the group of seasoned former child soldiers) have found a way to make it work in their favour. Therefore, their stories are not just sources for the constellation of actors, but some of them are also, essentially, their trademarks.

4.3. Discussion

As many authors have documented (*see* Chapter 2) and was discussed in the section about *niñólogos*’ journeys, aid agencies of all kinds can feel direct pressure to focus on experiences of victimhood and downplay other aspects of children’ lives. Shepler (2005b), for example, notes that communities that want access to development funds must accept the official view that former child soldiers are primarily children and victims who are worthy of reconciliation and reintegration into society. In this context, funders and agencies may also be tied into project-dependent funding (Brocklehurst & Peters, 2017). Still, in the humanitarian world, the constellation of

³¹ Transmilenio is a bus rapid *transit* (BRT) *system* that serves *Bogotá*.

actors struggles to make the figure of the child soldier ‘stick’, and to rise on the international agenda (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Some Colombian practitioners declared themselves uncomfortable with the established practices dictating that former child soldiers are victims, and while they have to negotiate how to fulfil those expectations from the international arena, they ask “Why do not we teach people that there is a history of pain but also a history of resignification because they have signified their history, so we can stop selling pain and tears?” (Personal interview, SD, Bogotá, Colombia, 7th April 2016).

Colombian practitioners who were part of this research were aware of a dissonance between what they were saying and what they were seeing while working directly with former child soldiers. This awareness was described by one of my interviewees as a “narrative tension” (Rubio, 2015), meaning a mismatch between the discourse that they had learnt, and to which they contribute, and the accounts from former child soldiers they had access to. When I set out to explore the people implicated in the production of the figure of the child soldier in Colombia and the maintenance of this figure in the country, I thought of narratives like María’s and Santiago’s as an opportunity to contest or to challenge such discourse led by the already mentioned constellation of actors. However, if approaching both stories from their production processes showed me anything, it was how vital it is to be aware of the space that welcomes such voices, which is, precisely, the humanitarian world that has constructed the figure. Crucially, the two seasoned former child soldiers’ narratives show how the figure, with its practices and in general people behind its production locally and globally, offers a strategy for making a living to former child soldiers when they are trying to find their way back into *la civil*. Cheney (2005) shared a similar account on her work with former child soldiers in Northern Uganda:

LRA returnees I spoke with sometimes actively embraced their identities as child soldiers, and even ‘performed’ them for both local and international aid workers in order to claim certain protections and entitlements. Others followed NGO cues and constantly reminded others that they were traumatized or victimized children. In a group counselling session at the World Vision centre, I asked returnees how they would like their communities to view them. They said, ‘the community should look at us as something which is very important and receive us in a very normal way because we have been suffering in the bush. Some of us died in the bush’. (...) Returned LRA child soldiers thus embrace a potentially stigmatizing label in order

to wear their survival as a badge of honour that makes them the same and yet sets them apart from other children in ways that facilitate forgiveness and even warrant special attention. This distinction is especially valid to international relief efforts, and it makes war-affected children who haven't been abducted envious of LRA returnees who receive entitlements. The army has recorded numerous incidents of children reporting to the barracks claiming to have just escaped from the LRA. Upon debriefing, they find that the children fabricated their abduction in an effort to receive some of the assistance they see ex-combatants in their communities receiving. This ranges from food and material goods to educational sponsorship and vocational training. 'Adult' escapees typically get none of these, so *it literally pays to claim a child or child soldier identity* [emphasis added] (Cheney, 2005, p. 38)

As done by Cheney, Brocklehurst and Peters (2017) describe the awareness of how former child soldiers can use their own narratives to make the best out of it, as the manoeuvres children and young people may be performing to survive. Shepler (2005b) has also found such attitudes in Sierra Leone and describe them as social practices across a variety of contexts using a variety of strategically adopted self-representations. Utas (2011) has suggested a term for such situations: *victimcy narratives*. According to the scholar, such narratives are a key tool in the toolbox of former child soldiers that shows their awareness of presenting themselves as victims, and such *victimcy* appears not only in relation to international audiences (of aid workers, academics, and journalists), but also to a local audience (of kin, neighbours and significant others) (Utas, 2011, p. 215). Children and young people's lives have been documented, reconstructed, and mediated through processes of humanitarian intervention, and while so many accounts are gathered to inform research and to create humanitarian campaigns, young people seem to have understood the rules of the game and have started to find ways to make a living out of their stories, or at least to find platforms to share them. Furthermore, María's and Santiago's cases show how they live in a world where making use of their life story or not is conditioned by a set of external circumstances and dynamics. Even if they are now out of the armed group for several years, there is a past that they cannot seem to be able to leave behind. The transition from being a former combatant to a regular citizen demands them to exhibit their victim status, as also happens with forced migration and victims of sexual violence, and many others in a long list of victimisations produced by the Colombian war. Shepler (2005) has identified similar practices in Sierra Leone, and criticises how this requirement of constantly recognising the child soldier label in the community of former combatants is

transforming that label in a sort of a ticket that grants access to basic human rights. Because of these practices, their stories look like a type of currency: “What about the trauma of being abducted, mistreated, and then coming back and having your trauma serve as your family’s meal ticket?” (Shepler, 2005b, p. 211).

When the figure of the child soldier answers exclusively to the needs of agencies brings what Shepler calls the “unintended consequences” of the (re)creation of a global, generalised image of the child soldier (2005b, p. 209, *endnote 17*). But, isn’t it ironic? On one hand, former child soldiers are invited to talk about their lives, to share them regularly in advocacy events, in artistic demonstrations (as it is often these objectifying portrayals that civil society groups reproduce in drives to raise funds and awareness). But, on the other, they are kindly invited to hide their past, to neglect who they were when their stories do not necessarily fit in on what is expected from them. Several interviewees referred to an incident where a former child soldier visited New York as part of an advocacy campaign with a well-known NGO and those who were travelling with him were surprised when he started charging people to tell his story. Is not in a way what the constellation of actors do to their spokespeople? Money might not come directly, but in the end, money is moving around: to finance programs, to pay salaries, to invest in opening more field offices. What happened, in that case, was that ‘the middle man’ disappeared, and the money got directly into this person’s hands. He asked to be paid to share his story as a young person recruited, as a child in one of the war-torn countries in the world, like charging for a service. And people paid.

This chapter has presented a portrayal of how the global figure of the child soldier comes to live in Colombia. The two following ones are an invitation to question diverse experiences of childhood. By means of Colombian former child soldiers’ first-person accounts, explored through literary and creative devices, this thesis discusses the existence of a *warrior* and a *campesino* self, crucial to their self-representations.

Chapter 5. Children as skilled soldiers. Colombian former child soldiers' accounts of their warrior-self

She had asked: What is he? A friend or an enemy?
The alethiometer answered: He is a murderer.
When she saw the answer, she relaxed at once.
He could find food, and show her how to reach Oxford,
and those were powers that were useful,
but he might still have been untrustworthy or cowardly.
A murderer was a worthy companion.
She felt as safe with him as she'd done with Iorek Byrnison the armoured bear.
The Subtle Knife, Philip Pullman (1997, pp.27-28).

In Pullman's fictionalised world, the story revolves around one child: Lyra. What she does, what she is meant to be, what she has to experience to fulfil her destiny. In *The Subtle Knife*, the second book of the *His Dark Materials* series, Lyra, a twelve-year-old girl, meets Will, a twelve-year-old boy, who comes from a different world that, from her perspective, is the unreal, the fictionalised one, although Pullman depicts it clearly as real. In Lyra's world, which is inhabited by witches and armoured bears, rules are all mixed up, and there, children have their place in the world with blurry borders between adults and children's worlds. Because of that, perhaps, when she finds through the alethiometer (a device that answers any question when is adequately manipulated, a sort of Siri or Alexa of its time) that Will has murdered someone, her response is not one of terror or discomfort. No. She is pleased. Will is, as she states, a worthy companion. She feels secure by his side. Literature tends to be the place for taking licence to explore the world, and to challenge the assigned order for people and places, to reimagine the seemingly fixed order of things. This chapter and the upcoming one are an invitation to question, based on former child soldiers' first-person accounts explored through literary and creative devices, diverse experiences of childhood, and how their own experiences have the potential to account for a different kind of childhood instead of merely a lost one. The accounts presented in this chapter are not those of killing machines or evil children, as Will's murderous past could mislead the reader to think. On the contrary, their accounts ask questions about people (how does it look to think of oneself as a warrior), places (how does life look fragmented by rural and urban contexts), and practices (how does it look to be a young person who, once, in the past, was a child soldier).

As was described in Chapter 3, five of the eight participants of the writing workshops were strictly former child soldiers, meaning: they joined illegal armed groups in their childhoods and left them before turning 18 years old. Of this group, one entered when she was only five years old (the guerrilla took her with them after her parents were killed by the army because they were accused of collaborating with the FARC), two (a woman and a man) said that they joined willingly (because of political reasons, because they believed in the guerrilla fight), and the other two (a woman and a man) stated they had been forcibly recruited. Those participants who referred to their recruitment as forced, shared accounts of soldiering in which they were either unaware or disconnected from what was happening (as in the case of the man who was part of the paramilitaries), or in which they were trying to escape (as in the case of the young woman who said that as a girl she could not resist being there anymore, and would rather die before being part of the guerrilla group any longer). Those who stated that they joined willingly, on the contrary, talked about their experiences in the guerrilla, claiming that it was work that they liked doing or where they acquired skills and tested themselves as human beings. Based on their accounts, this chapter explores the warrior-self in Colombian former child soldiers.

This chapter discusses how Colombian former child soldiers portray their childhoods, sharing stories of their time inside the illegal armed groups, and representing themselves as warriors, a selfhood that includes military and political features, which go beyond their combat expertise. Scholarship on soldiering experiences of former child soldiers tends to focus on how being forced to fight and to assume the role of combatant expedites children's transition into adulthood (Utas, 2003), and how their lived experiences are testimonies of a lost childhood (Pachón, 2009; Thomas, 2008; Prager, 2003; Bald, 2002). My research, however, builds from international work conducted by Denov and Maclure (2007) – who found a “militarised self” among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone –, and by Marshall (2014) and Wells (2014), – who identified a culture of youthful militarism prevalent in certain societies –, and local research conducted by the National Centre for Historical Memory – ran by Colombian renowned scholars – on the historical dynamics and tendencies in the recruitment and use of children by armed groups in

the Colombian conflict from 1958 to 2015. Their report, *Una guerra sin edad* (A war without age, 2017), identified the existence of a “warrior-self” (term that I adopt in my work) among Colombian former child soldiers throughout its protracted war. In this chapter I argue that first-person accounts of Colombian former child soldiers invite to refigure their role in armed groups, to be seen as more than just victims and traumatised survivors; their accounts are an invitation to challenge understandings of children out of place, where children are seen both as threatened and threatening (Stephens, n.d.; Douglas, 1966), and to try to challenge that order through former child soldiers’ reflections of their past and understandings of their place.

This chapter depicts in three critical aspects of former child soldiers’ warrior-self in as many sections:

1. Reasons for joining the guerrilla fight,
2. How to be a highly skilled soldier, and
3. Deciding to leave, to desert the armed group.

The final section discusses these findings, asking what form of political subjectivity is mobilised when children are framed through the discourse of trauma, and what other ways of being political are rendered invisible by this approach.

5.1. Why join an armed group?

- “Were you forced to join?” Defence Minister Gustavo Bell asked.
 - “What are you doing in this mess?” Army Chief Jorge Enrique Mora questioned.
 - “Can you even carry a rifle?” Bell wondered.
 - “I joined,” the 13-year-old girl guerrilla said, “because I felt like joining.”
- (Robles, 2002, p. 2)

In July 2002, a foreign correspondent published an article in The Miami Herald entitled *The new face of Colombian leftist guerrillas: children*. There, the journalist presented this account of a 13-year-old girl guerrilla member, and one of the few survivors of twelve hours’ heavy combat between the FARC and the National Army in southern Colombia’s Huila region. This brief exchange between two adults and a girl hints at adults’ perceptions and understandings of children’s roles as soldiers, while also giving clues of how diverse and nuanced children’s own perceptions of their involvement in war can be, even if mediated by media representations. Robles’

extract suggests that the questioned guerrilla member could only be there if she was forced, and probably deceived, even if she was one of the few survivors of that “mess”, quoting the Army Chief, in which 32 guerrilla members were killed and 16 detained. Although the focus of the news is on how children are being used, this extract allows me to introduce this upcoming section, which invites to unpack the figure of the child soldier by informing it through Colombian former child soldiers’ first-person accounts of why they joined the war.

CC, one of the participants in the writing workshops, shared with the group the story of Johanna, a young woman in her region. When CC was a child, she was walking to school and ran into Johanna, a guerrilla member who was severely injured. CC ran back home to tell her dad, who took Johanna into their house and helped her to treat her wounds, without asking any questions. When Johanna felt better, she left CC’s house. A few months later, Johanna was captured by the National Army, and before being taken to prison as was supposed to happen, she was forced by the National Army to take a sort of walk of shame through the streets of her village; people would swear and throw small rocks at her. CC remembers feeling upset because what the Army had done was wrong, and that was not the right way to treat a human being. Then, she said, she decided to fight that Army, and found a way to join the guerrilla group operating in her region, the same from which Johanna came. CC was convinced of the importance of the guerrilla’s work in her region, so she joined willingly at the age of eleven years old. She also recalls (good-humouredly) that her family was not upset with her decision of becoming a member of an armed group, but that they were upset because she was a member of the “wrong one”: instead of fighting with the guerrillas, she should have joined the paramilitaries to fight against the guerrillas. CC was a guerrilla soldier for four years, and she only left the fight because she was captured by the Army. She did not want to leave the guerrilla group; she had even sworn allegiance to one of her commanders a couple of weeks before her capture.

CC told this story in one of the writing workshops. She shared the reasons why she joined and why she then believed that it was worth fighting for fair treatment and

against an Army she deemed unfair. The fact that she included her oath of allegiance to the group in her account also shows her level of commitment to the cause, and expresses her beliefs at that point of her life. Her account depicts some features of the warrior-self, particularly her reasoning as she is telling the story years after her time as soldier, and also her justification of why she joined an armed group when she was a child. “People may say that children don’t think”, CC told me when we met to invite her to join the writing workshops, and emphasised: “but I decided to join. I did” (Personal interview, CC, Bogotá, Colombia, 12th April 2016). Furthermore, the fact that her family got upset with her, not because she joined a guerrilla group but because she joined the wrong one, also shows how normalised it was for children to leave their houses to join an armed group (just moving from one place to the other); in her region, based on her account, at least one guerrilla and one paramilitary group were active.

Colombian sociologist Alfredo Molano claims that in the country, “children do not become guerrillas’ members by force, their world becomes a guerrilla and they, in it, take their place” (2017, para. 3). In 2004, Brett and Specht interviewed 53 boys and girls from nine different countries (three in Asia, four in Africa, one in Europe, and Colombia in the Americas) and reached the same conclusion: “In most cases, young people do not go out to find a war to join. The war is all around them, or comes to them” (p. 11). The political context in which young people grow up is relevant and influences their perceptions, stressed the researchers, and explained that being part of a family and peer group that opposes the authorities creates a particular character that favours joining fighting forces (Brett & Specht, 2004, p. 27). In Colombia, the war has been so protracted that in rural areas children cannot be completely shielded from it. It is everywhere: in their way to school, even at their houses’ front doors (*see* Chapter 6). Sometimes parents or close relatives can try to keep their children unaware of what is happening around them, like not discussing politics at home or not talking about the diverse fighting fractions that operate locally, but they cannot hide the tangible impact that war has in their houses, their villages, and their schools. TP, another participant of the writing workshops, is also the author of a children’s pop-up book called “La Casa de Caracol” (The snail’s house). There, he tells the

story of two siblings who live in a house that has “captured” some stars inside, and their dad tries, playfully, to bring some of them down as a gift. The children have also learnt to play the game of the snail houses (to roll into their mattresses) every time God, in the skies, makes stovetop popcorn. With this sort of stories, TP shared one night with the group, their parents managed to keep him and his sister unaware of the heavy armed confrontation to which they were exposed because of their house being inconveniently placed next to their town’s Police station. The station was regularly attacked by the guerrilla group operating in their area, so their house’s ceiling had many bullet holes through which the moonlight entered in dark nights (hence, the stars inside the house). Because sometimes their parents were not always at home when combat started, they taught their children how as soon as they heard loud noises (stovetop popcorn), they should go to their mattresses, to shield themselves from stray bullets.

CC and TP’s stories are different: CC was not shielded from what was going on in her area, and she could see, at least in the story she shared, how her dad treated a guerrilla member, “as a human being”, regardless of her involvement in war, or if he shared the guerrilla’s cause or not. TP and his sister were as shielded as possible from what was going on around them, as their parents could have been trying to keep them calm and unafraid, while also guarantying their safety in the midst of war. TP’s family left their town displaced by the armed conflict when they were young children too. The CNMH (2015) identified several stories of parents trying to shield their children from events such as forced displacement (many families in Colombia, like TP’s, had been forced to move to protect their lives, and to prevent the recruitment of their children by illegal groups [COALICO & CCJ, 2009]), and the disappearance of one family member (the National Victims Registry [CNMH, 2018b] reports that more than 80 thousand people have been disappeared during Colombia’s protracted war), by sharing fabricated accounts of what happened. Researchers, nonetheless, have found that when children grow up, some feel resentful because they were lied to, and their relatives’ stories failed to fully reassure them while the violent and traumatic events were happening (CNMH, 2015; Salamanca, 2013b; Bello, 2003).

FR, another workshop participant, also shared his account on how he joined the armed group in one of the writing exercises. In his case, a paramilitary structure recruited him forcibly:

Short story 1. Serene and silent afternoons [Tardes serenas y silenciosas], by FR.

Serene and silent afternoons of 1999, in beautiful Santa Rosana. I heard a chorus of barks on my farm. Suddenly, a strange sound broke through into the house. Screams, blows, insults flooded the savannah. A strong breeze snatched me from my hammock and took me to an abyss where nothing could be seen. Soon after, thirteen years old, I was already chanting: “AUC,³² AUC, counter-guerrilla for my country,” without a conscience, without place; I did not even know what date it was. The rumours reached my mother’s ears: “He is already dead; he is already dead”. With mourning in her heart, she began to forget me

Tardes serenas y silenciosas del 99, en la hermosa tierra Santa Rosana. Un coro de ladridos en mi finca escuchaba. De repente irrumpió un extraño sonido en casa, gritos, golpes, insultos inundaban la sabana. Una brisa fuerte de mi hamaca me arrebatava hacia un abismo con poca visión me llevaba. Al poco tiempo, con trece años: “AUC, AUC, contraguerrillero por mi patria” ya coreaba, sin conciencia, sin lugar y sin fecha me encontraba... “Ya está muerto, ya está muerto”, los rumores a oídos de mi madre bajaban. Con luto en su corazón ella me olvidaba.³³

FR’s story talks about his unwillingness to join the paramilitaries, even adding how unaware he was, living a quiet life in his farm, when something unknown came to take him away from there. He then describes his time in the paramilitaries as a time without conscience, without knowing where he was, nor even the date, and includes how difficult it was for his mother to hear rumours about his death. Another of FR’s stories, entitled “Five years old in black and white” (see Chapter 6), narrates how his and his family’s lives were irremediably changed by the murder of one of his sisters during a combat between the army and a guerrilla group in his town. Although during the course of this research, FR did not connect that event and his time within

³² Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), translated as United Self-Defenders of Colombia, was a Colombian paramilitary and drug trafficking group that existed, with that name, during the period from 1997 to 2006. After their formal demobilisation in the Alvaro Uribe’s government (2002-2010), the group was supposed to cease its actions, still, NGOs and INGOs have reported that even if the name changed, those who did not demobilise or who did and then returned to the fight, keeping their practices and controlled areas.

³³ Because of the richness of language in which Colombian former child soldiers created their accounts, I have decided to keep the original version in Spanish close to my translations to English.

the paramilitaries, he stated that he joined the paramilitaries to get revenge for his sister's death (*see* Brett and Specht, 2004; HRW, 2003) in media interviews and in a personal profile he made for a scholarship he applied for to pursue a postgraduate diploma at a Colombian university. I include this information here because as part of the narrative exercises facilitated by this research, he did choose to share both the story of his sister's death and the one about the day he was recruited, but he did not make any relevant connections between those two. As this research did not inquire specifically about that fact, I will not speculate about the reasons why, but I would still like to note this dissonance as a noteworthy element of how FR narrates episodes of his life in three different settings where there are different expectations from his narratives. This situation invites us to reflect on how former child soldiers negotiate, tell, and retell their stories according to the setting in which they are in. "Few things in life are so clear-cut that there is one single explanation for them", said Brett and Specht (2004) while analysing former child soldiers' narratives collected as part of their research, and highlighted that an individual may give several explanations for a particular action or keep quiet for this very reason (p. 9).

Lastly, DP shared his reasons for joining, not as part of one of the writing exercises, but during one a conversation after reading one of his pieces aloud. DP was the only participant who was outspoken about his past as a warrior, bringing it up in several conversations, sometimes without anyone else prompting it (perhaps because male experiences of soldiering are more validated than those of female). DP seemed reflective about his own life story, and he seemed to have grown from his time as a soldier. He said, for example, that he chose to be a guerrilla member because he was young and rebellious, and that he faced that decision with "perseverance and arrogance" (First workshop, 16th April 2016). DP's spoken accounts complemented his writings, and while on paper he portrayed himself as a strong boy, eager to learn; when he talked, he was reflective and said that the experiences were actually "not as easy as they sound". From his statements, it is clear that although he did not necessarily join because of a political commitment, as it happened to CC, he was not forced either, as it happened to FR. DP joined because he was a young rebel and,

once inside, he learnt about guerrilla politics along the way, over eight months of training, as he recounted in his short story, *March from Araracuara to La Chorrera*.

Ethnographic studies in Sierra Leone suggest that young combatants have a remarkable understanding of the political causes of the war they fight (Peters & Richards, 1998). In Liberia, Podder (2011) has also explored young people's motivations to join, beyond the victim narrative, reporting that even if there was fear, "those who joined mostly did so willingly" (p. 63). Research conducted in Colombia has established that military and political trainings are meaningful for all combatants, including children, and that such instruction is critical for their sense of belonging to the group (CNMH, 2017; Lugo, 2017; HRW, 2003; Álvarez & Aguirre, 2002). In CC's case, justifying her reasons to join a guerrilla group with her attempt to correct something that was wrong gave her a narrative from which she could make sense of why she joined and remained there until her capture. In Colombia, while paramilitary groups had a strong military and physical component in their training, the guerrillas have a training and indoctrination that while fulfilling a military function, it has a greater ideological component associated with their political speech (CNMH, 2017). One problematic aspect of seeing child soldiers just as victims is that it depoliticises all of them: they supposedly did not know what they were doing when they joined (voluntary forced or forced), and while they were inside the armed group, they were held against their will by the armed structures, as the opening quote of this section highlights. A child is not a political actor with rage or a stance regarding his/her territory, but is simply the abstract child of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, who has to be protected above anything else. Collins (2004) asserts that the emergence of children and young people as political actors can generate a diverse field of discourses, opening up new possibilities for representing the relationship between the nation and its children:

At no time was this more evident in Palestine than at the beginning of the Intifada; while sophisticated analysis of the role of young people was lacking at that point, it seemed virtually everyone felt a need to comment on the activists who quickly became known as the 'children of the stones' (aftal al-hijara). For every Israeli government official who argued that Palestinian children were being sent out into the

streets as cannon fodder by cowardly parents, there was a young refugee camp resident who expressed a sense of empowerment and insisted on his or her own agency. And for every psychologist or educator cautioning about the long-term ramifications of children's loss of 'respect' for adult authority, there was a musician or poet lauding the heroic exploits of the young stone throwers. (Collins, 2004, p. 44)

Colombian scholars Aguirre and Álvarez (2002) have challenged former child soldiers' willingness to stay inside the armed group because to flee or not to comply brings penalties and potentially death, as happens with adults once they are members of an armed structure. They argue that children are not only accompanied by adults who control and direct their actions, but also that in military training, children have to follow orders and rules that limit their autonomous thinking and preclude the construction of alternatives to solve problems. Therefore, the authors urge caution when children share their reasons for joining and remaining inside a guerrilla or paramilitary group, as they say that at least the context where they were at the time of their recruitment must be considered. Still, former child soldiers have their own understandings of what happened to them, and over their years in *la civil*, they also make sense of their experiences through their readings of their past, in which they can either recognise themselves as victims or not. Such approaches should be taken into consideration: instead of disregarding them, there should be a dialogue that facilitates a more in-depth analysis of the decision-making context. The category of "voluntary forced" created by the UN system to describe cases in which children report to have joined armed groups voluntarily, tries to protect children from being liable for any crime; however, it also removes their awareness at that moment or, maybe, to be more precise, the way in which they, as former child soldiers, would like to remember that moment.

Researchers such as Malkki (2015), Marshall (2014) and Fassin and Rechtman (2009) argue that the depoliticisation of children and young people speaks more about adults' perceptions and understandings of how childhood should look and less about the nuanced understandings of childhood in the midst of war or political violence. Idealised visions of childhood have placed children on a pedestal and from there, "it is nearly impossible for actual children to act in the world as effective political, historical subjects" (Malkki, 2015, p. 100). In his work, Marshall claims

that ideologically and politically committed young people who participated in the first intifada were able to cope better psychologically than their less involved peers (2014). Fassin and Rechtman (2009), with their exploration of how trauma has guided the development of the humanitarian world and its discourses, claim that suffering, as a dominant narrative, obscures social relations, historical realities, and political situations. When children's and young people's reasons to join the fight are not accounted for in demobilisation processes, reintegration is unlikely to be successful and sustainable.

The first section of this chapter shared three different accounts of former child soldiers, one from a woman and two from men, in which they either justify or reflect about their reasoning for joining an armed group as children. The following section will explore another aspect of former child soldiers' warrior-self portrayals: their skills as soldiers.

5.2. A highly skilled child soldier

During the first stage of my research, while I was exploring how the global discourse on child soldiering was enacted in Colombia, I got two reactions from *niñólogos* when I asked about the possibility for children to be highly skilled soldiers. One group gave me a sceptical look before allowing themselves to process the idea and to elaborate on it – usually, denying it as a possibility. The other group, which I discovered secretly shared that perception, found a safe space in my research to share their thoughts and beliefs around the fact that children can be, and in some cases are, highly skilled soldiers. All former child soldiers, either in writing or orally, referred to their time inside the armed groups as a period in which they obtained skills and acquired generally useful aptitudes for life, like endurance, patience, and how to build camaraderie. However, not all of them necessarily assigned those features or traits to being a soldier, perhaps prevented by the stereotypical image of how a child soldier should look, or maybe because they were not fully aware of such skills before

the workshops.³⁴ A couple of them reflected about their specific soldiering skills during the workshops (such as being able to carry heavy weights, literally cooking for a battalion, being commanded to do difficult and challenging tasks, and trying to prevent being captured in the aftermath of combat with the army), and another one shared with this researcher a written personal account in which she narrated her reflections on the importance and the value of the experience she had as a child soldier, and her uneasiness and frustration about being unable to be outspoken about her past, and to have it accounted for as part of her reintegration to civilian life.

DP talked at length about how heavy the backpacks were (they weighed approximately 50 kg., plus the weight of the gun) and how exhausting it was to cook for so many people: “Every single day: *arepas*.³⁵ You had to make 150, 200 *arepas*, for everybody... to knead and roast them. The *rancha* [the kitchen] started at 3 o'clock in the morning, and if it was your turn, you had to prepare broth, coffee, chocolate, *arepas* ... for everyone” (First workshop, 16th April 2016). He also described how hard and tedious guard duties were, which CNMH (2017) states as one of the tasks that demands a significant level of attention and discipline from soldiers, since the armed group can be attacked at any moment:

I remember standing behind a tree, getting wet, killing mosquitoes ... and I could not even kill them by swatting them, no, it had to be done in silence. [When in guard duty], you cannot talk in a loud voice, let alone light the flashlight “at full blast”, but in a “cocuyo style” (low light) by putting a plastic with a tiny hole in the glass before turning it on. Also, you had to learn by heart the way to the latrine, to the “chontos”, which are holes about 50 cm deep. (First workshop, 16th April 2016)

The long walks were another particular feature of being part of an illegal armed group, as guerrillas and paramilitaries structures would move around the country's rainforest, always hiding from the armed forces. DP shared a story about a march from Araracuara, a small settlement on the banks of the Caquetá River, to La

³⁴ One of the research methodologies invited them to think about their skills. Then, all of them revisited their childhood memories and made connections between who they were as children, and who they were as young people in the workshops.

³⁵ A type of food made of ground maize dough or cooked flour.

Chorrera, a town in the southern Colombian department of Amazonas. DP travelled with three more soldiers:

Short story 2. March from Araracuara to La Chorrera [Crusada del Araracuara a la Chorrera], by DP.

It all started when three colleagues and I were selected [to carry out] an advanced recce in the region of Amazonas. We left Las Animas, Caquetá [a small town], towards the Araracuara in speedboats (*deslizadores*), with four arrobas of weight on our backs (about 50 kg), plus our war equipment in our backpacks. [We were] willing to face any kind of danger and to give our lives for a cause instilled in us during eight months of training. At six o'clock in the morning, on any given day, I went into the rainforest with my three companions on a narrow path, almost covered by undergrowth, with a compass. [It was] a road full of obstacles. As we went along, we found animals like *manaos*, skunks, *yulos*, tigers, panthers, deer, tapirs, monkeys ... aggressive monkeys that rocked in the trees when they saw us, breaking branches and throwing them at us... It was there when I understood that we were occupying their space. So we pressed on, towards a goal that lasted seven days, seven nights [in which we were] wet, scalded and bare-backed, eating plain rice and grains. When we arrived at La Chorrera, the indigenous people (inhabitants) were frightened when they saw us. At that moment, I was afraid of being attacked. It was a very beautiful journey. You realise that nature is to be taken care of and that indigenous people are there to be protected.

Todo comenzó cuando fui seleccionado con tres compañeros, una avanzada de exploración en el departamento del Amazonas. Salimos de Las Ánimas, Caquetá, hacia el Araracuara en deslizadores, con cuatro arrobas de peso en la espalda más la dotación de guerra. Dispuestos a afrontar cualquier clase de peligro y dar la vida por una causa inculcada durante ocho meses de entrenamiento. Siendo las seis de la mañana, un día cualquiera, partí con mis tres compañeros por un camino estrecho ya casi cubierto por la maleza, con una brújula, selva adentro. Un camino lleno de obstáculos. A medida que avanzábamos nos encontrábamos animales como manaos, zorrillos, yulos, tigres, panteras, venados, dantas, micos... micos agresivos que al vernos se mecían en los árboles, rompían ramas y nos lanzaban... fue ahí cuando entendí que les estábamos ocupando su espacio, y así continuamos a llegar a la meta, meta que duró siete días, siete noches. Mojados, escaldados y pelada la espalda, comiendo arroz y granos sin aliños. Cuando llegamos a La Chorrera, los indios se asustaron al vernos, en ese momento sentí temor que nos atacaran. Fue una travesía muy bonita, ya que se da uno de cuenta de que la naturaleza es para cuidarla y los nativos para protegerlos.

Picture 6. March from Araracuara to La Chorrera.

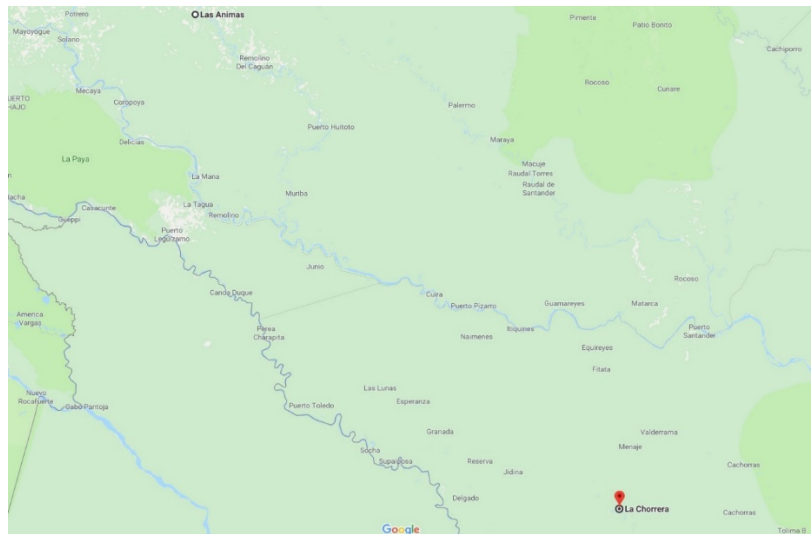


Image included for reference. DP's and colleagues' point of departure (Las Animas) and of arrival (La Chorrera), 150 km approximately.

DP's story revolves around how, as a soldier, he was selected to undertake a challenging task that took him to a long week exploration of the Colombian Amazon (the region covers an area of 403,000 km², 35 per cent of Colombia's territory, and it is mostly covered by tropical rainforest). He knew how to survive in the rainforest, how not to get lost in a wild terrain, how to survive with little food and under hard conditions, not only because of his military training but also because of his *campesino* background (see Chapter 6). In his story *March from Araracuara to La Chorrera*, while he highlighted the wonders of the route (i.e. the animals he encountered), he did not write extensively about the hurdles or challenges that he and his comrades faced over a week period travelling deep in the Colombian Amazon, away from their platoon. He mentioned the weight they were carrying on their backs, but did not focus on how difficult it is for a human to be cautious and almost invisible not only from his enemies (the army) but also from the wild animals that inhabit the rainforest, while carrying that sort of weight in extremely humid conditions. He just stressed how honoured he was to be selected to fulfil a job, and he added that the training was determinant to teach him the importance of accomplishing a task. He was then thirteen years old, and he had just eight months of training. DP might have not shared those reflections in writing, maybe because he

found them too distracting for the main emotion he wanted to share: joy, excitement, a sense of accomplishment. However, orally, on a different occasion, he was more insightful about that journey and, in general, about how hard it was to become a skilled soldier. One evening of the first workshop (all upcoming quotes are from First workshop, 16th April 2016), DP spoke openly of his time as a soldier. He shared information about a time of his life that existed but that he neither missed nor wanted to neglect, “it sounds easy now that I remember it”, he said, “but back then was quite hard, difficult”. When DP joined the guerrilla, he was trained to be a *pisa suave* (soft stepper), considered a highly skilled unit of the FARC that was particularly feared by army members (Bunker & Sullivan, 2014). *Pisa suaves* were guerrilla members who, for example, threw themselves to the ground, advancing only a few centimetres per hour, to analyse if there were any landmines before their battalion passed; their goal was also to move without leaving traces, and without being noticed. He said, for example, that to be able to advance in the group, a person needed a “good intellectual level”, which he described as being intelligent in every situation, to be eager to be good at your job: “in combat, you have to be a leader, even if you are not”, he explained. That is how he became a commander and was in charge of 25 children younger and older than him, he was then fifteen years old. “I was very brave, very *echado pa'lante*.³⁶ I was focused on myself, on what I was doing”, he said. He stated that the Amazon march was physically exhausting and mentally challenging. Still, he learned from it. For instance, engaging with the rainforest (such as, trying to find plants to heal his back wounds because of the weight of the backpack). In none of his accounts, neither his written one (the short story about his march) nor our night time conversation during the first workshop, did he refer to himself as a helpless child or as a victim, although, he was still able to be critical and reflective about the hurdles he had to experience.

Another story collected as part of this research was the one that CC wrote in her short story entitled *Páramo de Bagueche* (a *páramo* is the ecosystem of the regions above the continuous forest line, yet below the permanent snowline). In the previous

³⁶ Colombian expression that means a hardworking person, who is not afraid of problems, of good character, intelligent, determined.

section of this chapter, I presented CC's story and the reasons why she joined a guerrilla group. She stayed in the guerrilla for four years and only left because she was captured, after surviving for eight days in a *páramo*, with an injured foot, while “more than a hundred army and police members were chasing her”, she said. Other members of her platoon were not as lucky; among the dead was the guerrilla member who only a week earlier had taken her oath to remain loyal to the group. As part of her creative writing exercise, CC recounted this story, placing special emphasis on how hard she tried not to be apprehended. I have included several notes in square brackets with clarifications that she made while she was sharing her story aloud with the group:

Short story 3. Páramo de Bagueche, by CC.

The vultures and the hyenas [the army and the police] arrived, they wanted to eat us alive [to kill them]. It was very cold, my foot hurt.

I ran and ran to save my life. They were coming at me. Then they were on top of me [very close to me]. I threw myself to the ground and I kept running. I got lost. They kept attacking. They ate them alive. They ate my companions [killed them].

I left. I left everything, except my trusty partner [the gun], who was there for me at the most difficult moments.

I kept on running without stopping. I sat down. I was breathless. I stopped. The hyenas came back. They were close. I hid in an anthill (cave). Silence. I did not breathe. I heard the animals, the noises, the vipers. I listened to their steps, they opened their way through the grass as they walked, they were after me.

Two days there. I heard birds and magpies [the helicopter]. I decided to leave. I walked on. My foot got cold. It hurt me. The pain returned. I kept walking. I was looking for a way out. I kept returning to the same point [going round in circles]. It carried on two more days, approximately. I decided to ‘go back’. I could not. I could not let them eat me alive.

I looked for a way out, one more day. I saw a school on the other side of the mountain. I went there, but as I was arriving, I saw a signal that said ‘territory of hyenas and vultures.’ I ran, I ran, again anguished and desperate to seek and locate the right way out – I could not find it. I found a paddock. I decided to be eaten by the hyenas, I went there. Far away, I could see a house. I arrived at night. As I was spying on the house, a girl saw me. She was six years old. She told me: ‘Miss, you are dying. “You're bleeding a lot”. I was scared to see the girl (not her of seeing me, imagine that!), I called her in a low voice, and said: ‘Who are you with?’. She replied: ‘With my dad and my little brother’. I arrived (at the house). The man was scared. He took me into a room and told me: ‘I'll help you but only if you burn that camouflage and bury your best friend [the gun]. Vultures and hyenas are nearby [everywhere]. Ten minutes from here, they will see you’.

Llegaron los buitres y las hienas, nos querían comer vivos. Hacía mucho frío, me dolía el pie.

Corrí y corrí por salvar mi vida. Se me venían. Ya estaban encima. Me tiré. Y seguía corriendo. Me perdí. Seguían atacando. Se los comieron vivos [comían vivos, comiendo a mis compañeros].

Me fui. Dejé todo, menos mi buena compañera, quien en los momentos más difíciles estaba ahí para mí.

Seguía corriendo sin parar. Me sentaba. Me ahogué. Paré. Las hienas volvían. Estaban cerca. Me escondí en una hormiguera (cueva). En silencio. Ni respiraba. Se escuchaban los animales, los ruidos, las víboras. Escuchaba sus pasos, abrían el pasto, venían por mí.

Dos días allí. Escuchaba pájaros y las urracas (el helicóptero). Decidí salir. Caminaba. Me enfrié el pie. Me dolió. Volvió el dolor. Seguí caminando. Buscaba salida. Llegaba a un mismo punto. Continuaba dos días más, aproximados. Decidí “volver”. No podía. No podía dejar que me comieran viva.

Busqué salida, un día más. Vi una escuela al otro lado de la montaña. Fui, pero llegando decía “territorio de las hienas y de los buitres”. Corrí, corrí, nuevamente angustiada y desesperada por buscar y encontrar la salida correcta –no la encontraba–. Encontré un potrero. Decidí ser comida por las hienas, me fui por allí. Lejos pude ver una casa. Llegué noche. Espiando la casa, me vio una niña. Tenía seis años. Me dijo: “Señorita, se está muriendo. Tiene mucha sangre”. Yo, asustada al ver la niña (no ella a mí, imagínese), la llamé en voz baja, le dije: “Con quién está”, ella me responde: “Con mi papá y mi hermanito”. Llegué. El señor se asustó. Me entró a una habitación y me dijo: “Le ayudo pero si quema ese camuflado y entierra a su mejor amiga. Los buitres y las hienas están cerca. A diez minutos de aquí, se ven.

This story was read by CC, almost dramatized, and it was welcomed with excitement by the group who said they felt transported to that *páramo* with her; some of the most experienced readers in the group even compared her narrative to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. Every workshop participant, not just former child soldiers but also former members of the National Army, understood her fear and her rush while trying not to be captured, as they claimed to have been in similar situations when they were soldiers. When CC described the enemy as vultures and hyenas, all participants related to that reference and found it amusing; it was interesting to learn how guerrilla members referred to the army soldiers as scavengers, who may come by air or land, while also *dehumanising* them (one remarkably consistent feature of military training). CC included in her story how she was always with her good

companion, the gun,³⁷ and how important it was for the people who tried to help her that she bury it, to hide it and prevent any retaliation from the Army if they found her in their house. CC also added a specific encounter she had with a six-year-old girl, and how CC was the frightened one, not the little girl, which stresses how normal it is for children in rural areas to be surrounded by war, soldiers, and guns – as was actually CC’s case before becoming a guerrilla soldier. In her narrative, even if CC had an injured foot, she does not make any statement related to her being a victim of the circumstances, but in her story, she exercises all her available survival skills at the time, which also included making sense of her circumstances after exhausting all of her possibilities, and giving up.

In most cases children, both male and female, feel empowered by their participation in armed conflict (*see* Rosen, 2005) and rarely consider themselves to be powerless or victims. DP’s story, on the one hand, shows how he was a young person who not only carried a weapon or wore a uniform, but also had survival skills, interests and eagerness to progress in the group, and an awareness of a cause, of a reason why they were fighting. CC’s story, on the other hand, portrays how she was able to survive several days with no food while escaping and trying to hide, how she saw her gun as a partner on which she could rely, and what war dynamics humanise (their tools) and dehumanise (their enemies). Both stories are accounts of not only how their experiences were meaningful for them, but also how they developed skills to be good at their jobs, to be good soldiers, and how they also managed to survive war.

Turning a *campesino* child into a child soldier involves short, hard and demanding training, explains Pachón (2009), a Colombian anthropologist specialising in the historical involvement of children in war. She asserts that children receive training as soon as they enter the armed groups: in some guerrillas, it begins a few days after joining the ranks and can last between four and six months, although really

³⁷ In Colombia, as in other places as well, former combatants refer in multiple ways to their gun, *humanising* it: the most frequent name assigned to their endowment weapon is “mother” (*see* CNMH, 2017; Pachón, 2015), as it is the most effective strategy that commanders have found to signal how important it is to take care of it and not to lose it. Illegal armed forces devote a lot of their budget to armaments, and to lose it or to escape with it was severely penalised.

throughout their entire life a guerrilla never stops training and learning. Their activities involve harsh physical exercises and gymnastics, and specific military training (such as marching, jogging day and night with equipment on their backs, guard duty and surveillance, and learning how to handle arms). Losing the fear of weapons and using them is fundamental and is one of the achievements that children remember with satisfaction, reports Pachón. Children prepare for combat, learn survival techniques, and ambush tactics; those children who by their previous experience or innate abilities, demonstrate special skills are usually selected and receive special training from their superiors. While involved with armed groups, children would have tasks as digging trenches, making trips to get wood, ferrying supplies and information, acting as advance early warning guards, or even carrying explosives (HRW, 2003). Some children have reported enjoyment of the tough physical demands placed on them. The 2017 CNMH's report states that the training is the moment par excellence of the warrior's career in the ranks or at the service of the armed group, as it seeks to break the child past life, and place him/her in the new and unique way of understanding the world: as a loyal member of an armed group.

In 2003, Human Rights Watch published the report "You will learn not to cry" after gathering different accounts of Colombian former child soldiers to document the impact that war has had on them. In its section *Joining Up*, the IONG documented the case of Joseph, who at seventeen was already "a veteran of the FARC": "He joined when he was nine, quickly rose to be a militia chief, and later spent six years as a guerrilla. At age thirteen, he had a hundred fighters under his command" (HRW, 2009, p. 39). HRW's focus on soldiering was, nonetheless, not as a skill to be recognised, but as violations of children's rights that should be punished. In the course of this research – besides the work I found from scholars such as Ben-Ari (2009) in Israel and Singer (2005) in the United States, which had a partisan agenda arguing that children should be seen as skilled soldiers because they should be punished as grown-ups for the damage they cause regular armies' adult combatants – , I was only able to find one academic paper that presented, briefly, a child as a skilled soldier. Schultz and Weisæth (2015) shared the case of Patrick, a talented soldier in Northern Uganda who "became a skilled soldier" (p. 825), who gained

trust and served more than two years in the armed group, until becoming part of the special unit guarding the rebel leaders. The authors do not expand on that statement, but they just mention it to highlight how deeply embedded he was into the training, so during his reintegration he needed different strategies for his recovery, amongst them traditional healing. This emphasis goes back to the unidirectional focus on the child as a victim and the former child soldier in need of help to overcome trauma. These examples show how most of the attention lies on child soldiers training related to their combat skills, without assigning equal or meaningful value to other skills that they also acquire during their time as soldiers

Another such example was shared with me by María, one of the two seasoned former child soldiers who informed Chapter 4, and who also participated in the writing workshops. María published her short story “María on the job to get a job” [“María en el trabajo de conseguir trabajo”] when she was 20 years old. She shared this text with me when we met to talk about the research, and she told me that she felt that this was her most honest piece because of lack of external intervention (more about the process of production of the story in Chapter 4). Because of its length, I share only extracts here:

Short story 4. María on the job to get a job [María en el trabajo de conseguir trabajo], by MM.

(..) She knows about protection rituals and everything one needs to know to survive in the rainforest. She knows fishing, hunting, planting, harvesting, weaving, kneading, and how to do all the military training exercises. She is good at obeying, and she knows how to load heavy bundles, like her tactical bag, the one that for years she carried on her back. That bag of life and death.

María is full of construction experience; she knows trenching, how to make highways, mobile homes that are packed in seconds (...). María knows how to run, to hide, and to sing. She also knows about nursing, economics, politics, and revolution. Not to mention she has a good aim and a good eye for shooting, skills she so often had to use to survive.

Sabe de rituales de protección y todo lo que tiene que saber de la supervivencia en la selva, sabe pescar, cazar, sembrar cosechar, tejer, amasar, hacer los ejercicios de todos los entrenamientos militar, ella es buena en obedecer y cargar bultos tan pesados, como lo fue el equipo de dotación, que por años cargo en su espalda. Ese morral de vida y de muerte.

María está repleta de experiencia en la construcción, sabe hacer trincheras, chontos y carreteras, casas portátiles que se guardan en segundos ,(...) María sabe correr, esconderse y cantar. También tiene idea de las labores de la enfermería, economía, política y revolución. Sin mencionar la puntería y el buen ojo para los tiros, esos que tantas veces disparó para poder sobrevivir (AECID, 2015, p. 100).

María's account adds some nuance to the understanding of what it means to be a skilled soldier, while including defining factors of her childhood within the FARC, who took her with them after the murder of her parents when she was five years old. For her, her soldiering experience also refers to the regular practices that allowed her to survive the war and to live in the Colombian rainforest, for example, learning how to fish and hunt, and about "nursing, economics, politics, and revolution". In her text, she goes further to reflect how knowing that long list of skills did not amount to anything in her civilian life, as she was forced to hide her skills because they were considered illegal just because she learnt them as a child soldier:

María's experience is vast, but she cannot show it, because it can be considered illegal and criminal. Although she knows how to work from a very young age, it does not matter for this city, where only what can be certified with diplomas counts, and she does not have any.

La experiencia de María es grande, pero esta no la puede sustentar ya que le puede considerar ilícita y criminal. Aunque sabe trabajar desde muy niña, para esta ciudad esto no vale, solo sirve lo que se puede certificar con diplomas que María no posee. (AECID, 2015, p. 100)

María does not write her story in the first person, although it is an autobiographical account. This might relate to her attempt to look "professional", as in the short profile that accompanies the story in the book, she introduces herself saying: "I am not a writer, and I have never written a story, much less a short story" (AECID, 2015, p. 154). She begins her tale, for example, saying, "Once upon a time a young 20-year-old woman named María lived in a city, in a half-built building"; replicating common short story formats. Furthermore, in that short profile she also adds a key element that might account for why her story is particularly original (a dissonance in the global figure of the child soldier, following the argument of Chapter 4), and it is that she introduces herself as "a regular woman, who is a mother, and a young person disengaged from the conflict, another citizen of this country" (ibid). In her text, she writes placing herself in the present, as a high school student who arrived to that city

“barely a couple of years ago”, a single mother of a two-year-old child, and although she includes the fact that she was recruited as a soldier when she was a girl, she mentions it as one fact among many, from which she later builds up her struggles to be someone in the city, where all her skills and knowledge are unaccountable.

The second section of this chapter presented three accounts of Colombian former child soldiers (a man’s and two women’s) that show another aspect of their warrior-self: their reasons to remain inside the armed group; the skills and abilities acquired in their time inside the guerrillas, related to combat but not restricted to it; and how to use their skills to progress within the armed structure and to survive. The following section will address another crucial feature of the warrior-self among former child soldiers: the decision to stop being a soldier and to try a different life in *la civil*.

5.3. To escape, to decide to change their fate

One last feature of the warrior-self that this chapter considers is when a child decides to escape the armed group. Regardless of their reasons for joining, three of the former child soldiers who participated in the writing workshops discussed how they left the guerrillas. In the previous section, CC depicted in detail how she tried to hide from the Army for several days, and to prevent her capture in the story *Páramo de Bagueche*. DP also discussed the topic one evening, saying how proud he was of being able to escape the guerrilla during a change of guard. Although his written narrative about that day appears in the following chapter, here I include his reflections about the reasons why he decided to escape. He said that one time, when he was sixteen years old, his unit attacked a police station close to his family home, so he asked permission to go and say hi to his mother:

When my mom saw me, she did not recognise me. I was physically transformed and I was dressed in uniform and I carried my weapons. She started to cry because of the joy of seeing me and at the same time because of seeing me like that [so changed]. I said, “Do not worry, I’m fine.” But, it is hard to meet your mom in those circumstances and that she cries. I was very tough, I had no feelings, but that day my mom made me cry, it made me cry inside because I did not show her that I was weak. But, my weakness was inside, my soul cried in silence. (First workshop, 16th April 2016)

After that encounter, DP who had been in the guerrilla group since he was thirteen years old, started to ask himself if being in that war was worth it. He said that he had seen many of his comrades die in combat, and after seeing her mother that time, he started to think a lot about it: “If this is the price of war, that my mother suffers, and that all those who know me suffer, and I am suffering too ... why do I keep fighting? I reflected in silence. While on guard duty, I had a lot of time to think.” He also had a lot of time to plan, because two months before turning eighteen years old, he managed to successfully escape his unit, only to be captured a day later by the Army. He was in jail for a month, until it was clear that he was underage (barely), and then he entered the ICBF reintegration program. DP’s stories of his recruitment, his life inside the guerrilla, and his eventual escape portray how, as an adult, he reflects on his life as a soldier: he took the decision to be a guerrilla member, did his best to excel at it, and once that life did not make sense for him anymore, he did what he could to escape. Some aspects of the warrior-self include their entrance to the armed group, a logic of life in the ranks or at the service of the armed group, the possibility of occupying a place (finding meaning) through fulfilling certain functions, and acquiring survival skills (*see* CNMH, 2017; Lugo, 2017). These features speak of a person who not only carries a weapon but who also can survive, who grows and progresses in the armed structure, who believes in a cause or who is inserted in a collective as a combatant, but also as a valuable member of the group to help it to operate and make it sustainable. Some of the milestones in the construction of this self are wearing military-style uniforms or similar clothing, as it gives children and young people a sense of being part of something; receiving and learning how to handle and to take care of a weapon, taking an alias, and living under controlled structures that regulate their affective relationships and how they exercise of their sexuality (CNMH, 2017; Lugo, 2017).

MS wrote about her escape experience, which was not as planned as DP’s, in her short story *Esperanza*, thusly:

Short story 5. Esperanza,³⁸ by MS.

On October 17, 1999, there was a little girl named Esperanza. Esperanza only had herself, because her name was everything she represented. That same afternoon, that little girl who was in the camp made the decision to escape and told her partner, with whom she was going to change places for guard duty, about it. The change of guard that same night (of that unexpected and dark night) [a night without full moon or with cloudy skies]. At 12:30 am, that little girl gave her guard post to her companion, who waited anxiously and desperately. That morning they ran and ran without caring about anything. Suddenly they heard voices very close and dogs that barked. When they were close to reach the river that divided the Caquetá and the Meta (Colombian departments), they caught them and killed [she wrote “ended her life”] her companion and sister. At that moment, Esperanza thought, “They are going to kill me here! Will I die in the attempt (to escape) or will I live to tell the tale?”

El 17 de octubre del año 1999, se encontraba una pequeña niña llamada Esperanza. Esperanza solo se tenía a ella, porque era su nombre todo lo que ella representaba. Esa misma tarde, aquella pequeña en el campamento donde se encontraba, tomó la decisión de escapar y se lo comentó a su compañera de cambio de guardia. Cambio de guardia de esa misma noche (inesperada y tenebrosa noche). Siendo las 12:30 am, aquella pequeña entregaba su puesto de guardia a su compañera, la cual esperaba ansiosa y desesperada. Aquella madrugada corrieron y corrieron sin importarles nada. De repente escucharon voces muy cerca y perros que ladraban. Llegando al río que dividía al Caquetá y el Meta las alcanzaron y acabaron con la vida de su compañera y hermana. En ese momento pasó por la cabeza de Esperanza: ¡Aquí me dejan asesinada! ¿Moriré en el intento o viviré para contarla?

Before discussing MS’s story related to her escape, I would like to highlight two peculiarities of her narrative. First, MS tells the story of Esperanza, which was her *nom de guerre* (a key aspect of her warrior-self) when she was a child soldier. Although she does not specify that fact in her story, the group learnt it during the discussion after she read her tale aloud. Initially, the writer leading the exercise congratulated MS for giving her character a name, as a creative device, and although MS did not say anything about that comment, other participants asked her straightforwardly if that was her war name and she then confirmed that piece of information (see Chapter 3). Second, her story has another thought-provoking fact, and it is her use of the expression “living to tell the tale”, which is the title of the first volume of the autobiography of Gabriel García Márquez (*Vivir para contarla*, 2002), famous Colombian writer, called the father of the Magical Realism genre of narrative fiction and recognised for giving a boost to Latin American writing. This word

³⁸ Esperanza means “hope” or “expectation”.

selection seems to reference both her knowledge of some literary works and her attempts of finding an autobiographical voice.

In her story, MM shares the moment when she decides to escape: when it is her turn to change her guard duty with another soldier. She also remembers the courage she needed to make that decision, how she entrusted her plan to a companion, who also joined her, and the exact date of her escape. She had joined the armed group when she was twelve years old and escaped four years later, when she was sixteen. In her story, she portrays Esperanza as “a little girl”. Over the course of this research, MM shared some stories of physical violence in her house, which could be associated with the path that led her to join the guerrilla, but she was never specific about it. Both DP’s and MM’s stories of escape shared an inception point: the guard duty. CNMH (2017) states that people in charge of guard duty are described as “the eyes and ears of the other fighters” (p. 354). Guard duty is considered the perfect time to try to escape, as most members of the group would be sound asleep, and as DP added, it seems to also be the perfect time to think about escaping. According to accounts gathered by the CNMH, former guerrilla members would admire those who attempt to escape, as it is considered so risky because very few of them actually succeed. To be a deserter is a high-risk endeavour, and those who fail pay their mistake with their lives (Springer, 2015; HRW, 2003; Álvarez & Aguirre, 2000). Deserting armed groups, both legal and illegal, causes the greatest penalties and it has been assessed as particularly dangerous by former soldiers, both children and adults. Precisely because of that, whoever manages to do it is admired for his/her skills. A young ex-combatant from the ELN guerrilla said, “The one who left or the one who flew from there [the armed group] was because he had *pantalones* [guts]” (CNMH, 2017, p. 363).

The warrior-self, as discussed in the opening section of this chapter, also relates to children and young people’s decisions to escape armed groups, to change their fate, and DP’s and MM’s stories portray precisely that. Critically, and as also occurs with the reasons why a child joins an armed group, the reasons why a child escapes or not are not being considered by reintegration programs. When a child decides to escape,

practitioners working on their reintegration encounter a person interested in being where he/she is and who want to try his/her best to keep himself/herself out of the war. However, when in Colombia a child is captured by the Army, “he/she is labelled under the euphemism of ‘recovered’”, criticises RR, one of the *niñólogos* consulted by this research; a term that ignores the fact that, in many cases, “there was no willingness to leave the group because they were comfortable or convinced of what they were doing” (Personal interview, RR, Bogotá, Colombia, 30th March 2016). That eagerness to protect obscures the reasons why children and young people in the country can choose not only to join the war, but also to try to escape or to remain inside armed groups.

The third section of this chapter revolves around DP’s and MM’s accounts of their escape. As occurs with the decisions to join an armed group, children’s reasons, or representation of their reasons, to escape are also vital elements of their warrior-self, which, in turn, informs their transition to *la civil*. After depicting three critical factors of the construction of the warrior-self among a group of Colombian former child soldiers, I will now reflect how even if in Colombia child soldiers have historically fed the war, all parties in conflict still fail to openly recognise them. Ignoring children’s role in the Colombian war displays an active interest of hiding government failures to protect children’s rights, and illegal armed groups’ disrespect of the signed international treaties in which they have promised not to recruit any children under 15 years old, while simultaneously making a statement on where the right place for children is.

5.4. Invisible children or the story of “*los ninguneados*”³⁹

On 16th February 2015, on a national radio show, journalists and opinion leaders were claiming that child recruitment was so vast in the country that FARC guerrilla members were mostly underage. Two of the guerrilla spokespersons also present in the radio studio replied, in a mocking tone, that if what they were saying were to be true, how come so many years had gone by and the Colombian army had not been

³⁹ *Ningunear: menospreciar*. Look down on, treat like dirt.

able to defeat them. Why did that happen, they asked, if they were a guerrilla army composed mostly of *children*?

Luciano Marín Arango (aka Iván Márquez): I wanted to ask first where would the Minister of Defence gets that information, that 50 per cent of FARC members are children.

Jorge Torres Victoria (aka Pablo Catatumbo): Not only is it irresponsible [to say it], but the Minister is falling into a great contradiction: how is it possible that a guerrilla composed of fifty per cent *minors*, that it has not been possible to defeat it with a military force as numerous as he has? And, with that disproportion of force! To say that goes against him. (Author's transcription and translation)

This conversation portrays how neither side of the Colombian armed conflict wants to recognise any value in the children recruited, although all have used children without admitting the significance of their roles within each group; both the army and the guerrilla groups would deny their importance, portraying children as 'wild cards' in the war when they were not. There appears to be a power interest in this active exercise of denial of children's roles as soldiers. On one side, it is not *impressive* to show an army that was unable to defeat a guerrilla group comprised mainly of children, some of them as young as twelve years old. On the other side, for the guerrilla group, it would not be wise to acknowledge the number of children that were part of their ranks, because of international pressure and violation of many international agreements to which they are adherents. One prominent example of the scope of child recruitment in Colombia was Operation Berlin, which involved a FARC column named Arturo Ruiz where almost 40 per cent of its members were children (approximately 150 children in a force of 380 combatants) (HRW, 2003, p. 81). On November 2000, while Andres Pastrana's government was trying to negotiate a peace deal with the FARC, the guerrilla sent the Ruiz Column on a 1,100-kilometre expedition across the country to win back territory from paramilitaries in the northeast of Colombia. However, the Colombian army ambushed and defeated the unit (*ibid*), leaving an unknown number of casualties. Sixteen-year-old Ramón, whose father and eight brothers were in the FARC with him (*see* Molano, 2017), was a member of this expedition, and told HRW the following:

Machine gun fire attacked us from helicopters. Everyone is afraid when death is close, and I was feeling a tremendous fear. Then our commander called together the children he trusted the most and who were the toughest in combat. His name was Demetrio, but they called him the 'Bull' because he was heavy built. There must have been twenty-five of us children, sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen-year-olds. We left and stopped up ahead on a hill. At that moment, a really huge guy came at us from the army battalion. The 'Bull' stood his ground. The man had a machine gun, but the 'Bull' shot him and took it. The 'Bull' stopped them coming up the hill with the machine gun as they kept climbing up and I too stopped them with my rifle. At that moment, the Bull's woman [girlfriend] was hit. (...) The 'Bull' charged at them with the machine gun, but his ammunition ran out. They captured him and beat him. They caught the rest of us who were with the 'Bull' very quickly after that, and beat us with their rifle butts and kicked us, hit us in the stomach. They captured a hundred of us; about a half were children. [original in English] (HRW, 2003, p. 82)

Ramón's account shows not only how vital children were, in numbers, for the guerrillas, but also that some of them were considered skilled warriors and were chosen for risky operations. During our interview, LA, a social worker who was with the Colombian Family Welfare Institute program to reintegrate former child soldiers from the beginning, remembered a particular story she heard from a National Army soldier in 2000, who was complaining about having been bitten by ants, all "because of a child":

He said that it had been a confrontation between a column of the FARC and the army and that they killed everyone [guerrilla soldiers] but one child. The boy had the army waiting all night [they were unable to defeat him], until dawn, threatening them with some grenades [it was then, while waiting, when he was bitten by ants]. He [the boy] shouted: 'Come for me!' The soldier spoke of the integrity and courage of that child, and said, "I am afraid of child soldiers because they are *arrojadísimos* (intrepid), they do not measure danger, and they do not feel fear". He (the boy) had them all night shouting: "Come for me, *patihinchados*⁴⁰ (this is what guerrillas members called soldiers in that region), come for me here and we will all fly [blow up]". This soldier told the story of what happened with that child as telling the story of a warrior. Only until the end, when they killed the child, only until then, they realised that he was quite young because before all that, all that they could hear was his voice, but they could not see him. (Personal interview, LA, Bogotá, Colombia, 1st April 2016)

"Colombia's war has been a children's war" (ibid) and no one wants to recognise it because it would be a shame for all parties involved. "It is not in the interest of the National Army to say: 'We killed 14 children and three adults'. So, they just say: '17 people died'" (Personal interview, LA, Bogotá, Colombia, 1st April 2016). She

⁴⁰ Colombian expression that means insignificant person, of limited power and relevance.

adds that in Colombia people seem to think that as the guerrillas are old, they are mainly composed by groups of “bearded men, grownups, with big-bellies” (ibid), when in fact what she saw when visiting numerous Colombian regions were simply “a lot of children” (Personal interview, LA, Bogotá, Colombia, 1st April 2016), even though a lot of them grow older inside the armed groups, and became some of the main commanders who actually negotiated the 2012-2016 peace deal that finalised demobilised the FARC.

Although until the nineteenth century, children were valued as skilled combatants, and armed groups “look for them with insistence” (Jaramillo, 2007, p. 223), the humanitarian discourse, while trying to protect them and to prevent their recruitment, has also obscured their roles in war, and nowadays very little research has attempted to explore directly former child soldiers’ self-representations as skilled warriors. Similar cases to how child soldiers are neglected by their own armies have been reported in other contexts, such as Mozambique. Brocklehurst (2006) asserts in her book “Who is afraid of children?” that even if children are perhaps as effective as soldiers as adults, the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) avoids describing them as children and just hides them behind the label “soldiers”. Recognising them as children would be evidence that the group valued them for their capabilities and not because they were useful only as cheap labour (pp. 117-118). By neglecting the role played by children in war, the moral order rests in place: children remain “out of place”, and war continues to be, in appearance, an adult’s business that profits from children but that does not alter the order by recognising their importance. In Colombia, hundreds of thousands of children have been guerrilla or paramilitary soldiers, to only mention the modern war (*see* Introduction, Colombian context), and the state had failed at making those figures public, precisely because war dynamics have prevented it from being fully accountable as this kind of information gives advantage to one armed group over the other. “We cannot even imagine the number of fallen children and adolescents, but it would surpass that of the record we have of survivors”, said Gonzalo Sánchez, director of the CNMH at the presentation of their 2017 report *Una guerra sin edad*. For him, the possibility of a post-conflict scenario is also an opportunity to clarify the hidden dimensions of war

(Sánchez, 2018), and the report is the first time that a state entity recognises child soldiers' role as warriors.

This chapter has discussed how Colombian former child soldiers portray their childhoods, sharing stories of their time inside the illegal armed groups and representing themselves as warriors, a selfhood that includes military and political features, which go beyond their combat expertise. The following section will highlight specifically how ignoring such features in former child soldiers is only contributing to depoliticise them, and prioritising their portrayal as victims.

5.5. Discussion

The accounts of my participants represent how diverse the experience of joining, remaining in, and leaving an armed group can be for a group of children. The homogenised version of former child soldiers, once again, does not do justice to their experiences, and how they reflect about that past once they get older. The humanitarian world's unifying victimhood approach not only obscures the nuances of their stories, but also appears to shy away recognising any feature in children that would suggest that they were not innocent and naïve, because in doing so, they say, would open a worrying door, one that leads towards recognising subjectivities in children and politicising childhood (Malkki, 2015; Marshall, 2014, McMullin, 2011; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). The literature, both academic and humanitarian, not only points out that a military group is no place for a child; it also takes the opportunity to assert the appropriate locations for children.

As Pullman's fictionalised opening account suggested, these testimonies also invite us to ask some disruptive questions to the figure of the child soldier: to refigure the figure (drawing on Haraway). What if child soldiers were recognised as skilled soldiers? If they do not have what it takes to be a skilled soldier, why were some of them made commanders, some put in charge of risky expeditions, and almost all of them trusted with guard duty? Neglecting their skills and their roles makes them invisible, and not only neglects who they were, in the past, and who they are, in the present; but also, it neglects their role in history. Child soldiers, members of

guerrillas and paramilitary groups in Colombia, were (and are) not secondary actors in an adults' war: they were (and are) soldiers, they belong for however time they were inside their ranks, willingly or forced; and even if they demobilised, escaped or were captured before turning 18 years old, their personal stories were impacted by their experiences which they carry with them as a set of talents or skills that could have only been acquired as a result of their soldiering time and how skilled they were at it (*see* Chapter 6).

Humanitarian programs pretend to help former child soldiers to transition “from child soldier back to child”, and such rhetoric reinforces child vulnerability and infantilises them (McMullin, 2011, p. 752). What if instead of thinking of child soldiering as an experience that ‘should not have happened’, or a childhood lost, it is explored as one component of a person’s life, among many. Not doing so would fail to take into account former child soldiers’ understandings and representations of their warrior-self, attributes that they believe should not be concealed or neglected, but understood and accounted for, so they can keep connected to their past, without being forced to hide it or to ignore it. The upcoming chapter, the last of the three findings ones, will reflect on how rurality is another crucial element of their sense of self. Colombian former child soldiers’ *campesino*-self expands throughout their childhoods, spanning from their time before joining armed structures and their time inside the armed structures, where it encounters their warrior-self. Both portrayals are critical features of their self-representation and remain obscured by the figure of the child soldier.

Chapter 6. Rural childhoods. Colombian former child soldiers' accounts of their *campesino*-self

Narratives of childhood collected on and from Colombian former child soldiers reveal how rurality is a primary dimension of their sense of self, and that their past as part of *campesino* communities is an experience or part of them that expands throughout their childhoods, spanning from their time before joining armed structures and their time inside the armed structures. As stated in the Introduction of this thesis, about 90 per cent of child recruitment in Colombia takes place in rural areas surrounded or isolated by the armed conflict, and with little state presence and control (Lugo, 2018; Arjona, 2016; PNUD, 2011). The *campesino*-self, a key factor of former child soldiers' self-representations, as happens with their warrior sense of self, has been obscured by the global figure of the child soldier. This chapter, like the previous one, requires a great deal of imagination to think about people and places: what if children were still *childlike* in the midst of war? What if children were in their place – without adding the controversial term *right* –, as it is impossible to keep them shielded from war?

This chapter is divided into three main sections: the first introduces childhood narratives of people who grew up in heavily affected war areas, among them former child soldiers.⁴¹ The second presents childhood narratives of when they were already soldiers, sharing rural knowledge and a particular relation with the land and the environment, a key characteristic of *campesino* communities, and discusses what sort of knowledge this group of people has because of their rural selves and the skills acquired as soldiers. The last section critically debates how their *campesino*-self is

⁴¹ Although I clarify this in Chapter 3, it is worth remembering that the creative writing group “Mi cuento lo cuento yo” was composed of eight members, seven of them former child soldiers (five were members of guerrilla groups, two of the National army, after forging their papers to join before turning 18 years old). The other participant was a young person who grew up in a heavily war affected area, and although he did not join the armed conflict, his family was forcibly displaced from their region to an urban area. Out of the eight, seven were born in rural areas and, because of war, had to move out of the *campo* and lived in cities when we met. This clarification is important because the first section of the chapter includes narratives of that group of seven participants who grew up in heavily war affected areas, and the second one comprises narratives from those who actively joined the Colombian war as soldiers in their childhoods.

challenged and transformed when former child soldiers find their way into *la civil* through reintegration programs that move children out of their former location as soldiers, either the rainforest or rural areas, and place them in institutions usually located in urban centres. There, the humanitarian world takes care of them, socialising former child soldiers into an urban world they did not come from and are not familiar with, having an impact on their *campesino*-self, as it also happens with children and young people who experienced forced displacement because of the armed conflict (Salamanca, 2013b).

I would like to stress that I have not separated the first two sections following traditional approaches to the phenomenon of child soldiering: before, during, and after the recruitment in an attempt to show how an apparently worry-free childhood is interrupted by war and how reintegration tries to return former child soldiers to a previous state that was better in appearance; but I did it to highlight first that children were children, and not “child-soldiers-to-be” before their recruitment, and that even if they were not soldiers yet, their childhoods were not unaffected by war; and, second, that who they were before becoming soldiers was meaningful and especially useful for them when they became soldiers, allowing them to preserve their *campesino*-self in their time as warriors. Therefore, although I fraction their narratives to present them in a logical way in this chapter, my participants narratives form a continuum unbroken by their active involvement in war.

6.1. Childhood memories

*“When and how does suffering
become a source from which poetry can spring?”
(Das et al., 2001, p. 7).*

Former child soldiers’ rural childhoods have been mostly explored to find predictors or signals indicating the children’s risk of becoming soldiers. In this section, nonetheless, I argue that such a perspective, although practical and necessary for humanitarian prevention and protection programs, encapsulates this group of children in what appears to be a new fixed category: “child-soldier-to-be”, or

“pre-child-soldier”. In so doing, this approach obscures narratives that can inform us about rural childhoods in Colombia. While re-reading and analysing these accounts shared by the participants in my workshops, I had the impulse to classify their experiences using such predictors, because they are all present in their narratives: child labour, physical punishment, deprived contexts, proximity to the drug market, and close encounters with war (guns, combatants, victims). Still, that reading did not do justice to how the creative writing group shared their accounts in our two encounters. They shared those stories as memories that meant something more than just a prelude to their next step: to join the war, actively, as soldiers. They felt nostalgia for their past, their time sharing meals with their parents, playing at the riverside with friends, their closeness to nature, how they “communicated” with birds, streams, and leaves; and while they also shared difficult stories of their childhoods, they focused on their resources to navigate their lives in rough and dangerous contexts. Therefore, while these accounts provide traditional readings of *push* and *pull* factors in cases of child soldiering, they also suggest that there is a valuable archive of former child soldiers’ childhood memories that can inform areas such as rural studies, and childhood geographies. These accounts even point to disruptive aspects of a romanticised childhood in the midst of an armed conflict that are present in the stories and memories of rural children, had they become soldiers or not.

This section is divided in two, presenting: 1. rural childhood memories that are not directly affected by armed conflict, and 2. childhood memories impacted by war in which children appear to use childhood resources, such as imagination and play, to engage with what was happening, and where they portray themselves as embedded in what was happening and not alienated from it.

6.1.1. Childhood memories regardless of war

The creative writing group produced an important number of childhood memories and stories of events that happened in those places that are considered “the right ones” for children in Majority World contexts: at home, at school (on their way to), in their towns, and at work (drawing on Punch, 2003, who states that Majority World

children integrate work, play and school, moving back and forth between child and adult-centred worlds). In one group conversation, CC remembered how in her family, for example, “dinner was served when the chickens went to sleep. Each one of us had his place at the table. My father would bless the food, my mother, sitting next to him, and my brothers and I would answer in chorus: amen.” In this short account, CC narrates how her life, as a child, was influenced by rurality, her family would sit down to have dinner when the “chickens went to sleep”, and also portrays how important the role of his father was in the house: he was the one who would bless the food, while the rest of the family would sit around him. This narrative also hints how important religion was and still is for *campesino* communities. In her short story “My land”, MS represented some moments in her house, and proceeded to narrate some aspects of the roles played by her parents and herself, portraying how Colombian *campesino* communities observe traditional gender roles:

Short story 6. My land [Mi tierra], by MS.

My land – it reminds me of my mother, when with her tender love and patience she cut pieces of cheese and ground corn to make her *arepas*, while my father went down the road to scrape coca with his four employees. At that time, when I was only five years old, I waited while washing my hands anxiously just to eat one *arepa* from her sweet hands. The rain fell and the stones cried where we went [to a river] with my brothers to bathe for a while. When my father cut trees to take blocks and build my home, the forest spoke to me. The birds sang as though whispering into a cradle while I cooed over my sister in the hammock; as if they [the birds] guessed how anxious I felt to make sure that little girl did not fall asleep.

Mi tierra. Me recuerda a mi madre, cuando con sutil amor y paciencia cortaba trozos de queso y molía para hacer sus arepas, mientras que mi padre cogía camino abajo a raspar coca con sus cuatro empleados. En ese entonces yo con tan solo cinco años y esperaba ansiosa lavando mis manos para comer tan solo una arepa de sus dulces manos. La lluvia caía, las piedras lloraban donde íbamos con mis hermanos a bañarnos un rato. El bosque me hablaba cuando mi padre cortaba árboles para sacar bloques y construir mi morada. Los pájaros cantaban susurros de cuna mientras yo arrullaba a mi hermana en la hamaca. Como si adivinaran la angustia que tenía de ver a esa pequeña niña que no se dormía.

Her story portrays her mother in charge of cooking, her father leaving the house to work in their coca field with his four employees, and one of her main responsibilities when she was a five-year-old girl: taking care of her little sister and putting her to

sleep. She has fond memories of her mother and her special way of making *arepas*, and shares some reminiscences of her playtime in the river with her siblings, where the “stones cried”, and how when she went with her father to work, she would hear the “forest talk to her”, adding to her story some touches of childhood imagination. MS’s account shares some aspects of children’s roles within their household in Majority World contexts, on which I will reflect later in the text, but now I would like to highlight how her narrative “humanises” inanimate objects, like the river stones, and see birds as her accomplices in her task of trying to put her sister to sleep. “You do not have to have a Fisher Price that simulates the sound of the whales to be happy, to have a childhood”, discussed RR, one of the *niñólogos* interviewed as part of this research. She insisted that by working with former child soldiers, she found that they connect a lot with all that symbolic world of the rural and the rainforest, which is also a way to have a childhood. “They talk about the sound of the rivers, for example, and they have all those stories where nature acquires life and enters the world of the magical, the symbolic, the fantasy, which is also part of the world of children” (Personal interview, RR, Bogotá, Colombia, 30th March 2016).

When TP was a child, he also accompanied his father when he went to work in the coca field, as MM did, and he had a special responsibility attached to it:

Short story 7. My dad... had illicit crops [Mi papá... tenía cultivos ilícitos], by TP.

My dad... had illicit crops. We had to go at night and my dad always took me with him. He did not like it, but I told him to take me with him. I did not like him being alone because my mother, tersely, told us that if the army arrived or something happened, my father would ‘fall’ [they would capture him] and that at least I would return to let her know what happened.

Mi papá... tenía cultivos ilícitos. Entonces teníamos que ir por la noche y mi papá siempre me llevaba a mí para que lo acompañara. A él no le gustaba pero yo le decía que me llevara, no me gustaba que él fuera solo porque mi mamá, en pocas palabras, nos decía que si llegaba el ejército o algo, mi papá caía y que por lo menos yo me devolviera para avisarle.

TP starts his story with hesitation, and instead of saying, “My dad grew coca plants”, he shifts and says, “My dad... had illicit crops”. He appears to be following a script that criminalises the growing of the plant, native to South America. Such a script is

highly mediated by the war on drugs started by the United States in the 70's, and how Colombia has answered to it, focusing on eradicating the crops (as they are also one of the main funding sources of the illegal armed groups), instead of finding different pathways to understand how Colombian *campesino* communities depend on it because of the livelihood option it provides for them. In another exercise from the workshops, the participants were discussing some olfactory memories from their childhoods, and the following conversation occurred:

TP: There were many chemicals in the kitchen where the coca process was done, it was a small hut nearby our house. I remember that there was a yellow gallon that I thought was *guarapo* [sugarcane juice], and I opened it and it was acid! I fainted and it left me a little crazy [he laughs].

FR: The same thing happened to me once. I thought it was water and opened that gallon and it threw me about three meters.

MM: That acid has a gas that intoxicates you.

AF (facilitator): There are several people here who have already smelled ammonia [which is *not* the name of the acid that is used to process cocaine].

DM: Well, some people smell it already processed [referring to the people who buy cocaine, the consumers, mainly based in Minority World countries].

[They all laugh]

Field notes, 25th April 2016.

Colombian rural children are close to the drug market, as are their families. For them, as this previous extract shows, the smell of the chemicals (sulphuric acid) with which coca leaves become cocaine is common,⁴² and therefore, key part of their olfactory memories and experiences as children. As long as the drug market remains profitable, *campesino* communities will be part of it. Recent data released by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy show that Colombia produced 209,000 hectares of coca crops in 2017, a figure 11 per cent higher than the record-setting 2016 estimate of 188,000 hectares (Asmann, 2018). Coca production is a rural practice hard to eradicate, as *campesino* communities who harvest it complain

⁴² Cocaine is made from processing the leaves of a coca plant by either solvent extraction or acid extraction. The paste is then purified to produce coca base, which is transformed into cocaine hydrochloride, the powdered form of cocaine (NIDA, n.d.).

of the Government not being able to offer them viable solutions to replace their crops with fruits and vegetables, for example (The Economist, 2018). Although in Colombia, children tend to have their first close contact with members of armed groups when they work with this type of crop (as they are usually controlled by guerrillas' armies or paramilitary groups, as widely documented by NGOs and INGOs), these stories did not refer to any of those encounters, but shared some of their key olfactory memories as part of their lives as *campesino* children.

Following the same line of olfactory memories, although these ones are more pleasant, MM and FR shared two other stories in which they portray children's resources to deal with unpleasant events (physical punishment) through, in their case, seeking refuge climbing fruit trees:

Short story 8. I dreamt of becoming a butterfly [Soñaba en volverme una mariposa], by MS.

The taste of guava reminded me of the times my mum was going to hit me, so I would climb the tree, and dream of becoming a butterfly, and started to eat guavas there. When she got over [her bad temper], I would go back to the house, secretly, so that she would not see me.

El sabor a guayaba me acordaba cuando mi mamá me iba a pegar, que yo me subía en el árbol y soñaba en volverme una mariposa y empezaba a comer guayabas ahí subida, y cuando ya se le pasaba, me regresaba a la casa, escondida para que ella no me viera.

FR shared a similar story:

Short story 9. The mango tree. [El árbol de mango], by DP.

They [his parents] would give us [him and his brothers] a thrashing [*muendas*] for no reason. What I did was leave and find a mango tree to eat mango. There, I spent my hours, my pains ... I forgot that I had been beaten [punished]. I saw the wounds but I did not feel them.

A nosotros que nos daban muendas, por cualquier cosa, yo lo que hacía era coger para un palo de mango a comer mango. Ahí pasaba mis horas, mis dolores... se me olvidaba que me habían cascado. Veía las heridas pero no las sentía.

Although the inception of both short stories is the physical punishment that they suffered in their houses, MM and DP focused their attention on the resources they

had to evade that reality, by seeking refuge in nature: leaving their houses to hide from their parents, while also placing themselves out of their reach, by climbing fruit trees (guava and mango). There, the children would spend enough time for their parents to calm down, so they could return to their houses and avoid more beatings. MM included some aspects of her childhood imagination when she said that she dreamt of becoming a butterfly, so she could escape her reality. In a group conversation, she said that she kept on imagining the same thing throughout her childhood, even when she was already a soldier for the FARC.

FR and DM narrated two crucial roles that they played in their families. As mentioned previously, Colombian *campesino* communities preserve traditional gender roles, therefore, the tasks assigned to boys and girls tend to differ. While MM shared an account of being the caretaker of her youngest sister, FR told a story of his main task as the eldest among his siblings, and DM narrated how hard it was for him to join other people, adults, working in his family *finca* (small farm). First, FR's story:

Short story 10. Water [Agua], by FR.

When it was dawn and it was rainy, my first prayer was for water to come down [the hose]. But, as always, the rain covered [blocked] the hose, and then, because I was the eldest [son], I had to go up [to fix it]. I started my journey along the entire length of the hose praying for the damage to be close [to the house]. But, it was never close! After walking several kilometres up the hill, I would reach the water intake and located the reason for the damage. Cantankerous, I would grumble: "Rubbish, why do you always make me come up?" I removed it and the water flowed again. Then, I started down back home again, tripping and falling and rolling, and I used to encounter big monsters that, after the fright, I saw that it was just a pretty snake or a spider. When I saw my house in the distance, the sound of water flowing from the hose was my greatest satisfaction. When I arrived at my house, I expected some thanks from my father, but the only thing he would say was, 'Where were you fooling around? But then, I woke up and realised that the running water was just the fountain of the writing workshop.

Cuando amanecía lluvioso el día, mi primer ruego era que bajara agua. Pero como siempre la lluvia tapaba la manguera de una manera autónoma o que me tocaba subir por ser el mayor, emprendía mi travesía por todo el tramo de la manguera rogando que el daño fuera cerca. Pero, ¡qué cerca! Ya iba a varios kilómetros aruñando la loma, llegaba a la boca toma de agua donde encontraba el motivo del daño, renegando decía: "basura, ¿por qué siempre me haces subir?" La retiraba y fluía nuevamente el agua. Emprendía la bajada en caídas y rodando y me encontraba con grandes monstruos que después del susto miraba que era solo una

linda culebra o araña. Cuando veía mi casa a lo lejos y el sonido del agua por la manguera era mi mayor satisfacción. Llegando a mi casa y esperando de mi padre unas gracias, lo único que me decían era: ¿Dónde estabas brincando? Despertaba de la rabia y me daba cuenta de que estaba en la fuente del taller de escritura.

FR's story narrates one of the responsibilities he had as a child, the eldest in the family, and his expectations that his father, with no luck, properly recognised his actions. FR's family lived in an area without aqueduct,⁴³ and while his narrative depicts the hurdles that *campesino* children face when living in such situations (like having issues with running water and having to walk "several kilometres" up a mountain to try to solve it), it also shares his childhood outlook regarding that task. For example, he highlighted the type of animals he would encounter while walking in the mountain, which he described as "monsters" that transformed into a "beautiful snake" once he recognised them properly. His story also shows very early knowledge on the sort of animals that inhabit rural areas where children and their families live, vital information to survive in such contexts and that speaks of another kind of knowledge useful for children to get through life. Punch says that adults would rarely be seen collecting water if they had children (2003, p. 285), because children tend to have higher energy levels than them. FR's story reflects accurately those energy levels, as even if he complains about the assigned task, he narrates how he would come back to the house "tripping and falling", implying that he would be in a rush and not paying too much attention to the path, highly likely running. In his short story "Rain falls on everything", DM shared his memories as one more person in charge of milking the cows in his family farm:

Short story 11. Rain falls on everything [La lluvia sobre todo], by DM.

At three in the morning, the rain fell on everything that adorns the surroundings of the Casa Nueva farm. The alarm clock and the rooster announced that it was time to get up. My stepfather, shaking the hammock gave me the signal that I had to get up. A light rain fell on the roof, on the cows, on the chickens, dogs, bushes, trees, horses, on everything that was around us. In the kitchen, my mother stoked the wood

⁴³ Colombian *campo* (countryside) differentiates between the areas closer to town or villages, where services are concentrated (*cabeceras municipales*) and the rural areas more distant from there, where houses and farms are all spread with significant distances from the *cabeceras municipales*.

stove to make the coffee that the *corraleros*⁴⁴ would have, among them me, who “had to show our back” to the cold drops of water that fell from the sky. It was not easy for me. It was a martyrdom to wake up while it was raining, the heat of the sheet and the hammock were so much better, but no ... getting up from that pleasure seemed impossible. Then I was in the pen, sitting, milking that animal, the rain falling. She with her dirty tail trying to scare off the insects, but she hits my face with it, leaving it full of manure while the rain falls.

A las tres de la mañana una sutil lluvia caía sobre todo lo que adornaba el entorno de la finca Casa Nueva. La alarma del reloj con el gallo daba el aviso que era hora de levantarse. Mi padraastro con un sacudón en la hamaca me daba la señal que tenía que ponerme de pie. En el techo una sutil lluvia caía, caía sobre las vacas, sobre las gallinas, los perros, las matas, árboles, caballos, todo lo que se encontraba en nuestro alrededor. En la cocina, mi madre atizaba el fogón de leña para montar el café que sería degustado por los corraleros, entre ellos yo, quienes teníamos que clavarle nuestra espalda a las frías gotas de agua que caían del cielo. No era fácil para mí. Era un martirio levantarme lloviendo, el calor de la sábana y la hamaca eran mucho mejor, pero no, levantarme de ese placer se me hacía imposible. Ya en el corral, sentado, ordeñando ese animal, la lluvia cae. Ella con su cola sucia tratando de espantarse los insectos, pero la clava en mi cara dejándola llena de estiércol mientras la lluvia cae.

DM’s story is an account of rural and farm life. He narrates his struggle having to wake up early, at three am, to the rooster crowing, and how hard it was for him to leave his warm and comfortable hammock to go and milk a cow in the corral. He says that he was in charge of this task together with other people, adults. He also describes his surroundings: cows, chickens, dogs, trees, horses, all there with them, and they do not appear in the narrative as décor, but as companions, getting as wet as he was. About children’s relations with animals, FR shared with the group how he was used to race the pigs at his family farm to be the first to grab a recent fallen fruit from a nearby tree. Because of unequal power relations in households, children might be delegated jobs that adults would rather to avoid (Punch, 2003). In DM’s story, however, he appears to be in training to do this sort of job in his house and to carry on doing it for as long as it is needed. Children’s work mainly refers to unpaid labour that includes domestic, agricultural, and animal-related tasks (ibid).

Lastly, to close this first section of childhood memories untainted by war though still in its midst, I will now share three accounts related to their playtime as rural children. The first two stories are, from beginning to end, memories of good times

⁴⁴ A person who has a farmyard/pen where he piles manure and usually breeds animals.

(CC's and DP's), and the last one (FR's) starts that way but it is immediately changed because of the armed conflict. FR's story will assist the transition to the following part of the first section of this chapter: memories affected by war but in which children appear to use childhood resources, such as imagination and play to engage with what is happening, and where they portray themselves as actively embedded in what was going on. I have not included FR's story in the next section because he narrates how he was "abruptly" removed from what was happening around him and he was not able to take part in what was coming for his family.

CC told a story about her memories of going to a river in her town, "where I used to go with my family to cook *sancocho* [Colombian chicken and vegetable soup] and to *recochar* [to have fun time within a group of people]. We had a good time, united and happy." DP also shared a story in which the river was the main setting. In "Story of my childhood", he narrates one episode of his life where he remembered being at ease and relaxed, and portrays his time at play.

Short story 12. Story of my childhood. [Historia de mi infancia], by DP.

The most beautiful period of my life was when I was between 10 and 13 years old. I used to go with my friends, cousins and brothers to swim at a place called Remolino (lit. whirlpool), a river nearby. We liked it because it was deep, big and had a ravine, four meters high, more or less. From there, we would dive in all sorts of ways: diving straight, doing somersaults, backflips. We used to cook on the bank of the river and to play catch. No worries of any kind. We also would fish with masks and spears, stingray and hooks, *atarraya* net and canoe.

A la edad de los 10 a los 13 años, para mí fue la más bonita. Fue cuando iba con mis amigos, primos y hermanos a bañarnos al río, en un charco llamado Remolino. Nos gustaba porque era hondo, grande y tenía un barranco de cuatro metros de alto aproximados. Allí nos tirábamos de todas las formas de clavado, de pie, hacíamos la bomba, nos lanzábamos hacia atrás. Cocinábamos a la orilla del río, jugábamos a la lleva. Sin preocupaciones de ninguna clase. Pescábamos con caretas y arpón, atarrayas y anzuelos, chinchorro y canoa.

CC and DP shared stories related to a part of their childhood that was worry-free, going to the river to swim and to have a good time with their friends and families. For Colombian *campesino* children, rivers could be included as the "right place" for them, as they go there often to play and to be with other children and adults. *Campesino* children learn, from a very young age, how to "read" the river, its

currents, when it is safe to go in and which the best places to dive are (Reay, 2015); another piece of crucial knowledge acquired by children in rural areas of the country. The last story, “Five years old in black and white”, starts with FR portraying himself playing in front of his house with cars made from sardine cans, and how combat unfolds when some members of the police are coming back from the river:

Short story 13. Five years old in black and white. [Cinco años en blanco y negro], by FR.

With my brothers and some friends, we were playing in the sand with some cars made from sardine cans. Then, a real line of trucks crossed in front of us. Very quietly, I looked at the last one that passed by. In my mind [what I remember], I saw some police coming back to town from the river [where they were having some free time]. Suddenly, I heard a loud explosion. “It’s a guerrilla attack,” the adults shouted, running, hiding us [the children] under the beds. My mum would not stop crying. My older sister asked:

- What happened, mother [mum?]?
- Your little brother is not here!

It was a night of terror for everyone. This is the beginning of my life in black and white.

With clarity comes the calm of the night [when the moon came out, the attack ended]. My mother leaves the house, desperate, to look for my brother. [Before leaving] she tells my older sister to take good care of us [her siblings]. It did not take long to my mother to come back to the house with my younger brother. We were thrilled. Sorry. No, we were not. My mother asked about my older sister, and we answered, in chorus: “She went out to look for my little brother”.

Suddenly, a voice cries [the neighbours from the street]:

- María, María, your daughter is lying on the floor.

My mother left the house in despair. Right after her, I went to the front door and I saw four men bringing a sheet, with blood dripping, and my mother crying next to it. I ran out and saw my sister in that sheet. I hugged her. I took off my shirt and, with it, I cleaned her face. Suddenly, someone dragged me away from her and put me in a room. The room of oblivion, because I do not know what happened next. My life turned black and white.

Jugando en la arena, con hermanos y amigos con carros hechos con latas de sardinas, una caravana verdadera de camionetas cruzaron por nuestro frente. Con mucho sigilo miré la última que pasó. En mi imagen vi unos policías que llegaban de paseo del río, cuando al momento se escucha una gran explosión. Es una toma guerrillera, gritaban los adultos, que corrían, llevándonos para debajo de las camas, donde nos escondían. Cuando mi madre no paraba de llorar. Pregunta mi hermana mayor:

- *¿Qué pasó, madre?*
- *¡Su hermano pequeño no está!*

Fue una noche de terror para todos. Aquí es el principio de mi vida en blanco y negro.

Con la claridad llega la calma de la noche, también mi madre sale desesperada en busca de mi hermano, con una recomendación a mi hermana mayor, que nos cuidara mucho. En poco tiempo llega mi madre con mi hermano menor, la alegría fue total. Perdón, no fue total. Mi madre pregunta por mi hermana mayor. En coro contestamos: “Salió a buscar a mi pequeño hermano”.

*Cuando llega la voz:
– “María, María, su hija está tirada en el piso”.*

Sale mi madre desesperada. Al momento salgo a la puerta. Veo que traían una sábana, cuatro hombres, que escurría sangre, y mi madre llorando al lado. Salí corriendo y mi hermana venía en esa sábana. La abracé y me quité la camisa y le limpiaba su carita, cuando bruscamente me quitan de su lado, y me llevan a un cuarto, donde fue el cuarto de olvido, porque no sé qué pasó después. Quedó en blanco y negro.

FR's story portrays how the armed conflict affected Colombian rural children's lives, not only in the most 'obvious' ways, such as his sister's murder, but also by the people and the practices all around him: the police in his town, not just doing their job but also taking some time off and enjoying the river; children playing in the sand while the police return to their post, only to be attacked by a guerrilla fraction; the grownups, who ran and screamed to hide their children under the beds, while trying to protect themselves from any stray bullets; his mother worried to death because she could not find one of her sons, and his older sister being left in charge of taking care of her siblings while their mother tries to find the missing child; and his sister who, worried to death as well, contradicts her mother's instructions and leaves the house to try to find her little brother. FR depicts how his life was irremediably changed by that event saying that it changed from being full colour to just black and white; war took its colours away. He was then five years old. FR's account assists the transition to the following section: childhood stories in which children find ways to navigate their journeys to school.

6.1.2. Childhood in the midst of war

The creative writing workshops' participants also told stories of fear and their difficulties getting to school when they were children. This subsection presents three stories in which children encountered dead people on their way to school, one even at her house's front door. Again, and as I said at the beginning of this section, to read these accounts with a different lens requires a great deal of imagination. It is true that for children encountering dead bodies as part of their "daily life", as CC puts it, represents a traumatic experience that requires an early conversation on apparently *unchildlike* topics such as death, and violence from them, and their families. However, my participants narrated the following stories focusing on how they, as children, found ways of navigating such encounters, and not how such encounters affected their lives or damaged them. With "The children of the alley", DM tells the story of how he and his friends found creative ways to travel through an alley that took them to their school without paying much attention to the dead people that they would find there often.

Short story 14. The children in the alley [Los niños en el callejón], by DM.

When we opened the gate that led to the "alley of the dead" - Yovanny, Yonny, Wilson and I were already afraid just opening it; entering that place, even only hearing or saying its name scared us. I remember that we took turns to remove the padlock; on Mondays it was my turn, I was terrified to insert the key in the small hole, the fear was so great that there were moments when that piece of metal came out of my hands and fell to the floor, the same floor where so many dead people had fallen. My legs were shaking. It was uncertain what we might find on the way to school. (...) During the walk through the alley we played; we performed acrobatics on our bikes or races, so we could forget about what we might find: dead people. The only beautiful thing about the "alley of the dead", a place in which the souls in pain scared at night, were the trees of *cañaguat* [*Tabebuia*], which on spring mornings dazzled with their beauty; they were all yellow. (...)

Al abrir el portón que nos daba la entrada al "callejón de los muertos"; Yovanny, Yonny, Wilson y yo, ya sentíamos temor hasta de abrirlo y entrar a ese lugar que sólo escuchar o pronunciar su nombre nos asustaba. Recuerdo que nos turnábamos para quitar el candado; los lunes me tocaba a mí, sentía mucho miedo al tomarlo para incrustar la llave en el pequeño agujero, era tanto el temor, que hubo momentos en los que ese pedazo de metal se me salía de mis manos y al mismo suelo, que recibió a innumerables muertos, iba a dar; las piernas me temblaban. Era incierto lo que tal vez nos encontraríamos en el recorrido hacia la escuela. Los martes le tocaba a Wilson, los miércoles a Yovanny, los jueves a Yonny, los viernes cualquiera de nosotros podría repetir la tortura de abrir ese portón que nos daba la entrada al "callejón de los muertos". Durante el recorrido por el callejón

jugábamos; realizábamos acrobacias en nuestras bicicletas o carreras, esto hacía que se nos olvidara lo que podríamos encontrar: muertos. Lo único hermoso que tenía el “callejón de los muertos”, lugar en el cual las almas en pena asustaban por las noches, eran los árboles de cañaguaste, los que en las mañanas primaverales deslumbraban con su hermosura; todos se vestían de color amarillo.

DM and his friends knew that they would encounter dead people in that alley, so, they decided to take turns opening the gate, and, in that way, relieve some of the stress and fear they felt because they had to take that route every single day to go to school. They also decided to perform acrobatics and to race on their bikes, so they could forget the imminence of finding a body in their path. Particularly, DM's narrative includes the beauty of the yellow trees that decorated the alley in a Champs Elysees kind of way. All these details portray children's strategies to deal with an uncomfortable reality that they could not escape. If they could have done it, they would have changed the route. They could not. Therefore, they found ways to navigate through that place every school day. “Like that, every day of my childhood” tells a similar story in a completely different tone. CC also used to find dead bodies on her way to school, and in a brutal narrative, she describes what she found and how she reacted when she encountered someone injured:

Short story 15. And so, every day of my childhood [Así, todos los días de mi infancia], by CC.

I was six years old. I walked to school, for an hour and a half, and would find on the way brains, legs, arms, etc. or wounded people who belonged to the armed groups. When I saw injured people, I would go back to the house to tell my dad, so he could go and help them. And so, every day of my childhood.

Yo tenía 6 años. Iba a la escuela caminando y por una hora y media encontraba en el camino de la escuela sesos, piernas, brazos, etc. o personas heridas pertenecientes a los grupos armados. Cuando encontraba heridos me regresaba para la casa a avisarle a mi papá para que fuera a ayudarlos. Y así todos los días de mi infancia.

CC's story portrays how regular was it for her to run into, on her way to school, injured and dead people, whom she was able to recognise as members of the armed groups. Her depiction shows that the region where she lived with her family was a “red zone”, where regular combat took place, and where all sort of weaponry was used, not just guns. Again, and as it happened in DM's case, CC did not focus on

how traumatic this was for her or not, but on what she did when she ran into an injured person. These encounters were a determining factor for her story, as it would be in that path where she would run into Johanna, the wounded guerrilla member crucial for her decision to join the guerrilla group operating in her area when she was eleven years old (*see* Chapter 5).

Lastly, “My dreams were interrupted...” tells the story of MM’s journeys to school. In her case, the dead bodies sometimes were right in front of her house door and belonged to people that she and her family knew, probably neighbours.

***Short story 16. My dreams were interrupted... [Mis sueños eran interrumpidos...],
by MS.***

When I woke up, my dreams were interrupted by the shooting [combat] that ended the lives of people close to my family and me. Many of their bodies sometimes obstructed the door of my house that faced the street. The street where I went to earn a living for my brothers and me. I worked in a restaurant in the port of the town, washing dishes, groves, sheds and platforms to take something home to my brothers, who stayed in the house while my dad went away to work on the river carrying wooden blocks in a canoe. I was going to school, and I took notes on paper sheets that other students gave me. My brothers and I took turns to use the pens because we did not have any more. We did the same with uniforms and shoes; we also took turns with them.

Al despertar, mis sueños eran interrumpidos por los disparos que acababan con la vida de las personas que tenían acercamiento con mi familia y conmigo, muchos de sus cuerpos algunas veces obstaculizaban la puerta de mi casa que daba a la calle. La calle donde salía a buscar opciones de vida para mí y mis hermanos, trabajaba en un restaurante en el puerto del pueblo, lavando platos, marraneras, galpones y andenes para llevar un sustento a mis hermanos que se quedaban en la casa mientras que mi papá se iba lejos a trabajar por el río transportando bloques de madera en una canoa. Iba a estudiar y escribía en hojas de cuaderno que me regalaban y esferos que [nos] turnábamos con mis hermanos porque no había más, los uniformes y zapatos también nos los turnábamos...

MM’s story takes a step further by including in her daily account the fact that, sometimes, dead bodies of people that her and her family would recognise from her town blocked her main door. When she read this story aloud, she explained that sometimes she actually had to push the door, hard, to be able to move a body and to leave her house. Her story, again, is not about how traumatic this was (and certainly must had been), but about her determination to leave her house to work, so she could

provide for her siblings and herself, and to study, even if she lacked the most basic resources to do so, such as paper sheets and pens. In her story, it would appear that everything is against her, but still, she found ways to make it work. Such closeness to death, usually unimaginable for children and, in general, people living in Colombian urban areas, gave this group of former child soldiers a different relationship with corpses. Although in informal conversations they never mentioned their experiences as responsible for violence or the death of somebody else, they did talk about how easy it was for them to check other combatants' pockets and clothes once they were dead after combat. Some of them said that they would not even think about what they were doing, as they used to do the same when they were children and encountered these dead bodies along the road.

Colombia's protracted conflict makes it difficult to imagine how an ideal or desirable childhood would look in rural areas. A topic that frequently appeared in my interviews with *niñólogos* was that it is not clear how the life that children had before being recruited was better than the one they had when they were in the armed groups. What did they lose? My interviewees would ask, spontaneously, during our conversations. All of them would agree that an ideal childhood in Colombia, at least considering the profile of former child soldiers coming from rural areas, was an ideal and not a fact. Stories of poverty, inequalities, lack of education and health services repeat, over and over, in Colombia's rural areas, where most of the child recruitment happens (Villar-Márquez & Harper, 2010). Was being recruited the worst thing that could happen to some of the children that joined the armed groups? Some of them would claim not. Colombian *niñólogos* consulted in this research were critical about these nuanced portrayals of childhoods that, even if they do not account for the Western figure of the child, they do share key elements of how a *campesino* child might look. One Colombian NGO working in the reintegration of former child soldiers tried to map the childhood from which their children were coming from:

I will tell you what childhood was: forced labour. Boys and girls said: "Look, I had to sow, take care of the mule, cook for the employees, and take care of my little brother". There was not a childhood like the one that the middle class would have in Colombia, and the problem is that we are trying to understand their lives comparing them to those standards, and not to those of the *campesino* children. What is a *campesino* child? The family does not 'consider' or 'grant' him/her any childhood.

Childhood is a new understanding. They came from forced labour, so there was no childhood. One of the girls said: “Well, *it was not sad, because there was no abuse in my life*, but I took care of my brothers, I cooked, I had to take care of them while my mother arrived [from work]”. The boys also tell, for example, several of them were *raspachines* [coca farmers]. That is, none of the children came from the so-called ideal childhood. Most came from complex and difficult childhoods. Nobody came from the beautiful, wonderful childhood, like the one we wanted to ‘sell’ (to promote). [emphasis added] (Personal interview, SD, Bogotá, Colombia, 7th April 2016)

Colombian child rights’ practitioners are aware of the peculiarities that surround rural childhoods and from which especially former child soldiers come from. This chapter section has presented eleven stories of childhood related to children who work and support their families within the household and in the fields from a very young age, of physical punishment, of their eventful journeys to school, and of their experiences of growing up in areas heavily impacted by war. Simultaneously, it has presented the people’s perspectives, as grownups, of those events: their memories and representations of how they felt, and how they navigated such events. Their narrative decisions dictated the focus of this section, while inviting us to rethink childhood in the midst of armed conflicts, and highlighting the importance of opening the perception from which Majority World childhoods are researched (mostly in relation to their work), to include other factors of their everyday lives that would facilitate a more holistic perspective which would be more appropriate for understanding children’s childhoods (drawing on Punch, 2003).

The following section will reflect on how the *campesino* past of former child soldiers was particularly useful in their time in the armed groups.

6.2. Campesino children joining a campesino guerrilla

MS remembers the day when she got malaria and was burning in fever in the middle of the jungle. She remembers that day because what saved her, she says, were the memories of what her mother used to do to treat her and her siblings when they got sick. She says that she told her comrades to find potatoes, so they could cut them, without peeling them, to place them under her armpits, in her forehead, in her genital area and even to put some pieces inside her socks, so they could be in contact with her soles. They looked at her confused, she remembers, but she insisted, and so they did it. That saved her, she says. She still does not know exactly how that works, but doing it gave her enough time to reach a nearby town to get some treatment.

MS joined the FARC in the south of the country when she was eleven years old. She was escaping her mother's ferocious beatings, trying to find protection. Before joining, she had lived her whole life in the campo, with her campesino family.

RO remembers being bullied by his comrades because he was a "city boy". They would send him to find yucca in the bush just to mock him. He did not know what a yucca crop looked like, and even when he managed to find it, he did not know how exactly to dig it out of the ground. Before joining the guerrilla group, he was an undergraduate student, a voracious reader, and a social leader aligned with a far-left political party. Because of that, he was persecuted by the paramilitaries and ended up under the guerrillas' protection, in one of their camps. For him, daily guerrilla life was frustrating, as he would find simple tasks challenging, as having to walk in the dark, and he did not like people with less education than him giving him orders. He felt clumsy and, what was worst, he says, is that he thought that he was getting stupid there.

RO joined the FARC in the north of the country when he was an undergrad student in his early 20s. He was hoping to be a teacher in the guerrillas, not a combatant. Before joining, he had lived his whole life at an urban centre, with his urban family.

MS's and RO's stories portray glimpses of the divide between what sorts of knowledge are considered valuable in the cities and what is considered valuable in the *campo* (countryside).⁴⁵ MS's story depicts the utility of the knowledge she acquired from her mother on how to treat high fevers with scarce resources. Because of that transferred knowledge, particular to rural settings (Pachón, 2015; Gómez-Estrada, et al., 2011), she says that she was able to cope the malaria symptoms while she was a FARC combatant. RO's story, by contrast, shows how his experience inside the guerrilla group, as a combatant, was different because of his urban background: he would not know how to identify crops or how to navigate the rural life embedded in guerrilla life. MS believes her knowledge was practical, valuable; the experience challenged RO as he felt that he was, as he said, "getting stupid there". Both accounts also portray what knowledge is considered valuable, both in rural and urban settings, suggesting the disconnect that exists between both worlds, which impacts how Colombian urban and rural communities relate, assigning what seems to be a greater value to urban experiences and undervaluing rural ones (Harto de Vera, 2018).

Colombian *niñólogos* who were part of this research argued that one factor that they found missing from the figure of the child soldier was how savvy young ex-combatants were about life in the *campo*, and that they thought this was a specific type of knowledge that went beyond their *campesino* self, as a very particular form of wisdom. However, *niñólogos* and the same former child soldiers who participated in this research agreed that they felt that such knowledge was considered merely anecdotal and it did not necessarily correspond to what people would expect from them, as it did not feed the figure that fuels the humanitarian world. During my research, that aspect of their lives proved to be quite meaningful. Their written short stories and conversations were full of the sounds, smells, images, and flavours of

⁴⁵ As done in Chapter 4 with the accounts of María and Santiago, these two narratives are presented in a third person narrative style as a stylistic decision to convey meaning, based on recordings of group conversations (in MS case), and field notes (in RO's case). RO's case was documented at a University gathering to which I was invited as an audience member to hear the life story of a former guerrilla soldier. RO was then a *reintegrador* working for the ACR, and authorised the use of this story for this research.

their rural lives: the sound of the pouring rain in the *campo*; the smell of *campesino* coffee (sweetened with *panela*, raw cane sugar) at dawn; the long walks in the jungle sharing the space with panthers, and wild monkeys, and the food that indigenous communities would share with them, like the time that the Emberá community cooked some frogs (that taste like octopus, said MM), and they ate it, because “you can never, ever, reject a food offer from an indigenous person, because if you do, they would never offer you food again”, said MM. Being recruited by an armed group, and being taken away from their family and their familiar places and people, had an impact on the sort of experiences and skills that they gather along the way, meaning: they know what they know because of the childhood they had, which is related more than just to their rural experiences, but also to their knowledge and skills attached to their soldiering experiences. The second section of this chapter highlights two *campesino* features that are also part of their warrior-self: firstly, knowing how to use plants and herbs to heal one another, and, secondly, their special relationship with nature and their skills to ‘navigate’ the country.

6.2.1 Learning how to heal one another

As part of one creative writing exercise, the group talked enthusiastically about how they used some local plants, herbs and vegetables. FR, for example, remembered when he was a child and worked as a *raspachín*, harvesting coca leaves. The coca plant produces an allergic reaction in some people (similar to poison ivy), so over the first days, hands will be covered by blisters, until the skin develops calluses. When that happened, FR said that “you would drink an aromatic tea with lemongrass and, at night, you could also bathe your hands with the plant and that helped with the swelling”. Although children’s work in coca crops is considered forced labour, it is a regular practice for children in Colombia, as it is for their families (ILAB, 2012), because the crop provides them with a means of survival, and livelihood because of a highly active drug market that cannot compete with the dynamics of regular and legal crops (Nuñez, 2016; *see previous section*).

MS remembered that particular time when having some potatoes at hand saved her life (this section’s opening story): “Potato brings me memories of my house, from

everywhere, especially when I was sick and it saved me”, she said. DP shared that one time that he got *culebrilla* (shingles) and was able to heal by using *panela* scratch, and MM said that, for her, cinnamon was useful almost for everything: “I love to chew it, the taste, the smell. When I have menstrual cramps, blessed be the cinnamon! Cinnamon is like a very necessary fragrance in the house and it is also useful for digestive pains”. Traditional remedies are an integral part of the Colombian culture (Gómez-Estrada, et al., 2011), and this knowledge has been passed on from generation to generation, and it is a distinctive form of cultural transmission of traditional knowledge in *campesino* communities. “When children became ill, parents used traditional remedies, inherited from their ancestors and based on knowledge of the properties of various plants that mothers had learned to prepare” (Pachón, 2015, p. 14). Memories of uses of plants and herbs to heal or to ease symptoms were learned by children from the elders, grown-ups around them who either showed them by doing (as it was MS’s case) or taught them how to use effectively what was available in el *campo*, as *campesino* communities still do, which proved to be useful once this group of children joined the guerrillas’ ranks. Although these accounts appear to narrate former child soldiers learning experiences before joining the armed groups, it is still safe to assume that as guerrilla movements recruit mostly people from *campesino* communities, they could have also acquired some of this wisdom from their socialisation with other people, both children and adults, inside the armed groups.

One of the participants of the creative writing workshops was a trained nurse who used to work with the Army. After lunch, one afternoon, we sat down to have some coffee and while we were chatting, he said he wanted to ask something that had been bothering him for years, and he asked three of the former guerrilla army members there how they managed to treat complicated diseases (like leishmaniasis, leptospirosis, malaria and Chagas disease, among others that are common amongst the guerrilla groups), and also war injuries, like stepping on an antipersonnel mine, or being hit by a bullet. All of them laughed with complicity, as they just were used to dealing with these situations even with a lack of equipment and medicines, although, as they said, they were able to get a hand on some vaccines and basic

medicines in their monthly *remesa* (as the guerrilla called their grocery shopping, closer to the military term, supply run, or resupplying). They remembered how they conducted some basic surgeries after heating a *machete* blade, how certain plants were useful to treat some symptoms before they were able to reach a basic medical centre in a small town or find a doctor, and sometimes they kidnapped doctors and brought them to heal their wounded. Their accounts, however, did not seem to exhibit an awareness of the limitations under which they lived and how even if they managed to survive some not so serious diseases, certainly other guerrilla members did not have the same luck.

One factor that surfaced from this research, was former child soldiers' relation with their bodies and their physical health. They would say that because of the time they spent living in rural areas, inside and outside the armed groups, as their context was characterised by its lack of resources, they are used to delaying any sort of treatment that does not seem urgent. Maybe because of the different scenarios they have faced, where they have been close to losing their lives, a sting or a cut does not look serious enough, but such perceptions have already had serious repercussions in their lives, as conditions that they need to treat or to get seen, are ignored (MM shared a story in which, once in *la civil*, she ignored the bite of a scorpion and was hospitalised for several weeks and in risk of losing one of her legs).

During my workshops' preparations, I met a group of former child soldiers through a local NGO. Once, I was talking to a group of them, trying to explore what sort of knowledge they believed they had. Then, some pointed out their discipline and lack of fear, and when I tried to explore it further, I asked about the kind of things they thought they would be able to do that others maybe would not. One of them remembered a time when he was in institutionalised care as part of his reintegration program, and he was the only one able to heal a bullet wound that one of his peers got when he escaped the house. He healed him, he said, because he "was used to doing it inside the group" (Field notes, 25th February 2015). Although this young man did not elaborate further on why his peer had a bullet wound, it has been reported that young people who committed crimes and are in institutional care tend

to escape the houses overnight to make some money through illegal practices (like petty crime), and then come back, so their absence is not noticed (Defensoría del Pueblo & UNICEF, 2006). Knowledge like this, healing bullet wounds or treating difficult diseases with a scarcity of resources, has allowed several former child soldiers to request formal nurse training once they are out the armed groups. This, however, is relatively recent. Some years ago, recognising any skill acquired inside the guerrillas' armies or the paramilitary groups, or to revalidate their knowledge, was unthinkable, as it could either reawaken traumatic memories (Personal Interview, IF, Bogotá, Colombia, 16th February 2016) or validate armed groups, where children's rights were violated, as "teaching centres" (Personal Interview, JC, Bogotá, Colombia, 14th April 2016).

Lederach (2017) and Ingold (2000) call to make a difference between *campesino* practices within and outside of armed groups, explaining that *campesino* communities cultivate the land and, in turn, are nurtured by the land, and that their daily life includes farming practices founded on relationships of reciprocity forged between humans and non-humans. Guerrilla members use their *campesino* skills to live of the land, but they not only do not take care of nature, they also abuse it. However, Andrés Link, a primatologist at the Colombian University of the Andes, highlights that guerrilla groups and *campesino* communities as well have contributed to the disappearance of some species because they hunt them for food or, as reported by the book *Animalario* (2016), they use them for health reasons. For example, there is a myth that the broth of spider monkey cures anaemia and weakness. Therefore, every time that someone is sick, they look for a monkey and pay anything to drink a broth of monkey, instead of taking a pill for pain (Tono, 2016, p. 37). This section has reflected particularly how former child soldiers' *campesino*-self allowed them to transfer certain knowledge to take care of their health and of that of their companions, and how this knowledge was transformed when they became soldiers. The following section will reflect on one particular experience of child soldiering life in Colombia: the long marches. As it has been done in this section, it will also present meaningful connections from whom they were before becoming soldiers.

6.2.2 How to navigate the country and to live in the rainforest

All my participants lived in *fincas* or rural communities before joining the war. FR described the jungle as “a book of colours, a music box”, and added that while he was a member of a paramilitary group, sometimes walking around the country he was able to appreciate the wonders of nature: “Some flowers [it was like if they] shone, they were very well placed in the landscape”. CC would describe thunder in the middle of a storm as if a music band were playing its drums in the jungle, and said that she was able to identify specific sounds, so she could know when a storm was coming or when a river was going to change its flow. Rivers had a special place in their childhood memories, and not only as places where they would spend their free time or play. Rural communities have a social and economic structure that functions from the use of natural resources (Nuñez, 2016). Colombia has 20,000 kilometres of rivers, and MS, for example, would talk about meaningful rivers in her life story (*see maps*), listing them carefully (like Yarí, Caquetá, Caguán, Mecaya, Guayabero and Lozada) while showing a map where she registered her journeys around the country. For her, rivers were the mothers of “streams, puddles and everything”, and wrote a short poem saying: “The river is the mother that cleanses the heart, the mind and the soul. I see her running! And I envy her character, I want to be her to bathe my heart of wounds and sores (that burns and burns [her heart])” [*El río es la madre, limpia el corazón, la mente y el alma. ¡La veo correr! Y envidio su carácter, quiero ser ella para bañar mi corazón de heridas y llagas (que arde y arde)*]. She also painted a river on the cover of her collection of short stories produced in the writing workshops and described it to the group as follows:

[I painted myself] sitting on a rock, thinking ... watching the river run. [I also painted] many clouds. The river is the mother of the gorges, of the puddles, of the lakes, of everything. I always sat on a stone, even if it was not at the farm, where I have very few memories. The farm was far away, I always went when I fought with my brothers or with my mother, there was a tree that I went up to eat guavas, and after I climbed the tree, I sat on the stone to watch the river run. There, I deposited in my river all my anger, my pain. I relaxed to see how the river passed, how it ran. And I found figures in the river and in the clouds. And the butterfly, which has always represented for me memories of my childhood and still [today]. I put the title: Memories of yesterday. (Second Workshop, 30th April 2016)

Picture 7. MS's drawing of the cover of her collection of stories.



Note: She wrote two words with a red pen in the river: *recuerdos* (memories) and *dolor* (pain). Picture taken by the author. 30th April 2016.

MS's account and drawing have been kept on this section of the chapter because while she mixes her childhood memories regardless of whether she was a soldier or not, they represent both that magical world of children already discussed, while also making a case of this group's relationship with nature that facilitated, in a way, the time they spent as soldiers. Colombian former child soldiers talked about a different way to be in the country, which allowed them to learn how diverse Colombia's was naturally and how important it was to respect it and protect it. For example, DP would mention how while he was walking as a FARC soldier "in the middle of the cold and silent Amazon rainforest", he was accompanied by "the singing of the birds, monkeys and the echo of the trees rocking from one side to the other, because of the wind". MM, who was also a FARC soldier, wrote once how whenever she takes a pencil and a paper, "I end up drawing a tree or a flower. This is a very special connection I have with nature, with my land, my ancestors and with the environment that I have missed so much throughout my years living in the city" (Q4C, 2016).

In 2012, Colombia had approximately 66 million hectares of rainforest (into which Spain, Portugal, Andorra and Gibraltar would fit) (CNMH, 2018a). A very particular feature of guerrillas' life were the long marches, when soldiers had to carry their full

kit, including tents and cooking equipment, on their shoulders, as well as their assault rifle and munitions, while crossing vast terrain in the Colombian rainforest (see Chapter 5, DP's short story *March from Araracuara to La Chorrera* and Operation Berlin). Although collected accounts from children have reported that those walks were one of the toughest parts of guerrilla life (HRW, 2003), former child soldiers who were part of this research said that those marches gave them the opportunity to get to know the country differently, and also to appreciate its biodiversity while learning about it, particularly about wild animals.

During the second writing workshop, we worked on young people's memories related to their sense of place with the support of a map (*see* Preface and Epilogue). All of them covered a significant part of the drawing, pointing out places where they have lived, visited, and passed by either by foot, by river and even by helicopter. They would recognise the place where they were recruited, for example, or where their families used to live, and they highlighted, particularly, some of the longest trips they took by foot (without specifying precisely when they happened), and shared the amount of time that those marches took, sometimes weeks, sometimes months. They did not complain about how hard those trips were, and were mostly impressed by the distance they had travelled in such journeys: "Look at the journeys that we had!", exclaimed MM once everyone finished sharing their maps and their stories about their travels in the country. Their personalised maps record displacements to at least ten regions, roughly 30 per cent of Colombia's regions, and show how specific they were about the places they visited, naming urban centres, little villages, rivers, and mountains (*Picture 8*).

Picture 8. Some of the maps drawn by the participants, indicating their life journeys since they were born until 2016 (date of the workshop).



Pictures taken by the author. 30th April 2016.

CC described her exercise saying that she painted all the places where she was at some point of her life. “I visited several departments in one way or another: walking the mountains, from one side to the other, for days. Other trips were made by car,

when I was already in Bogotá. Here, in the city, one travels in a normal car and nothing exciting happens”. DD was proud of the knowledge that allowed him to escape the guerrilla in a change of guard (see Chapter 5). He knew *that* river so well, he said, that he was able to escape, by boat, on a dark night, without raising suspicions and without needing any help for that task beyond his memory (DP escaped with other seven guerrilla members). He told the story of his escape while pointing to the map and sharing stories about how strong the current was at a certain point, how difficult it was to turn in one of the curves of the river, how deep or shallow the stream became according to the area. When he finished, he also talked about how excited he would be to be able to return to that area, and to see how everything looks like ten years after running away from there.

Those long walks also allowed them to identify all sorts of animals, as Colombia is the country with the second-highest biodiversity in the world, after Brazil (Instituto Humboldt, n.d.). For example, DP mentioned it in his short story “March from Araracuara to La Chorrera” (*Chapter 5*) that, with his comrades, they “found animals like *manaos*, skunks, *yulos*, tigers, panthers, deer, tapirs, monkeys”. AC, one of the *niñólogos* consulted in this research, remembered feeling amazed by the animal knowledge that a group of former child soldiers had. She recounts a particular conversation that she witnessed during an activity break at her previous office, an INGO based in Colombia:

A group conversation we had [with several former child soldiers] was about the animals on the mountain. They began to talk about bush meat. They asked: “Do you know the '*chucha*'?” And we all would laugh and shared our memories. “Do you know the ‘*boruga*'?” Then the others laughed, because ‘*boruga*’ means prostitute in the Putumayo region, but no, the ‘*boruga*’ is an animal that looks like the *chigüiro* [capybara]. Do you know... the *lapa*, the *tapir*, etc., other series of animals that I had never heard about. Listening to them, I realised: they know a lot of things about the country... if there is a book about former child soldiers who talk about the animals that are on the mountains, no one is going to buy it, or, better said, very very few people will... but who cares. UNICEF is not interested in publishing a book of children and animals on the mountains. Nevertheless, how they know the country! How they are full of stories! They are full of knowledge and they know so many beautiful things. (Personal interview, AC, Bogotá, Colombia, 21st March 2016)

When the FARC guerrillas signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016, the violence in many rural zones fell significantly. The end of

the war not only meant a long-awaited reprieve for millions of people who live in remote areas of the country, but meant biologists and other researchers could now explore the country's forests, rivers, and mountain zones (Peñarredonda, 2018). Because of this sort of awareness, which mixed with their knowledge of how to live in the rainforest, some former combatants (either recruited as children or not) work now as rural guides in post conflict expeditions. Associated French Press (2016) reported that the Colombian government was preparing 22 scientific expeditions to unexplored territories with the Colombia Bio project that aims to generate a large national information system based on new inventories of ecosystems. Particularly, the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Research on Biological Resources has suggested demobilised guerrillas collaborate with the investigations, contributing the knowledge acquired after decades living in jungle and mountainous areas (ibid). The Institute is the biodiversity research branch of the National Environmental System and works in alliance with the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, and their plan could also help the reintegration of ex-combatants in tourism projects, forest management or fishing. Even before the peace deal, when the guerrilla group was still active, a scientist remembered how they hired guerrilla members as guides, saying that they were the ones who knew the rainforests better, so they did not risk getting lost (Tono, 2016).

Connections between rurality and child soldiering have not been explored further, and scholarship on rural childhoods in the Majority World have focused on lack of access to basic services (i.e. school, sanitation, medical, electricity, communication and transport services, *see* Ansell, 2016; Punch, 2004, 2007); health issues (*see* Schellenberg et al., 2003; Ansell, 2016; Attanasio et al., 2004) and child labour (*see* Hollos, 2002). Their *campesino* past and the particular knowledge that they seem to acquire as part of their soldiering experiences is again obscured by the figure of the child soldier. HRW's 2003 report on Colombian child soldiers had highlighted it already: "Speaking with these former child combatants weeks or months after they had been captured or had deserted, we saw nothing remarkable about them at first. Rather, we found ourselves looking at the faces of seemingly ordinary, poor Colombian children" (p. 5). Coming from a rural area was determinant for my

participants, even if at the time of the research, they were living in an urban zone. Living in small towns (*veredas*), swimming in rivers, getting to deal with particular diseases with the help only of herbs and plants found wild in nature, identifying paths by following their instincts or the stars, encountering wild animals, learning how to recognise multiple sounds in the dark, were some of the many remembrances that came from the exercises.

Humans do not merely occupy a territory; they build it and transform it, and at the same time are shaped and changed by it (Ruiz, 2013; Bushin et al., 2007; Wiborg, 2004; CIDS, 2002). The land is a crucial component for the construction of individual and collective experiences, as places have meaning, not for themselves but because they are repositories of personal and collective experiences and memories. Lederach (2017) asserts that, for example, when people in rural areas walk, often for hours, from one community to the next, they establish and strengthen their sense of place, and their roots are not established through stasis but rather through constant movement (p. 598). Guerrillas' long marches have been seen as abuse of children's bodies because they are strenuous and might cause long-term impact on their physical development, which is true (Wesells, 2006; Rosen, 2005). However, from former child soldiers' perspectives, those same long marches allowed them to relate to the country, to "their country" as they call it, differently (also see *Epilogue*). Equally, lack of access to health services has been considered as a form of child abuse, as if a boy or a girl soldier got an infection in the middle of the jungle, he/she could not have access to medical treatment and risk death or long-lasting physical consequences, which is true. However, as this chapter has discussed, such restrictions made this group of former child soldiers resourceful, not only because of the experience inside the armed groups but also because of their past as *campesino* children, living in rural areas, where access to health services is also scarce. These two examples show how people negotiate their circumstances to make the best out of it, following what Das and colleagues said, and the thesis Introduction highlights: "in the midst of the worst horrors, people continue to live, to survive, and to cope" (Das et al., 2001, p. 1).

This group of Colombian former child soldiers are still able to appreciate the specialness of living a rural life. Their soldiering experience did not obscure their traces of rurality because, precisely, soldiering and rurality were powerfully intertwined (*see* Introduction), and, in this way, the experience of soldiering did not steal at least these aspects of their childhoods. This research identified how Colombian former child soldiers' upbringing was useful for their time in the armed groups, exploring how their time as soldiers enhanced certain skills and provided them with a sort of knowledge that they were able to acquire because of joining a *campesino* guerrilla, as Colombian's are. None of the irregular armed groups devote resources to help children continue their truncated formal education (schooling). No former child soldier interviewed by Human Rights Watch, for example, said that he or she had received any reading or writing instruction, despite the fact that many were barely literate. Nonetheless, the aforementioned skills were acquired or enhanced during their time as soldiers, when according to developmental research children learn most elements of their culture from other people, such as relatives, peers, and other close members (Punch, 2003; James, 1995).

Considering that childhood (in the broad sense) is the time of education ("distinguishing between education broadly, schooling as a particular form of education, and learning as omnipresent in social life" [Shepler, 2014, p. 38]), establishing a connection between their past experiences as *campesino* and warrior children and their present self should be unavoidable to facilitate their transition into gainful employment or other means of livelihood (Brett & Specht, 2004, p. 15). Former combatants, who were soldiers in their childhoods, carry with them rural knowledge that have the potential to inform any reintegration programs to *la civil*, as suggested by Springer (2005), who said that a successful reintegration process should encourage and take advantage of the particular skills of the people who leave armed groups, including in its package of attention measures "a global inventory of skills acquired (along with an official certification)" (p. 262). This section has made meaningful connections in former child soldiers' childhoods memories, which allowed them not only to navigate differently their time as soldiers, but also provided them with skills for their civilian life. The following section will reflect on how

important it is to recognise former child soldiers warrior-self and campesino-self, not only as a way to facilitate their reintegration in civilian life, but also to ease their own dialogues with their past while they attempt to figure out their present.

6.3. Discussion

Short story 17. My land [Mi tierra], by MM.

My land is a memory, a past, a present.
A future that I do not see.
My land is distant, foreign (belongs to others) diverse,
hot, whore, hard, soft and hostile.

My land is in the distance, far away.
I cannot go. My land is forgetfulness and memories.
It is the longing and the dream.
I am my land.

*Mi tierra es recuerdo, pasado, un presente.
Un futuro que no veo.
Mi tierra es lejana, ajena, diversa,
caliente, puta, dura, blanda y hostil.*

*Mi tierra está en la distancia, muy lejos.
No puedo ir. Mi tierra es olvido y recuerdo.
Es el anhelo y el sueño.
Mi tierra soy yo misma.*

In English, the Spanish word *tierra* has six different meanings: land, earth, ground, soil, world, and dust. MM story talks about all of them in one: where she and her ancestors were born, where she inhabited for many years, as a child before becoming a soldier, and as a warrior too; the world that she has lost because she cannot come back, and still, she manages to keep real close, because, as she says, “mi tierra soy yo misma”. Malkki (1992) has discussed the rooting of people who has been forced to leave their land, such as refugees, and she explains that “people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness” (p. 27), as it is the case of MM, who carries her land, her memories, her sense of self, of who she was and who she is now, with herself, because that is who she is. In Colombia, life in the *campo* has been historically described as “simple and monotonous”, even dull (Pachón, 2015, p. 13). Family lives revolved around

their crops and children would support their families by working in the field. Nonetheless, because of the armed conflict, crops lost their shade, native animals were endangered, and waterways were left at risk (Lederach, 2017), inflicting a violent severing of these relationships resulting in an extended sense of being lost (*perdido*) and uprooted (*desarraigado*), even as people remain in place” (Lederach, 2017, p. 592). The *campo* that young people remember is part of a frozen past that probably does not exist anymore, due, ironically, to the impact of the same armed conflict of which they themselves were part. The loss of the *campesino*-self produced by war cannot be seen as a situation that affects isolated people but rather communities and rich socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental dynamics (see Osorio Pérez, 2007). People who experienced child soldiering could have a similar feeling of nostalgia for a rural past as people who experienced forced displacement, either as children or as adults. The CNMH (2013) reports that geographical, affective and symbolic references that bind people to their towns or the *campo* are lost with forced displacement, and that the forced movement of *campesino* communities to rural areas has destroyed the social fabric and altered the cultural transmission of traditional knowledge and practices of great significance for individuals and families. This research also argues that former child soldiers experience such uprooting, precisely because of that *campesino*-self core to their childhood experiences, before joining armed groups, preserved by war, is broken by reintegration, as most of them cannot return to their regions for security reasons.

Chapters 5 and 6 extended an invitation to question, based on former child soldiers’ first-person accounts explored through literary and creative devices, diverse experiences of childhood, and how their own experiences have the potential to account for a different kind of childhood instead of merely a lost one. This chapter has argued that while the figure of the child universalises and essentialises a mythical child soldiering experience with a post-conflict ‘template child’ who is traumatised, vulnerable, and “irreparably scarred” by the experience of war (McMullin, 2011, p. 752), former child soldiers are not the mere projection of their time as soldiers. Their complex sense of self is usually reduced to accounts of their past as combatants and victims, ignoring crucial features of their sense of self, such as their *campesino* past.

Former child soldiers' campesino-self, as it occurs with their warrior-self, are key features of who they are, as people, and yet they are forced to hide them and to navigate new ways of being in *la civil*, as their past ends unaccounted for as a strategy to help former child soldiers to overcome the impact of war in their lives. As this research has shown, former child soldiers are a complex mix of remembrances, ways of portraying themselves, and pieces of what they choose to remember and to forget. Even if the figure of the child soldier employs a "dehumanising rhetoric of conflict" that obscures the complexity and richness of children's lives, soldiering affects but does not determine children: "War is not simply destructive for children but also transformational, just as it is for adults" (McMullin, 2011, p. 752). Approaching former child soldiers as elements out of place (Douglas, 2004), and trying to return their childhoods (Pachón, 2009; Prager, 2003; Bald, 2002), even if when they exit the armed groups were already young adults, infantilises them to keep them controllable and contained, instead of dealing with them as political actors with an on-going sense of self that includes who they were and how they perceived their lives in their childhoods, throughout, and not just in their time as soldiers.

Chapter 7. Roots and routes – Final thoughts

This thesis began with a story. An outdated one. Not only because it happened in 2013, six years ago, but also because after this PhD journey, it is now clear how obsolete the idea of former child soldiers as “useless generations” is. The Colombian former child soldiers portrayed in this thesis, through their own words and those of people working with them, appear as complex, even knotty, individuals who navigate their lives based in the present (tracing their routes) while engaging in meaningful conversations with their past and their memories (mindful of their roots). This doctorate research played with figures that collect hope and fears, and show possibilities and dangers (drawing on Haraway, 2004, p. 1). By simulating the string game of cat’s cradle, this research demonstrated how, through connections and encounters, apparently solid figures (such as the one of the child soldier), are informed and challenged by others (Colombian niñólogos and former child soldiers’ accounts of their childhood experiences). And, from such a game, it is now possible to refigure global childhoods perceptions with the assistance of a Colombian dialect.

The aim of this research was to examine normative understandings of child soldiering in the Colombian context. One overarching and two complementary questions shaped this exploration:

- 1. How do former child soldiers’ own articulations of their experiences open up or diversify our understandings and theorisations of childhood?*
- 2. How is the global figure of the child soldier rendered or vernacularized in Colombia both by local humanitarians and by former child soldiers themselves?*
- 3. How does this vernacularisation in turn speak to humanitarianism and its practices around the figure of the child soldier?*

To answer these questions, I firstly explored how the global figure of the child soldier is enacted in Colombia, tracing the tensions between global discourses and local practices through the exploration of narratives from professional children's rights advocates (whom I call *niñólogos*) and *seasoned* former child soldiers (young people who act regularly as spokespersons for such a figure). Secondly, I draw on creative fieldwork (with the creative writing workshops “*Mi cuento lo cuento yo*” [“I’ll be the one to tell my story”]) to document childhood narratives from a group of eight people who grew up in heavily war affected areas of the country. Qualitative research enabled me to focus on in-depth, context-specific accounts to answer my research questions, and to unpack the figure of the child soldier to allow accounts of their warrior-self and their *campesino*-self; both critical components of their present self-understandings, while being reflective and critical about their past. Finally, I analysed to what extent these accounts conform to the figure of child soldier.

In this final chapter, I review the main findings of this research. The chapter begins with a summary of findings, then moves into a discussion of implications for literature, policy and practice, later explores possibilities for future research, and finally offers some concluding reflections.

7.1. Summary of findings

This thesis explores childhood experiences of former child soldiers, and attempts to identify what gets lost in translation, that is: what happens when local understandings of people and places are translated into global figures; and also what happens when, simultaneously, global figures, like that of child soldiers, are translated into local idioms. The figure of the child soldier is an intentional narrative that reproduces hegemonic assumptions about children: what is ideal and what is not. However, and regardless of the insistence in the humanitarian discourse on portraying former child soldiers’ experiences as one type of experience (mainly that of victims), data found in this study provides elements to refigure the figure of the child soldier, and its concomitant concept of childhood.

Scholars with work on the field of child soldiering attest that refiguring the global figure requires a great deal of imagination (*see* Shepler, 2014; Rosen, 2013; Drumbl, 2012; Denov, 2012.). In this research, I used creative methods to explore childhood narratives of former child soldiers in Colombia as different types of experiences, and not as *pollution* (drawing on Douglas), or as “children out of place”, but as a different experience, in which they were the experts, and not the researcher. Their collected tales show how while former child soldiers’ lives were irremediably determined by their experiences as soldiers, their adult outlook on their childhood memories is not constrained by war. Their tales do not hide the war from their lives, but, somehow, put it in the right place: in the background. Colombia’s protracted armed conflict affected their lives in so many different ways, but still, provided a background in which they, as children, found their place, learnt from it, grew up from it, navigated it, tried to escape it (physically and through childhood imagination), and regardless of whatever anyone would say, they made do (*see* Molano, 2017; Arjona, 2016; Bello, 2003). Instead of lacking a childhood, Colombian former child soldiers portray a different kind of one. Their accounts speak of a unified, whole childhood, and not of a broken, fractioned one, as it is done by the humanitarian discourse: before their recruitment as soldiers (in a sort of pre-child-soldier or child-soldier-to-be category, suggested by this research), during their time as soldiers (child soldiers), and after their time as soldiers (former child soldiers). Former child soldiers make meaningful connections, back and forth, with whom they were as children, inside and outside the armed groups, and whom they are in the present, as adults, portraying the line that gives the title to this thesis: “I am who I am now because of who I was”.

Colombian former child soldiers’ self-representations speak of two defining factors: their *campesino*-self (which expands throughout their childhoods, regardless of whether they already were soldiers or not), and their warrior-self (which speaks of their time as soldiers as something more complex than just the portrayal of the vicious combatant). Particularly, their childhood stories urge us to stop seeing them as “child-soldiers-to-be”, as their stories and memories seem to be only valuable as predictors of their later recruitment into armed groups, without allowing their stories

to engage in meaningful dialogue with other childhoods' experiences, and not just those of children out of place (i.e. rural childhoods). Their accounts ask, straightforwardly, if were not they in the "right place" when they were living in their houses, with their families, walking daily to school, playing by the river or in front of their houses? Why does war have to obscure it all, to taint it? Their *campesino* tales, where war was in the background, speak of their closeness to nature; how, while they lived in rural areas (before and during their time as soldiers), they made sense to their lives through an on-going dialogue with the environment, their elders, their peers, and used that knowledge to get through life. Their stories also speak of the awareness and the resources they had at hand to deal with daily events, directly affected by war or not.

The idea of a normal childhood might have been lost, but their childhood was not stolen or non-existent, it was just a different one. In their childhoods' accounts lie, hand in hand, their roots and routes. Regarding their active participation in the Colombian war, former child soldiers' accounts also reflect the importance of recognising children's role as *warriors*. Doing so acknowledges the support they provided to the armed groups (not just by fighting, but also keeping the structure functioning by cooking, and taking guard duty, for example), and finding ways to navigate their new place. War in Colombia, instead of looking like the *wrong* place for rural children, appears to be the *unavoidable* one for some of them. Their self-representations speak of *campesino* children who were also warriors, seeing themselves as complex human beings who are much more than just victims, or people in need of protection, and help. After their demobilisation from armed groups, not seeing themselves as powerless victims allows former child soldiers to renegotiate their past, to remember good and bad times, to portray their strengths and resources to grow up in the midst of some of the hardest circumstances, not just because of war, but also because of the country's inequality that maintains a considerable divide between rural and urban areas, the latter being where 90 per cent of child recruitment occurs.

Then, how do these tales speak to the global figure of the child soldier? Here it is important to bear in mind that the intention is not, paraphrasing Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie, to dangerously replace one single story with another. Colombian former child soldiers' childhood tales collected in this research portray a complex and different childhood that existed without being erased by war. Still, the fact that they did not discuss the impact that war had in their lives (some said they were tired of talking about the same subject over and over again), occasioning suffering and pushing them through traumatic events, does not remove the fact that such events occurred in their lives and that also shaped them. The global figure of the child soldier, therefore, might be problematic, but it is not wrong: it is just *incomplete*.

By paying attention to frictions between people, practices, and places (following Tsing, 2005), I was able to identify how *niñólogos* and seasoned former child soldiers consciously engaged with the global figure in Colombia, making the best out of it, even with its limitations. *Niñólogos* highlighted how the figure was useful to pursue public policy, while seasoned former child soldiers said that it was practical to make a living, as being a spokesperson pays well. Generalisations, like the one portrayed by the global figure of the child soldier, need to speak a common language (in this case, the UN one), to facilitate comparison and to mobilise agendas and funding in the international arena. However, locally, the frictions between the global figure and the local understandings of child recruitment operate in a sort of interacting mutualism/parasitism. In this interaction, the global *always* gains from the dialogue (by collecting testimonies, reports, spokespeople) and remains generally unaffected (the category has been updated only once between Machel's report in 1996 and the Paris Principles, 2007). The local, however, sometimes gains from this relationship (to promote childhood policies, to prioritise the situation in a national and an international agenda), although in specific circumstances ends up harmed (particularly former child soldiers, who are treated solely as victims, depoliticising them, and constraining their choices regarding, for example, the active role they played in war). Isn't it ironic, Fassin (2011) would ask, that: "the very gesture that appears to grant them recognition reduces them to what they are not – and often

refuses to be – by reifying their condition of victimhood while ignoring their history and muting their words” (p. 254).

The figure of the child soldier is problematic because it obscures individualities and diverse childhood experiences in its attempt to maintain the victimhood lens, and it also operates like a trap for former child soldiers, as they are forced to adopt that persona in certain scenarios, or to decide not to do it, and risk being left out of protection programs run by the state and national and international NGOs (*see* Utas, 2011; Shepler, 2005). Former child soldiers learn how to reproduce dominant narratives of their experiences and navigate them. When it is useful, they use it. When it is not, and they can avoid it, they do it. They feel constrained by practices that require them to refer to their past constantly, such as the cases in which to have access to certain services, such as health services or education for themselves or their families, they have to be outspoken about their past in order to be treated differently in a highly unequal country. They would prefer not doing it, but if forced, they will. The figure is also problematic because it, perhaps unknowingly, has created a pre-category of “child-soldier-to-be”. This classification reduces former child soldiers’ childhood experiences to what it is meaningful to understand their recruitment, forgetting that, as Human Rights Watch reported more than fifteen years ago in its 2003 report on child soldiers in Colombia: “Speaking with these former child combatants weeks or months after they had been captured or had deserted, we saw nothing remarkable about them at first. Rather, we found ourselves looking at the faces of *seemingly ordinary, poor Colombian children*” [emphasis added, although at this point, it should not be needed] (p. 5).

So, what is really lost in the translation between global discourses and local understandings of the experience? Former child soldiers’ accounts of their rural childhoods, their accounts as skilled and valuable soldiers and, throughout, their status as political subjects. If we dare to take former child soldiers at their word, then, there are a number of practical implications for researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners alike.

7.2. Implications for the literature, policy and practice, and future research

7.2.1. Implications for the reintegration of former child soldiers

This thesis brings forward what I consider valuable insights that contribute to better disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for former child soldiers, considering that the construction of a new society needs to recognise the knowledge that comes from lives directly involved in the conflict. Although Machel's report was published more than two decades ago, it appears to still dictate how the approach to former child soldiers reintegration is handled: "The transition from child soldier back to child is unimaginably hard" (Machel, 1996, p. 20), as if the aim of reintegration were to return the child soldier 'back to child'; and not back to any type of childhood the former child soldier would want, but back to the western fixed idea of how an ideal childhood should look. Such rhetoric further reinforces child vulnerability and infantilises former combatants, showing that children are not valued, but pitied (McMullin, 2011). A topic that frequently appeared in my interviews with *niñólogos* was how it is not clear how the life that children had before being recruited was better than the one they had when they were in the armed groups. What did they lose? All of them would agree that an ideal childhood in Colombia, at least considering the profile of former child soldiers, was an ideal and not a fact. Stories of poverty, inequalities, lack of education and health services repeat, consistently, in Colombia's rural areas. Was being recruited by armed groups the worst thing that could happen to a child? Some of them would claim not.

However, former child soldiers' first-person accounts collected by this research complete this depiction by rescuing events and features of their childhoods, before becoming soldiers, and also while they were soldiers. Their tales suggest that as part of their transition from former combatants to regular citizens, again, their past must be seen as a whole, and it must add and not subtract. Children should not be seen for what they lack (like an ideal childhood), but for what they bring to the table: their experiences, their memories, their interpretations of what happened to them, their political views on the war, the knowledge they acquired as soldiers, their guilt and

sorrows, as well as their pride and joys. Colombian former child soldiers try to bring the skills of their previous life into their reintegration processes, not only from their time as soldiers but also from their time before joining the armed groups, as *campesino* or rural children, and such contributions should be accounted for and not ignored or neglected, as they do not completely fulfil the expectation of people in need of help and protection.

The ability of former combatants to make their own living is crucial for their transition from soldiers to civilian life. However, former child soldiers are seen by the society as people who have committed crimes and therefore, as unemployable (Salamanca, 2015). Professionals working in the Colombian reintegration program recognise that for a former combatant, a job is more than a paycheck: it is his or her first chance to be a citizen again and to be properly integrated into society. Considering that childhood (in the broad sense) is the time of education, “distinguishing between education broadly, schooling as a particular form of education, and learning as omnipresent in social life” (Shepler, 2014, p. 38), to establish a connection between their past experiences (in the Colombian case as *campesino* and warrior children) and their present self should be unavoidable to facilitate their transition into gainful employment or other means of livelihood (Brett & Specht, 2004, p. 15). On this matter, former child soldiers and people working with them in NGOs and academia, claim that is urgent to take into account skills and previous work experiences, relating to, for example, agriculture or the ability to adapt to difficult environmental conditions. Some even claim that a successful reintegration process should encourage official certification of the global inventory of skills acquired by people who were part of armed groups (*see* Springer, 2005). Although it is true that former child soldiers tend to lack the “typical” work experience of other young people their age, and are unable to be open about their past experiences, hiding their history is only making their reintegration into society harder.

To approach former child soldiers as solely victims also excludes them from the country’s reconciliation and historical memory initiatives, because their accounts will only be considered as victims of the armed conflict, failing to recognise 1. Their

roles as soldiers within armed groups, and 2. Their childhood stories before becoming soldiers but still being affected by war. Furthermore, and even if risking judicial repercussions, former child soldiers could benefit greatly from acknowledging what happened to them within the armed groups and as part of war, instead of just denying it or hiding it. Doing so speaks also about a process of healing and also to reinterpret their past actions, key aspects of their personal explorations as citizens, back in civilian life, trying to be just like anyone else. One main effect of not seeing former child soldiers as solely victims would be to hear their expectations in the present, as the people who they are when they join reintegration programs. By listening to them carefully, and individually, professionals working in those programs would not only recognise their needs as people coming from rural areas, but also their current interests, such as how important it is for some of them to ask forgiveness from a specific community or group of people, their legitimate interest in continuing with a military career as they consider themselves skilled in this task, and the need for learning something more than just the regular training programs offered to them (such as bakery, or hairdressing), to include the learning of new languages, and communicational skills, for example.

Reintegration programs should approach former child soldiers as citizens in formation, with rights and responsibilities, without necessarily making them subjects of criminal prosecution (Steinl, 2017; ICTJ, 2014). In recent years, children and young people have been increasingly included in the operations of transitional justice measures (Ramírez-Barat, 2012), whether truth commissions, reparations programs, or criminal trials, which are presented as an alternative to regular criminal justice in countries emerging from armed conflict. Voluntary participation in the mechanisms of contribution to the truth may be an option for former child soldiers (as it has been tried in countries such as South Africa, Liberia, and Sierra Leona, *see* Steinl, 2017; Armas, 2017), provided that it is preceded by confidential reflection exercises on their past and psychological support (ICTJ, 2014). To allow former child soldiers to participate in diverse post-conflict scenarios, without necessarily holding them accountable of their past wrongdoings, allows them to construct what Wainryb (2011) calls a “sense of moral agency”, in which people are able to acknowledge that

what they did in the past was hurtful and wrong. Such awareness, explains the scholar, is fundamental for the success of their reintegration process and their path into civilian life (*see* Wainryb, 2011).

The following subsections will now suggest the implications of this research for the literature and will suggest some pathways for further research.

7.2.2. Implications for the literature

Normative western understandings of how an ideal childhood should look determine how a non-ideal childhood should look too. In this context, there is a need of more nuanced understandings of diverse childhoods, to challenge “the right order” instead of complying with it. The urgency to “save the child from the soldier”, of protecting idealised and pristine childhoods from the evils of war, crime, and abuse, has influenced the way in which research has been done on the topic. Even if studying the field of child soldiers means entering a conceptual as well as legal and moral minefield (Rosen, 2015), to keep approaching child soldiers mainly as victims of trauma, or as mere soldiers, obscures the opportunity to see this group of people’s own representations of their experiences in a more complex and comprehensive way. Key views of Childhood Studies have directed the sociological look of the field towards specific contexts and experiences, resulting in a wide range of studies focusing on children’s everyday lives in different settings. This study, which narrates childhood from the perspective of young people, hopes to contribute to this body of work by challenging traditional understandings of the lived experiences of children who grow up on heavily impacted war areas and who have experiences as soldiers.

The Colombian vernacularisation of the global figures of the child and of the child soldier suggest we reimagine understandings of childhood by challenging:

1. The idea of where the right place for children is,
2. The notion that children are apolitical and secondary actors in an adult’s war, and
3. The assumption that once a person has experienced a traumatic event, he or she is transformed irremediably, removing from him/her any option of making and remaking him/herself as many times as needed.

Research on child soldiering could do more to challenge the humanitarian approach, while opening the space to diverse childhood narratives that document how children grow up in heavily war affected areas, not just as victims of the circumstances, but how they actually take their place in the unavoidable scenario that war represents in many contexts. More research is needed on how global discourses on childhood are worked out locally, in practice, to keep the conversation going between “the universals” and “the locals”, following Tsing, to keep documenting how the bridges through which knowledge travels, back and forth, talk about what make us similar and also what make us different. It is not about normalising war as the right place for children, but it is about being unsatisfied by accounts that answer to normative expectations of how a certain type of childhood should look, to open the space to more disruptive accounts and readings of childhood. One of the Colombian *niñólogos* interviewed in this research would summarise this as:

We, researchers, usually go, talk and get from people what we need. And former child soldiers have the discourse that we want to hear, but we do not have more processes, or maybe time, that allow, as in archaeology, to take layers and layers and layers until we get to where the real treasure of their experiences lies (Personal interview, RR, Bogotá, Colombia, 30th March 2016).

With this challenge in mind, I suggest now two specific pathways to take the exploration further.

7.2.3. Implications for further research

I suggest my research contributes particularly to three fields of study: children geographies, rural studies, and war studies, as former child soldiers’ childhood accounts have the potential to inform each one of them, in its own way, and simultaneously. Their accounts speak not only of trauma and victimhood (detailed portrayal contained in the global figure of the child soldier), but also of how they adapted to their situations and navigated them. Furthermore, their accounts share nuanced tales of a romanticised rural past, and of how childhood imagination helped them to get through difficult times and harsh contexts. Also, their tales talk about their active involvement in war, that implied in some cases their willingness to join, their determination to remain inside the armed group, and their willpower to escape

the war, to change their fate. In former child soldiers' nuanced accounts of their childhood memories lies an unexplored archive of diverse types of childhood experiences affected by war but not determined by it with the potential to inform how Majority World childhoods are documented and perceived. María, one of the seasoned child soldiers who also participated in the workshops, would put it more nicely: "*Estoy contenta de poder contar una historia que quería contar y por la que nadie había preguntado*" ["I'm happy to be able to tell a story that I wanted to tell but that no one had ever asked me about"] (Field notes, 15th March 2016).

More research is needed on how global discourses such as the rights of the child are worked out locally, in practice (Shepler, 2014, p. 7). I would suggest that children rights' practitioners' involvement in their work, from Malkki's (2015) perspective (to shift the focus of the study of humanitarian intervention from aid recipients to aid workers themselves), could be explored further. Although in this case, their accounts and reflections guided my understanding of the vernacularisation of a global discourse, an approach to humanitarianism among a group of people working with former child soldiers directly could provide a better account of how local frictions operate in Colombia, adding a nuanced approach to the phenomenon. Tsing argues that it is important to learn about the collaboration through which knowledge is made and maintained, and to explore, ethnographically, how global circulating knowledge creates new gaps even as it grows through the frictions of encounter (Tsing, 2005, p. 13). I would then say that this type of research could be of benefit in any context where children are recruited as soldiers, either by illegal or legal forces (including the US and the UK), to keep the work of refiguring the figure going.

7.4. Concluding thoughts – how an *ideal* childhood looks like

This thesis has provided a critical reading of child soldiering in order to reject the naturalisation of humanitarian figures and normalised understandings of the experience. My research contributes to the literature on child soldiering by sharing valuable data from Colombia and by making a case for the importance of trying innovative research methods that allow participants to take the lead on how they want to share their accounts. Children have been traditionally understood and

approached as less than adults, and such view also dominates the children in difficult situations spectrum. Denying their existence as subjects of their own lives, and trying to mask them as victims of circumstances is not doing them, or anyone else, any good. Regardless of how unimaginable or painful it might appear to us, researchers, as outsiders, it is worth taking the risk of recognising them as their own people, responsible for their actions and their life story. To do it, could actually open a door to see them for what they are, complicated people with a diverse range of experiences (their roots) from which they can build up and learn (their routes). To see them, instead of keep on hiding them under the rug, as if not looking at them (which equals to portray them poorly), would make them somehow disappear.

This thesis has been an invitation to refigure the figure of child soldier and the figure of the child promoted by humanitarian discourses through a Colombian lens, and I would like to end this book by, precisely, using the Spanish depiction of what *refigurar* means, to suggest how an ideal childhood could look. To refigure, in Spanish according to the Real Academia Española, is to “*representarse de nuevo en la imaginación la imagen de lo que antes se había visto*”, loosely translated as to represent, again, in the imagination, an image that was already seen. Although my research took great care in not asking straightforward questions to former child soldiers that could guide their readings of their childhoods towards normative understandings of the experience, I did witness some clues of what an “ideal” childhood would look like to them from our daily interactions during the creative writing workshops. Five of the eight participants came to the two long weekends encounters with their children, and they would always treat them as the priority. No one would eat before the children did, and when they were in charge of serving the food, they would choose the best portions of meat to give to their children before distributing the rest of the meal among the group. Anytime their children talked to them, they would give them their full attention, stopping whatever they were doing, and there were no silly questions. They would even include them in some exercises as a way to spend more time with them, like colouring some pictures, or asking them creative questions on topics related to nature. They were all also excited when the writer leading the activities suggested an evening reading some short childhood

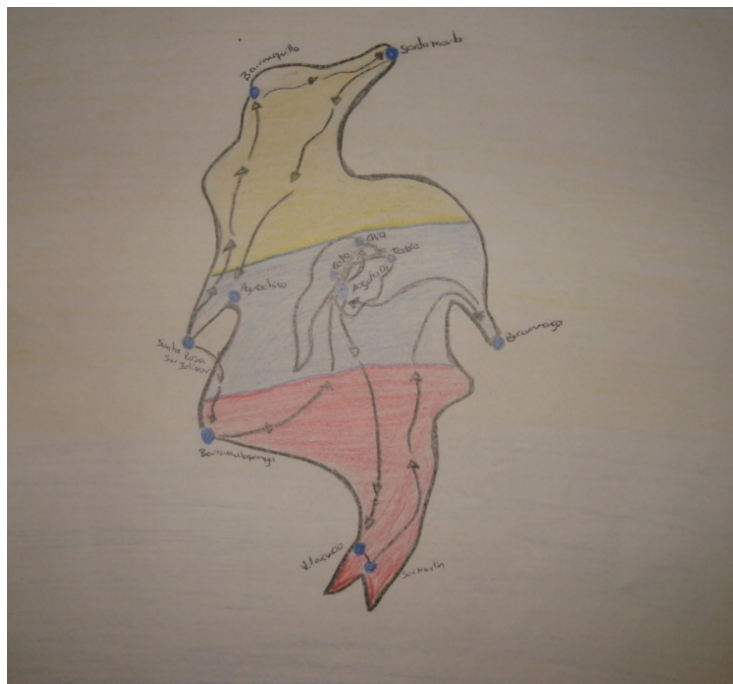
stories aloud, by the fire, and took great care that their children understood every little detail that was shared that night. All of them told me, on different occasions, how happy they were with the opportunity to participate in an activity that allowed them to spend some quality time with their children. Once the daily activities finished, they would dedicate their time entirely to their children, and when they were not around, they would share with the group stories of their children in school, or in their houses; also stories of their children's imagination. Their children were important and central in their lives.

And, it all appears to come down to that.

Epilogue – “Mi Colombia”

At the second workshop, FR started painting his map of Colombia following the given instructions: to map his movements in the territory. He started placing the names of some important locations where he had been throughout his life (“cities where I have lived and which I have also enjoyed”, he said later), covering the diagram, even if not all the chosen places belonged there precisely. Once he had covered almost every corner of the map, he painted “a nose of the devil” in the centre, because in that territory, *su tierra*, he suffered “many things”. Then, he drew connecting lines to show his journeys and then, suddenly, as he would explain later in the group conversation, he started to ‘see’ the profile of a woman and it all made sense to him. For FR, his journeys, his life in the country, had lead him to that moment, to the present, where the most important things in his life were: “his women”, as he called his wife and his daughter. Then, to complete the exercise, he divided the map in three equal parts and carefully spread the colours yellow, blue, and red, the colours of the Colombian flag.

Picture 9. FR's map



Paraphrasing Malkki (1992), it is interesting to see the complexity of how people construct, remember, and lay claim to particular places as “homelands”.

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Appendixes

Appendix A-Ethical review

University of Edinburgh
School of Social and Political Studies
RESEARCH AND RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
Ethical review form for level 2 and level 3 auditing

This form should be used for any research projects carried out under the auspices of SSPS that have been identified by self-audit as requiring detailed assessment - i.e. level 2 and level 3 projects (see <http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/ethics>). This form provides general School-wide provisions. Proposers should feel free to supplement these with detailed provisions that may be stipulated by research collaborators (e.g. NHS) or professional bodies (e.g. BSA, SRA). The signed and completed form should be submitted, along with a copy of the research proposal (or a description of the research goals and methodology where this is unavailable) to the relevant person:

- For staff applying for external funding, the PI should submit the form to Research Office
- For Postdoctoral Fellows, the Mentor should submit the form to Research Office
- For PG Research (PhD or MSc by Research), the Supervisor should submit the form to Director of the Graduate School.
- For UG Dissertations, the Supervisor should submit the form to the Programme/Dissertation Convenor.

Research and Research Ethics Committee will monitor level 2 proposals to satisfy themselves that the School Ethics Policy and Procedures are being complied with. They will revert to proposers in cases where there may be particular concerns or queries. For level 3 audits, work should not proceed until Research and Research Ethics Committee (or the Director of Graduate Studies, in the case of postdoctoral research) has considered the issues raised. Level 3 applications should be submitted well in advance of a required date of approval.

Research Office may monitor the implementation of arrangements for dealing with ethical issues through the lifetime of research projects. Please ensure you keep a record of how you are addressing ethics issues in the course of your research (e.g. consent forms, disclosure processes, storage of data, discussion of ethical issues by project advisory board). Do contact the Research Administrator if any unanticipated ethics issues arise in the course of your research/after the completion of your project.

SECTION 1: PROJECT DETAILS

1.1 Title of Project:

Telling childhood: Growing up as a child soldier in Colombia

1.2 Principal Investigator, and any Co-Investigator(s) (Please provide details of Name, Institution, Email and Telephone):

Nathalia Salamanca-Sarmiento.
Sociology PhD Student at the University of Edinburgh.
n.salamanca@sms.ed.ac.uk
07428063080

1.4 Does the sponsor require formal prior ethical review? YES NO

If yes, by what date is a response required

1.5 Does the project require the approval of any other institution and/or ethics committee?
YES NO
If YES, give details and indicate the status of the application at each other institution or ethics committee (i.e. submitted, approved, deferred, rejected).

1.6 This project has been assessed using this checklist and is judged to be

LEVEL2 (for information to Research Ethics Committee)

LEVEL 3 (for discussion by Research Ethics Committee)

1.7 If Level 3, is there a date by which a response from the committee is required?

10th November, 2014

Name: **Nathalia Salamanca-Sarmiento** Signature.....

PLEASE ATTACH A **COPY OF THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL** (OR ALTERNATIVELY A DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH)

SECTION 2: POTENTIAL RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS

2.1 Is it likely that the research will induce any psychological stress or discomfort? **YES** NO

If YES, state the nature of the risk and what measures will be taken to deal with such problems.

As explained in section 5.2.1.1 Selection of Participants, during **the writing workshops, I will be working with adults, women and men, who experienced the crime of child recruitment. After a great deal of thought about how to do ethically sound research on this topic and with this population (survivors of armed conflict), I am aware that I cannot prevent any psychological stress or discomfort amongst my participants. However, the psychological well being of my participants is one of the foremost concerns in this project, thus great care will be taken to minimize any risk of harm.**

In order to create a safe space for them to talk and to share their stories, I have:

- 1. Selected a participatory method as a way to approach them. The Colombian methodology *Relato autobiográfico y construcción de memoria social* (autobiography creation and construction of social memory) is, in itself, a way to enhance agency, as they will be able to speak and to be in command of the way they tell their stories, reflecting on their lives, in general, without focusing exclusively on their memories of being soldiers.**
- 2. Decided to work with a group of people who already know each other, as participants of my stakeholders' projects. They will come from community and social projects, which will reduce the associated risk of conducting this type of research in a country with an on-going armed conflict. This characteristic will also have an impact on the building of trust required by the activity (to be conducted twice a month for five months). It is worth saying that I will reassure potential participants that their use of the service (through the stakeholder) is not dependent on whether or not they become research participants.**

3. Explored and agreed, with the support of my stakeholders, that a counsellor trained in psychology will be present during the activities. Every workshop will have debriefing procedures, will respect the participants' pace, and will pay attention to non-verbal signs of discomfort or dissent. Although the selected methodology is considered to be a safe place to work on autobiographical accounts, respondent distress might arise. To reduce the risk of such situations, I, as suggested by Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer (2001), and Grétry (2011) will be attentive in anticipating problems, offer rest breaks, and debrief after each day of activity. I will also conduct a planning meeting beforehand with the stakeholders' counsellor to identify any risks to the participants feeling upset and these risks will be minimised. The sessions will be planned carefully with warm up and cool down activities that are enjoyable and allow time to discuss anything else (Hill 2013).
4. Planned on working on an ethical protocol with the support of my supervisors and the *in situ* Feedback Team (Section 4 of my proposal). This document will include contingency plans in case a participant reveals to be at risk of harm.
5. Settings will be selected carefully to prevent risks of distress or humiliation (Alderson and Morrow 2004). To guarantee safety for the participants and the researcher, the workshops will be conducted in the office of the stakeholder. Public places will be avoided (former child soldiers experience social stigma).

As explained by Davis (2012), it is necessary to consider the potential negative impact of these activities on respondents, but it is also pertinent to discuss the possible benefits of these workshops for participants. The participatory method could prove therapeutic and cathartic for the respondents in offering them an opportunity to reflect and discuss their experiences and emotions. Overall, the many possible benefits to the participants outweigh the potential negative effects; therefore, it is foreseeable that these activities may prove therapeutic and at least interesting for the participants.

- 2.2 Does the research require any physically invasive or potentially physically harmful procedures? YES NO

If YES, give details and outline procedures to be put in place to deal with potential problems.

- 2.3 Does the research involve sensitive topics, such as participants' sexual behaviour, illegal activities, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health, or their ethnic status? YES NO

If YES, give details.

The use and recruitment of children is a war crime and people who were recruited as children are considered – socially but not legally – both victims and perpetrators (according to the type of activities they undertook while being inside the illegal armed group). As a result, this is a community that has been strongly stigmatised.

During the workshops, I will be working with adults that experienced child soldiering. As I am interested in former child soldiers that were actually separated from their families and lived with the armed groups for at least a year, I can assume that they were involved in illegal activities (not just recruited for the support roles, porters or cooks, but also for active fighting, laying mines or spying, taking care of abductees, and used for sexual purposes). Therefore, I cannot safely assert that my participants were victims exclusively of child soldiering, as they could also have had experiences of forced displacement, maiming, sexual violence, among other human rights violations.

Furthermore, as I will be approaching their stories through an autobiographical exercise, I cannot safely assume that the only period of time when they experienced some kind of violence was during their time with the illegal armed groups. The root causes of child recruitment are push and pull factors, such as poverty, discrimination (ethnic, tribal, and religious identity), and witnessing acts of violence (SRS-CAAC n.d., Defensoría del Pueblo and UNICEF, 2006). Additionally, once former child soldiers are reintegrated into civilian life, they remain a vulnerable population because of the difficulties they have accessing education and, therefore, qualified work. Being aware of this situation, I will follow the protocol described in section 2.1.

During the workshops (and even if the participants know each other before hand as a way to increase their safe participation), I will take care of the way each group activity is designed, to prevent the disclosure, as far as possible, of sensitive information. As done by Hill (2013) when conducting research with children and young people affected by parental alcohol problems, the sessions will begin with a discussion around confidentiality, feeling safe and the importance of respect. Reassurance will be given to the participants that they do not have to talk about anything they do not feel comfortable with and opportunities will be created for them to 'opt out' easily of group activities.

Finally, throughout the whole research process, I will pay close attention to sensitive information that might be revealed in any of the accounts, although not asked (e.g. armed groups locations or strategies), in order to delete it. Although I will be hypervigilant of these situations throughout the process, I will take care of erase any sensitive information that might have been revealed, also guaranteeing not to keep any personal data for longer than is necessary.

- 2.4 Is it likely that this research will lead to the disclosure of information about child abuse or neglect or other information that would require the researchers to breach confidentiality conditions agreed with participants?

YES NO

If YES, indicate the likelihood of such disclosure and your proposed response to this.

If there is a real risk of such disclosure triggering an obligation to make a report to Police, Social Work or other authorities, a warning to this effect must be included in the Information and Consent documents.

As researcher, I have no legal responsibility to report any information on illegal activities or any other criminal activity that does not include children. In my research, I will be talking basically about childhood memories, and initially I do not foresee any disclosure of information about child abuse or neglect.

However, if any of the participants reveals information related to a child experiencing (or at significant risk of) physical, emotional, sexual abuse or neglect, the counsellor – experienced in working with child protection issues – will be informed, and the stakeholders' ethical guidelines will be followed.

Because of the country context, in order to secure my participants' involvement and safety, I have to guarantee full anonymity and confidentiality. For that reason, at the beginning of every workshop session I will discuss confidentiality issues with the group and explain that whatever they say will be confidential unless they share information related to them or someone else being in immediate danger of serious harm. As explained by Hill (2013), there is a moral responsibility to ensure that following disclosure the participants, and any children involved, are adequately supported. The on-going involvement of the stakeholder will ensure this support. If for any reason this is not appropriate, I will discuss the situation with my supervisors and the *in situ* Feedback Team, in order to decide the next steps.

- 2.5 Is it likely that the research findings could be used in a way that would adversely affect participants or particular groups of people? YES NO
-

If YES, describe the potential risk for participants of this use of the data. Outline any steps that will be taken to protect participants.

Although not intended, as the purpose of this research is to explore former child soldiers' autobiographical accounts and how do they behave against the mainstream discourse of the experience, the findings might challenge perceptions of childhood and, particularly, the views on the lived experiences of children growing up in the midst of a long lasting armed conflict.

It is my hope that from this research I will be able to speak at conferences, specifically aimed at policy makers and humanitarian officers regarding this population, to inform more effective means to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and improve intervention during reintegration processes. It is also hoped, then, that the research findings will inform and shape progressive, positive change in the understanding of child soldiering in contexts of long lasting armed conflicts, rather than specifically targeting them.

If this research draws media attention, all information will be concealed until the analysis has been completed and the thesis has been written down. Any contact from a person or organisation outside the research process will be taken with extra care to guarantee the anonymity of participants and stakeholders (as mentioned in section 5.6).

All the procedures to keep safe all the data gathered during this research are highlighted in section 5 of this Annex.

- 2.6 Is it likely that participation in this research could adversely affect participants in any other way? YES NO
-

If YES, give details and outline procedures to be put in place to deal with such problems.

I am aware of the related risk this project could have on my participants' mental health. Particularly working on their autobiographical accounts could be distressing as the exercises might trigger painful memories or unresolved issues with their past.

However, as I stated before, I am taking care to create a safe space for them to work, and I will be relying on the support of a counsellor trained in psychology during the activities. The counsellor will be a person they are already familiar with, because of their work with the organisation.

As my participants are part of a previous social project led by one of my stakeholders, and thus know each other well, this workshop will be an additional activity in which they will be working. With this decision, I am taking care of any kind of impact that the process might have on them not only during the activity, but also after it. Furthermore, as they are part of an organisation process, they will already be familiar with security procedures related to their involvement in participatory activities and their visits to the organisations' office.

As I mentioned in the Selection of Participants section of my research design, the expectation of this research is that former child soldiers participate willingly, making the decision to opt-in and to leave the research at any moment, if they so wish.

2.7 Is this research expected to benefit the participants, directly or indirectly?

YES NO

If YES, give details.

Levels of illiteracy among former child soldiers vary in different countries, but low levels of education are a defining feature of child soldiering (Blattman 2006). This is why the participatory method suggested by this research aims to empower the participants, by providing them with tools to narrate stories. Such tools are useful not only for the purpose of this research, but also in life. As discussed exhaustively with my stakeholders in the country and talked over with two Colombian women, former child soldiers, this methodology is seen to be a valuable exercise in agency that will allow an over researched community to be in command of their stories, to choose what to tell and what to hide, and to gain a skill that they can apply, later on, in their search for jobs or further education.

Furthermore, as explained in section 2.5 of this Annex, I hope that from this research I will be able to engage in conversation with key stakeholders in the country regarding this population. The analysis and findings have the potential to inform more effective means to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers, and to improve intervention during reintegration processes. Furthermore, this research can also inform and shape progressive, positive change in the understanding of child soldiering in contexts of long lasting armed conflicts.

2.8 Will the true purpose of the research be concealed from the participants?

YES NO

If YES, explain what information will be concealed and why. Will participants be debriefed at the conclusion of the study? If not, why not?

When it comes to the conclusion of the whole study, a preliminary debrief to the participants will be conducted (stakeholders and workshop participants), while the researcher is still in the country.

SECTION 3: POTENTIAL RISKS TO THE RESEARCHER/S

3.1 Is the research likely to involve any psychological or physical risks to the researcher, and/or research assistants), including those recruited locally?

YES NO

If Yes, explain what measures will be taken to ensure adequate protection/support.

Sensitive research

One of the main challenges of this research is to conduct ethical research both with the participants and with the researcher. I have been working closely to the topic of child soldiering since 2009, as a journalist and as a human rights researcher. However, during those years, and before starting my MSc at the University of Edinburgh in 2012, I found it to be an emotionally challenging job mainly because of short timelines and the inability to conducting in-depth research.

As a result, my research decisions were constructed with the aim of preventing unnecessary psychological distress, although I anticipate that the potential still exists. For me, it is fundamental to recognise the potential for emotional impact not only to qualify my work as a researcher, but also to prevent profound effects in my future involvement in social research, as those identified by Lofland and Lofland (1995), and Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer (2001): (a) intentionally avoid establishing personal rapport and empathy as a protection mechanism, (b) research exhaustion, and the ultimate effect, (c) becoming desensitized.

Proposed strategies to tackle emotional exhaustion

As emotional distress is an intrinsic part of research – no matter if working with documents or directly with people – researcher-support will be formalized in the process to improve my psychological well-being. According (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer (2001), such support can be categorised both as formal or informal:

The formal support includes:

1. Regular contact with the researcher's supervisors.
2. Peer feedback both in Colombia (*in situ* Feedback Team) and in Scotland (study group of University of Edinburgh researchers working with children in difficult situations, and Voices of Post-Conflict Project network).
3. Professional supervision, such as psychological therapy. Since I started doing research on human rights violations, I have been regularly consulting a mental health therapist in Bogota. I have kept in contact with her while in Edinburgh (through online communication), and I am planning to maintain such contact throughout this research.

The informal support considers self-reflexivity exercises, such as keeping a personal research diary (this practice of self-awareness helps researchers to be hyper vigilant of their emotions and to later interpret it as data). There are also some options such as debriefing, counselling, rest breaks, and the development of safety protocols (physical and emotional), which will be applied to benefit both the participants and the researcher (mentioned in section 2.1).

Additionally, in preparation for fieldwork, I have been training in Edinburgh with Capacitar's program *Trauma, healing and transformation*, sponsored by the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy (two sessions, May and September, 2014). This program empowers people working with communities that have experienced trauma and teaches strategies to recognise and to treat secondary trauma and compassion fatigue (see: <http://www.capacitar.org/trauma.html>)

Physical risks

When it comes to work directly with former child soldiers, because of my professional background, I feel comfortable in my ability to work with this population and to conduct research in what is for me a familiar context (Colombia, my home). Furthermore, and also because of my years of experience working in human rights and directly with NGOs and humanitarian organisations, I have a solid network of stakeholders that are familiar with my current research and with whom I have kept in touch during these two years living abroad.

My research will likely be conducted in Bogotá, Colombia's capital, as my main stakeholders run programs with former child soldiers there. I have lived in the city most of my life, worked with NGOs based there and travelled around the country teaming up with local grassroots organisations. Without taking security for granted, during my years of experience I have been trained how to react to any possible threats whether alone or as a member of a group (emergency contacts, how to conceal sensitive

information, and how to talk to armed groups – legal or illegal). Although in this opportunity I will not be directly affiliated with a particular local organisation, all my activities with former child soldiers will be conducted in strong alliance with my stakeholders and I will strictly follow their security guidelines. My participants will not have my contact details, and any communication attempt will be conducted through the NGO.

Even if I have been living in the UK since 2012, I am close to the country through regular communication with my family, friends, and former colleagues. During a four month break I had between my MSc and my PhD (while waiting for funding to continue my studies), I went back to Colombia and worked as a social researcher in Bogotá on the topic of children and forced displacement, and travelled to one of the rural areas without any security situation. Nevertheless, once back in the field, I will address this issue with my stakeholders, to update my knowledge about any unknown threat, if any, and security will be one of the topics discussed openly with my *in situ* Feedback Team (page 34 of my research proposal).

SECTION 4: PARTICIPANTS

4.1 How many participants is it hoped to include in the research?

A minimum of five and a maximum of ten former child soldiers for the writing workshops.

4.2 What criteria will be used in deciding on the inclusion and exclusion of participants in the study?

This research includes one type of participants: former child soldiers, and only individuals aged 18 and over will be included in the research.

As for the former child soldiers, the sample chosen will be based on the criteria highlighted in the *Data Collection and Research Methods* of the Research Design section and on being members of a working group run by one of the stakeholders.

Though respondent may have physical illnesses, this should not have an impact on the workshop setting unless it would also impact their mental well-being or ability to consent. As noted above, any respondents that are deemed incapable of giving full consent will not be considered for this research. Instances of physical or mental illness would be judged on a case by case basis with the health of the respondent being the foremost concern. This will be discussed with the organisations I will be working with, and the NGO will be able to help me identify individuals that can, or cannot be included in the research.

4.3 Are any of the participants likely to:

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| be under 18 years of age? | YES <input type="checkbox"/> | NO |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | |
| be looked after children (including those living in local authority care or those living at home with a legal supervision requirement)? | YES <input type="checkbox"/> | NO |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | |
| be physically or mentally ill? | YES <input type="checkbox"/> | NO |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | | |

- have a disability? YES NO
-
- be members of a vulnerable or stigmatized minority? YES NO
-
- be unlikely to be proficient in English? YES NO
-
- be in a client or professional relationship with the researchers? YES NO
-
- be in a student-teacher relationship with the researchers? YES NO
-
- be in any other dependent relationship with the researchers? YES NO
-
- have difficulty in reading and/or comprehending any printed material distributed as part of the research process? YES NO
-
- be vulnerable in other ways? YES NO
-

If YES to any of the above, explain and describe the measures that will be used to protect and/or inform participants.

I am aware that former child soldiers are members of a vulnerable community. However, by working closely with my stakeholders and being supported by my *in situ* Feedback Team, I will try to prevent any additional distress to my participants (as discussed in detail in section 2.1 of this annex).

Furthermore, my methodological decisions are an attempt to conduct ethical research with people who experienced child soldiering, facilitating spaces where they can obtain tools to work on their autobiographical experiences, without forcing them to reflect specifically on their war experiences. Every decision made throughout this research design has been made considering a dignifying approach to my participants, aiming to prevent replicating social stigma. From the beginning, all my participants will be approached as adults, who experienced a particular situation in their childhood, but that are more than just that experience. They will be informed and debriefed constantly, and even if they are in the context of an organisations' process, I will talk directly to them about any decision or proposal that arises along the way.

Even if I do find challenging the relationship that might be established during the writing workshops (student-teacher), I prefer it over conducting interviews, for example, where as a researcher I will be more in 'control' of the conversation. Here, with this methodology, I am looking forward to being able to be co-present in their learning process, and to learn and to reflect on it simultaneously with them.

As highlighted before, I will reassure potential participants that their use of the stakeholders' services (through which I recruit) is not dependent on whether or not they become research participants.

Do the researchers need to be cleared through the Disclosure (Protecting Vulnerable Groups) Scheme?

See http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/pvg/pvg_index.html YES NO

Will it be difficult to ascertain whether participants are vulnerable in any of the ways listed above (e.g. where participants are recruited via the internet)? YES NO

If YES, what measures will be used to verify the identity of participants, or protect vulnerable participants?

4.4 How will the sample be recruited?

The sample will be recruited through the organisations I will be working with. As I do not know the exact background of every possible participant, the organisations I will be working with will help me identify possible participants, who will be recruited in person.

4.5 Will participants receive any financial or other material benefits because of participation?

YES NO

If YES, what benefits will be offered to participants and why?

Since some of the former child soldiers might need to travel for the workshops, the travel costs of every participant will be refunded. Snacks, drinks and lunch will also be provided during the activities.

Before completing Sections 5 & 6 please refer to the University Data Protection Policy to ensure that the relevant conditions relating to the processing of personal data under Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 are satisfied. Details are Available at:

www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk

SECTION 5: CONFIDENTIALITY AND HANDLING OF DATA

5.1 Will the research require the collection of personal information from e.g. universities, schools, employers, or other agencies about individuals without their direct consent?

YES NO

If YES, state what information will be sought and why written consent for access to this information will not be obtained from the participants themselves.

5.2 Does the research involve the collection of sensitive data (including visual images of respondents) through the internet?

YES NO

If YES, describe measures taken to ensure written consent for access to this information.

5.3 Will any part of the research involving participants be audio/film/video taped or recorded using any other electronic medium?

YES NO

If YES, what medium is to be used and how will the recordings be used?

As mentioned in my Research Proposal, the only way I will record the encounters during the workshops is if my participants agree with the procedure, and I can guarantee a non-

invasive way to audio record the activities. Each activity will be transcribed and decoded, and the file will be safely deleted.

I might take pictures of some of the materials produced during the workshops and the process (as proof of the activity). These pictures will not include any recognisable image of the participants, and any specific feature of the location that would enable the identification of the stakeholder.

5.4 Who will have access to the raw data?

I will be the only person with access to the data during this research. In the case of audio or video recordings, I will personally work with the transcriptions.

5.5 Will participants be identifiable, including through internet searches? YES NO

If YES, how will their consent to quotations/identifications be sought?

5.6 If not, how will anonymity be preserved?

During the workshops, I will keep a codebook separate from my research notes in which the identity of the participants will be decoded. The research notes will protect the participants' anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. During the writing-up, participants will remain identified by a pseudonym, and no personal information that could identify them will be included in the thesis. The names of the organisations will not be mentioned in the thesis.

5.7 Will the datafiles/audio/video tapes, etc. be disposed of after the study? YES NO

All digital data will be stored on a computer without network connections and backed up on an external hard-drive (both saved in different places). Audio files will be deleted immediately after transcription. Transcripts of the interviews will be kept in the same security systems as the recordings to ensure that the original transcripts are not accessible to anyone other than myself during the length of the study. Following the completion of the research, after the submission of the PhD thesis and the publication of a book, all digital materials will be permanently deleted.

5.8 How long they will be retained?

Permission will be sought from participants to keep the files for up to a maximum of five years so that the material can be revisited or re-analysed if needed. If any of the respondents do not agree to this, I will ask permission to only record the interview for transcription purposes; after which the audio recording will be deleted and destroyed.

5.9 How will they eventually be disposed of?

Electronic files will be deleted. Paper documents will be shredded.

5.10 How do you intend for the results of the research to be used?

Besides the writing of the thesis and a book, I am interested in bridging the existent gap in and out of academia when it comes to production of knowledge. Therefore, initially I look forward to engaging in an informed debate with Colombian national NGOs, humanitarian institutions, and governmental offices, to discuss the findings of the research and the need to include former child soldiers' first-hand accounts in their understanding of childhood in contexts of long-lasting armed conflicts.

I am also interested in exploring how former child soldiers use this participatory method (writing workshop). Based on the results, I would like to share the experience amongst networks of academic researchers and practitioners.

5.11 Will feedback of findings be given to participants?

YES

NO

If YES, how and when will this feedback be provided?

Yes. To those involved in the workshops, I will offer access to a summarized version in Spanish through the stakeholders. Non-academic reports will be provided to the organisations involved in this research around six months after the completion of my fieldwork.

I will strongly encourage feedback from the respondents, whether it is about the interview, the findings, or any elements of their participation in this process.

SECTION 6: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT

6.1 Will written consent be obtained from participants?

YES

NO

NO

If YES, attach a copy of the information sheet and consent forms.

In some contexts of ethnographic research, written consent may not be obtainable or may not be meaningful. If written consent will NOT be obtained, please explain why circumstances make obtaining consent problematic.

Because of the research topic and the on-going armed conflict, all consents will be obtained verbally and will be audio recorded. As I intend to ensure my participants full confidentiality and anonymity, it would be counterproductive to ask them to sign a form that could identify them.

During the writing workshops, at the beginning of each session, the participants will be asked again about their willingness to be involved in the process. As I mentioned in the ethics section of my research design, the expectation of this research is that former child soldiers participate willingly, making the decision to opt-in and to leave the research at any moment, if they so wish.

However, I will provide two versions of the information sheet: one tailored towards the NGOs and the other one for the former child soldiers, explaining the aims and the design of the research.

Administrative consent may be deemed sufficient:

- a) for studies where the data collection involves aggregated (not individual) statistical information and where the collection of data presents:
 - (i) no invasion of privacy;
 - (ii) no potential social or emotional risks:

- b) for studies which focus on the development and evaluation of curriculum materials, resources, guidelines, test items, or programme evaluations rather than the study, observation, and evaluation of individuals.

6.2 Will administrative consent be obtained in lieu of participants' consent?

YES

NO

If YES, explain why individual consent is not considered necessary.

In the case of research in online spaces or using online technology to access participants, will consent be obtained from participants? **Not applicable**

If YES, explain how this consent will be obtained.

If NO, give reasons.

6.3 In the case of children under 16 participating in the research on an individual basis, will the consent or assent of parents be obtained? **Not applicable** YES NO

If YES, explain how this consent or assent will be obtained.

If NO, give reasons.

6.4 Will the consent or assent (at least verbal) of children under 16 participating in the research on an individual basis be obtained? **Not applicable** YES NO

If YES, explain how this consent or assent will be obtained.

If NO, give reasons.

6.5 In the case of participants whose first language is not English, will arrangements be made to ensure informed consent? **YES** NO

If YES, what arrangements will be made?

The details of the research will be explained in Spanish, participants and researcher's mother tongue.

If NO, give reasons.

6.6 In the case of participants with disabilities (e.g. learning difficulties or mental health problems), will arrangements be made to ensure informed consent? **YES** NO

If YES, what arrangements will be made?

Though respondent may have physical illnesses, this should not have an impact on the workshop setting unless it would also impact their mental well-being or ability to consent. As noted above, any respondents that are deemed incapable of giving full consent will not be considered for this research. Instances of physical or mental illness will be judged on a case by case basis with the health of the respondent being the foremost concern. This will

be discussed with the organisations I will be working with, and the NGOs will be able to help me identify individuals that can or cannot be included in the research.

If NO, give reasons.

- 6.7 Many funders encourage making datasets available for use by other researchers. Will the data collected in this research be made available for secondary use? YES **NO**

If YES, what arrangements are in place to ensure the consent of participants to secondary use?

SECTION 7: Unplanned/unforeseen problems

- 7.1 Is the research likely to encounter any significant ethical risks that cannot be planned for at this stage? **YES** NO

If YES, please indicate what arrangements are being made to address these as they arise in the course of the project.

Working with sensitive topics (child soldiering) and with vulnerable populations (former child soldiers) in a context of on-going armed conflict can always lead to ethical challenges that were not planned for before conducting the fieldwork.

I am totally aware of this situation, and to the fact that I might have to make some decisions on the spot during the fieldwork. I will however always make the decisions that will protect my participants, even if it could have a negative impact on the research. I will also be able to ask the stakeholders, the Feedback Team *in situ*, or contact my supervisors if needed.

SECTION 8: CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The University has a 'Policy on the Conflict of Interest', which states that a conflict of interest would arise in cases where an employee of the University might be "compromising research objectivity or independence in return for financial or non-financial benefit for him/herself or for a relative or friend." See: http://www.docs.csg.ed.ac.uk/HumanResources/Policy/Conflict_of_Interest.pdf

Conflict of interest may also include cases where the source of funding raises ethical issues, either because of concerns about the moral standing or activities of the funder, or concerns about the funder's motivation for commissioning the research and the uses to which the research might be put.

The University policy states that the responsibility for avoiding a conflict of interest, in the first instance, lies with the individual, but that potential conflicts of interest should always be disclosed, normally to the line manager or Head of Department. Failure to disclose a conflict of interest or to cease involvement until the conflict has been resolved may result in disciplinary action and in serious cases could result in dismissal.

- 8.1 Does your research involve a conflict of interest as outlined above YES **NO**

If YES, give details.

Appendix B – Invitation to the writing workshops (Spanish)

Taller de Escritura Creativa “*Mi cuento lo cuento yo*”
Dos fines de semana
16 y 17 de abril de 2016 / 30 de abril y 1 de mayo de 2016.

Con la guía de Pilar Lozano (periodista, escritora de literatura infantil y juvenil, y promotora de lectura y escritura del Ministerio de Cultura) y Adriana Ferrucho (especialista en Teatro Social e Intervención Socio-Educativa), un grupo de personas jóvenes afectadas por el conflicto armado y con interés por la narrativa autobiográfica, tendrá la oportunidad de fortalecer sus herramientas de escritura y sus capacidades creativas, a través de un trabajo individual y colectivo apoyado en metodologías participativas (como remembranzas a través de los sentidos, saberes, territorio –mi casa y mi cuerpo– y redes de apoyo y círculos de fortaleza) en medio de un ambiente natural.

La participación en el taller será certificada por la Universidad de Edimburgo de Escocia y por las facilitadoras. Las personas interesadas en participar serán entrevistadas antes y después de la actividad, con el objetivo de valorar las expectativas y los resultados de la propuesta.

Sobre la investigadora y el proyecto

Nathalia Salamanca Sarmiento es periodista con una maestría en investigación social. Después de trabajar como investigadora por más de diez años con organizaciones sociales colombianas (como Medios para la Paz y la Coalición contra la vinculación de niños, niñas y jóvenes al conflicto armado en Colombia), inició un doctorado en Sociología en Escocia sobre diversas representaciones narrativas de las experiencias de personas reclutadas en la infancia por grupos armados ilegales en Colombia. En su trabajo sugiere que las imágenes de medios de comunicación, organizaciones sociales y organismos del Estado presentan una mirada fragmentada y homogénea de estas experiencias, por lo que le interesa explorar diversas narrativas en primera persona.

La intención de este taller es invitar a un grupo de personas jóvenes con interés por la escritura y los relatos a compartir múltiples historias, no exclusivas de las experiencias del conflicto armado, en medio de una comunidad creativa. Este será un espacio seguro y de confianza, en el que solo la información que cada persona considere pertinente informará el proceso investigativo.

Logística

El primer taller se desarrollará fuera de Bogotá (en un lugar aún por definir) los días sábado 16 y domingo 17 de abril. La salida de facilitadores y participantes será el viernes, 15 de abril, a las 6:30 pm. Todos los participantes contarán con hospedaje (dos noches) y alimentación (tres días: cena del viernes, desayuno, almuerzo y cena del sábado, y desayuno y almuerzo del domingo).

El lugar de encuentro para las actividades del 30 de abril y el 1 de mayo se concertará entre todos los participantes del primer taller.

Para los participantes con hijos menores de doce años, se ofrece para ellos la opción de transporte, alojamiento en la misma habitación y alimentación durante el tiempo del taller. El lugar tendrá zonas de juego y habrá una persona al cuidado de niños y niñas mientras se desarrollan las actividades.

Más información:

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Creative Writing Workshop “I’ll be the one to tell my story”

Two weekends

April 16 and 17, 2016 / April 30 and May 1, 2016

With the guidance of Pilar Lozano (journalist, writer of children’s and young people’s literature, and reading and writing promoter of the Ministry of Culture) and Adriana Ferrucho (specialist in Social Theatre and Socio-Educational Intervention), a group of young people affected by the armed conflict and with an interest in autobiographical narrative, will have the opportunity to strengthen their writing tools and their creative abilities, through individual and collective work supported by participatory methodologies (such as remembrances through the senses, knowledge, territory, house and my body- and support networks and circles of strength) in the midst of a natural environment.

The participation in the workshop will be certified by the University of Edinburgh of Scotland and by the facilitators. Those interested in participating will be interviewed before and after the activity, in order to assess the expectations and results of the activities.

About the researcher and the project

Nathalia Salamanca Sarmiento is a journalist with a master’s degree in social research. After working as a researcher for more than ten years with Colombian social organizations (such as Medios para la Paz and the Coalition against the involvement of children and youth in the Colombian armed conflict), she started a PhD in Sociology in Scotland on various narrative representations of the experiences of people recruited in their childhoods by illegal armed groups in Colombia. In her work, she suggests that the images of the media, social organizations and state agencies present a fragmented and homogeneous view of these experiences, so she is interested in exploring different narratives mainly in the first person form.

The intention of this workshop is to invite a group of young people with an interest in writing and storytelling to share multiple stories, not exclusive of the experiences of the armed conflict, in the midst of a creative community. This will be a safe and trustworthy

space, in which only the information that each person considers pertinent will inform the investigative process.

Logistics

The first workshop will be held outside Bogotá (in a place yet to be defined) on Saturday, April 16 and Sunday, April 17. The departure of facilitators and participants will be Friday, April 15, at 6:30 pm. All participants will have accommodation (two nights) and food (three days: Friday dinner, breakfast, lunch and dinner on Saturday, and breakfast and lunch on Sunday).

The meeting place for the activities of April 30 and May 1 will be arranged among the participants of the first workshop.

For participants with children under the age of twelve, the option of transport, accommodation in the same room and food during the workshop is offered for them. The place will have play areas and there will be a person looking after the children while the activities are taking place.

More information:

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