

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking Worlds in the Wake of Violence

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While research on armed conflict focuses primarily on violence and suffering, this article explores the practices of love and care that sit alongside these experiences of harm. Motivated by our omissions to pay sufficient attention to love and care in our research to date, we ask: How can centering practices of love and care illuminate different pathways for understanding the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence? Building on interdisciplinary literature, we conceptualize love and care as practices and potential sites of politics that shape how people survive and make sense of violence as well as imagine and enact lives in its wake. Drawing from our respective research in Colombia and Uganda, we argue that paying attention to love and care expands scholarly understandings of the sites associated with remaking a world, draws attention to the simultaneity of harms and care, sheds light on the textured meanings of politics and political work, and highlights ethical and narrative dilemmas regarding how to capture these political meanings without reducing their intricacies. For each of the pillars of our argument, we propose a set of questions and avenues that can shape emergent research agendas on taking love and care seriously in contexts of armed conflict.

Mientras que la investigación sobre conflictos armados se centra, principalmente, en la violencia y en el sufrimiento, este artículo explora las prácticas de amor y de cuidado que se dan paralelamente a estas experiencias de damnificación. Motivados por la falta de atención que prestamos al amor y al cuidado en las investigaciones realizadas hasta la fecha, nos preguntamos: ¿de qué forma enfocarnos en las prácticas de amor y cuidado puede iluminar distintos caminos para comprender la reconstrucción de los mundos después de la violencia? Con base en la literatura interdisciplinaria, conceptualizamos al amor y al cuidado como prácticas y lugares potenciales de la política que determinan cómo las personas sobreviven y comprenden la violencia, y cómo imaginan y viven sus vidas con sus consecuencias. Valiéndonos de nuestras respectivas investigaciones en Colombia y Uganda, sostenemos que prestar atención al amor y al cuidado expande la comprensión académica de los lugares asociados con la reconstrucción del mundo, destaca la simultaneidad del daño y del cuidado, esclarece los

significados complejos de la política y el trabajo político y resalta los dilemas éticos y narrativos de cómo capturar estos significados políticos sin reducir su complejidad. Para cada uno de los pilares de nuestro argumento, proponemos una serie de preguntas y enfoques que podrían moldear las nuevas agendas de investigación para que tomen al amor y al cuidado con seriedad en los contextos de conflictos armados.

Alors que les recherches sur les conflits armés se concentrent principalement sur la violence et la souffrance, cet article explore les pratiques d'amour et de soin qui accompagnent ces expériences de préjudice. Motivés par nos omissions d'accorder une attention suffisante à l'amour et au soin dans nos recherches jusqu'à présent, nous nous posons la question suivante: Comment la concentration sur les pratiques d'amour et de soin peut-elle éclairer différentes voies pour la compréhension de la reconstruction des mondes suite à la violence? Nous nous appuyons sur la littérature interdisciplinaire et nous conceptualisons l'amour et le soin en tant que pratiques et que sites potentiels de politique qui façonnent la manière dont les gens survivent et donnent un sens à la violence, ainsi que la façon dont ils imaginent et constituent leurs vies dans son sillage. Nous nous inspirons de nos recherches respectives en Colombie et en Ouganda et nous soutenons qu'accorder de l'attention à l'amour et au soin étend nos compréhensions intellectuelles des sites associés à la reconstruction du monde, attire l'attention sur la simultanéité des préjugés et du soin, apporte un éclairage sur les significations nuancées des politiques et travaux politiques et met en évidence les dilemmes éthiques et discursifs concernant la manière de capturer ces significations politiques sans réduire leurs intrications. Pour chacun des piliers de notre argumentation, nous proposons un ensemble de questions et de pistes qui peuvent façonner les programmes de recherche émergents sur la prise au sérieux de l'amour et du soin dans les contextes de conflits armés.

Keywords: care, violence, feminism

Palabras clave: cuidado, violencia, feminismo

Mots clés: soin, violence, féminisme

Introduction

Scholarly narratives about armed conflicts are, almost by definition, typically characterized by a primary, if not exclusive, focus on violence, suffering, cruelty, and harm. Yet, in the midst and wake of violence, people also fall in love, forge social and intimate relationships, and extend different forms of care to one another. This article has emerged through the omissions and erasures that resulted from not having adequately engaged with these practices of love and care in our own research on violence. We thus take up Angela Lederach's question, who asks (Lederach 2019, 398), "what is seen—and made possible—when we widen the frame and focus the lens on life and love, rather than limit the field of vision to death and suffering?"

Roxani's research has explored various dimensions of feminist peace and conflict studies, most recently focusing on the politics and hierarchies of victimhood in Colombia (Krystalli 2019b). Philipp's research focuses on the lived realities of male sexual violence survivors in Northern Uganda (Schulz 2020). Although different in geographic focus and subject area, our work is united by feminist epistemological, methodological, and analytical curiosities and commitment to the study of violence, peace, and survival. The meanings of feminist standpoints in research are as varied as the people who pursue them (Zalewski 2006, 47). In our case, feminist commitments have led us to ask which forms of violence become (il)legible to different actors and with what effect, to model our work on a relational and care-based

approach to research (Fujii 2017a, 3–6) as well as to critically reflect on the power dynamics in which our research methods and ethics are steeped.

According to Cynthia Enloe, maintaining the capacity to be surprised is a cornerstone of a feminist sensibility (Enloe 2004, 13). Enloe's work has modeled turning that surprise on oneself, critically reflecting on what one has missed in one's own analysis of world politics over the years. Taking up Enloe's invitation, this article centers that with which our own past work failed to sufficiently engage: the importance of love and care in "remaking a world" (Das et al. 2001, 3) in the wake of violence.

We are deliberate in calling this an omission and erasure, and not a silence. Our interlocutors, ranging from former combatants to victims and survivors of violence, and from humanitarian practitioners to bureaucrats of transitional justice, regularly carried out the work of care and love and narrated it to us. For reasons linked to epistemological hierarchies that privilege certain topics when it comes to researching violence (Biddolph 2021, 532), on which we critically reflect herein, we failed to adequately represent those narratives in our academic work to date. Yet, love and care kept coming up and made themselves visible—even when we did not always ask directly about them, even when we failed to treat them as central to our academic work. In this article, we thus ask: How does taking the practices of love and care seriously illuminate different pathways for understanding the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence?

Drawing from our respective research in Colombia and Uganda, we show that centering practices of love and care opens up different sites and spaces, and highlights a different set of actions, through which to understand the work of remaking a world in the wake of violence. Relatedly, love and care reorient scholarly attention away from an individualistic and neoliberal understanding of peace and violence and toward a more relational understanding of both harm and survival (Stites, Humphrey, and Krystalli 2021, 2721). We argue that taking love and care seriously requires asking a different set of questions and documenting a different set of stories than those that focus primarily or exclusively on violence and harms. Our primary interest is not in *proving* that love and care matter to people remaking worlds in the wake of violence (although, as we demonstrate, they do) but, rather, showing *how* our study and understanding of those experiences would be different if we took those dimensions seriously.

Taking love and care seriously in contexts of violence and armed conflict allows us to paint a "different kind of war story" (Nordstrom 1997, xvi), which ultimately offers a more textured representation of individuals' and communities' experiences, beyond a universalizing storyline that focuses on violence, suffering, and cruelty. Importantly, we are not setting up a dichotomous hierarchy: we are not suggesting that love and care are more important to document than violence. On the contrary, we argue that practices of love and care sit *alongside* violence and its echoes. Considering this complex coexistence is essential for understanding remaking a world in the wake of violence.

This article proceeds as follows: We begin by reflecting on the conceptual dilemmas surrounding our use of the terms love, care, and remaking a world. Next, we review the interdisciplinary bodies of literature that have shaped this investigation, focusing particularly on emotions and international relations (IR), the anthropology of love, and the ethics of care. This overview highlights both how mainstream academic scholarship on politics and international relations has failed to center love *and* how certain scholars have challenged these erasures. In the following section, we provide some brief context on the sites and methods of our respective research in Uganda and Colombia.

The empirical discussion is then structured around the main analytic themes that guide our argument, each of which we accompany with a set of questions that can form the basis of a research agenda on love and care in remaking a world. First, we highlight how treating sites of violence and victimization as spaces of love and

care expands the frame of understanding the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence. Second, we draw from our interlocutors' narratives to demonstrate not only that care is political work but also that political work requires the work of care. Third, acknowledging that violence, love, and care do not exist in an "either/or" relationship, we draw attention to the questions that emerge when considering their simultaneity. Fourth, we critically examine the moments in which shedding light on love and care can risk depoliticizing subjects and relationships in ways that create narrative and ethical dilemmas for scholars and other storytellers. Finally, we underscore that inquiring about love and care is not *inherently* political; in that vein, we highlight a set of questions to explore how love and care can open up more textured investigations of the meanings of politics and the political while remaking a world in the wake of violence.

Conceptual Dilemmas: Remaking a World, Love, and Care

Echoing Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, and Margaret Lock (2001), we rely on the language of "remaking a world" to describe how people make sense of and respond to violence as well as imagine and enact a life in the wake of it. For Das et al., these processes of "remaking a world" center around how communities "read, endure, work through, break apart under, transcend" (Das et al. 2001, 3) violence and other forms of social suffering. Das et al. recognize that the trajectory of that imagination and its associated activities are not linear (Das et al. 2001, 6) and that neither the language nor the goal of "healing" resonates with all those who suffered harms (Das et al. 2001, 19). We agree that the language of "healing" or "recovery" sometimes serves to "authorize the political processes of normalization" (Das et al. 2001, 14) in ways that do not reflect the texture and echoes of how violence lives on, even after the events associated with it appear to be over.

Describing the temporalities of violence, peace, love, and care presents a related challenge. As feminist scholars have highlighted (Ní Aoláin 2006, 843–44; Walker 2009, 23), formal declarations of the end of war that relegate violence to the past are often out of step with how people experience the ongoing effects of it (Wibben 2020, 117). "Remaking a world after violence," then, is an illusory statement, suggesting that violence has neat endings or that the act of remaking happens only after such endings are declared. To address this narrative challenge, we rely on Christina Sharpe's formulation of "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016). In her powerful book on the afterlives of slavery, Blackness, survival, and care, Sharpe draws attention to how the metaphor of the wake unfolds on different temporal planes and at different sites (Sharpe 2016, 13). The wake does not create false or sharp distinctions between past, present, and future, acknowledging that the effects of oppressions and harms are felt across time. Relying on Sharpe's powerful articulation enables us to capture the simultaneity of harm, loss, care, and love across time in ways that hold more possibilities than speaking of life "after" violence.

Exploring love and care as practices of remaking worlds in the wake of violence raises questions regarding the linkages and slippages between the two notions and terms: How are love and care similar? And how may they be different? We deliberately do not provide a singular definition of love or care, refusing to pin down them to any of their ontological or epistemological dimensions, because our analysis below is guided by the meanings our research interlocutors have attached to these terms and by the ways in which they understood and narrated the interrelations and differences between these concepts and practices. Rather, in this section, we reflect on the conceptualizations of love and care that shape how we have interpreted our interlocutors' narratives. These interpretive frames are inspired by critical scholars across fields and disciplines; in particular, we are intellectually indebted to scholars and activists focusing on feminism, race, and other vectors of power, oppression, and liberation who draw attention to practices of love and care

from a vast range of contexts and positionalities (hooks 2001; Tuck 2009; Ahmed 2014; TallBear 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Berry and Lake 2020; Hobart and Kneese 2020; Manivannan forthcoming).

As an expression, “love-and-care” is clunky. To understand our reliance on it, we must first explain what we do *not* mean by these terms. Although narratives and practices of romantic love, sexual love, and love practiced in recognized dyads (such as couples) are part of what we are interested in, these manifestations of love do not fill the entire frame of our exploration. Relatedly, inspired by the work of Kim TallBear (2016), we do not understand love exclusively within a heterosexual matrix or within the confines of the biologically or demographically recognized units in which it may unfold (such as families and households). As the analysis below demonstrates, the love we analyze also encompasses the love of place, political work, and more. As Holly Porter learns from one of her interlocutors in Northern Uganda, “you cannot understand Acholi love if you think that it is between two people” (Porter 2019, 12)—to the effect that “our understanding of the phenomenon of love should consider the wider societal backdrop as well as the particular web of social relations [...]” (Porter 2019).

In terms of care, we are less focused in this article on the formal work of professional caregiving (as done, e.g., by nurses) and are, instead, more attuned to the everyday manifestations and relations of care as well as their political dimensions, as practiced by those who do not have a professional mandate or obligation to provide care. In their widely cited definition of care, Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher specifically recognize its relational component, by conceptualizing care as “everything that *we* do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that *we* can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 1993, 103, emphasis in original). Virginia Held maintains that “care is both a practice *and* a value. As a practice, it shows us how to respond to needs and why we should. It builds trust and mutual concern and connectedness between persons” (Held 2006, 42).

In terms of love, then, bell hooks’ conceptualization provides a key interpretive frame for our analysis. hooks understands love not as a passive noun but rather a set of actions and practices, best understood as a verb (hooks 2001, 4). According to hooks, love is composed of different ingredients, including not only care but also “affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (hooks 2001, 5). Noting how love “makes the subject vulnerable, exposed to and dependent on another”, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed further draws our attention to the relationalities and interdependencies in which love is caught up (Ahmed 2014, 125). Most of these components of love are also integral aspects of feminist understandings of care as entailing, among others, empathy, responsibility, trust (Held 2006, 10), commitment and responsiveness to needs (The Care Collective 2020, 27), or committed knowledge (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 69). Recognizing these similarities leads Catherine Bolten to remark that “love and care cannot be separated conceptually or in practice; love *is* care, it is one’s explicit enhancement of another individual’s life” (Bolten 2012, 8).

These commonalities also mirror some of our interlocutors’ understandings of love and care and their respective relationships. To illustrate, as the *Rwot* (chief) of *Palwo* in Northern Uganda explained to us, “in our culture, love and care are viewed as inseparable. When there is love there is also care, and the other way around is also true.” Yet, another interlocutor from Northern Uganda explained that “love and care normally move together. So, love and care how I understand it is looking after the person that you love. [...] It is about taking time to care for someone who matters in our life. You create relationships and take care of each other.” Cast in this light, love and care are seen as inherently linked and interdependent.

Yet, feminist care ethicists paint a somewhat more complex and ambiguous picture. Care can flourish under the influence of love, but it does not necessarily depend on or require love. Feminist analyses have revealed that the intricacies of care, illuminating “how relations of dependency care can be cruel as much as loving”

(Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 11), are often bound up in power discrepancies (Tronto 1993, 109) and can at times involve violence or abuse of power (Held 2006, 25). Critical feminist insights have also shown that care can be instrumentalized politically (and economically) and can perpetuate inequalities (Ticktin 2011, 3). Building on this work, we recognize that there can be care without love and (declarations of) love without care. In speaking about them in relation to one another, we draw attention to the connections and tensions our interlocutors experience between these concepts and practices, rather than suggesting that love and care necessarily always go together.

Love and Care in Scholarly Literature of Violence and Its Wake

“Love is one of the most difficult things to do in human community,” the poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama says (Ó Tuama 2020), “but yet, in politics and conflict resolution, love is often left out of the conversation because it seems either airy-fairy or impossible.” Why might that be the case? Across different disciplines, it seems that love and care are often considered “too personal,” “too mysterious,” and “too sacred” to be subjects of scholarly inquiry (Swidler 2001, 2). Love and care are often regarded as feminine values and practices (Tronto 1993, 111), relegated to the personal domain and the private sphere, and thereby outside the realm of what much (although, crucially, not all) academic scholarship on world politics considers relevant for examination. This inattentiveness to love and care is particularly pronounced in scholarship on peace and conflict, which is predominantly concerned with experiences of violence, suffering, and cruelty. As our own erasures of love and care in our scholarship to date suggest, ideas about which questions, narratives, and experiences an academic discipline takes seriously influence the stories researchers choose to investigate, document, and publish (Enloe 2004, 69). “International relations is a science that affirms death, rather than life,” Olivia Rutazibwa (2021) says, highlighting how the politics of knowledge creation can sideline academic discussions of love and care (see also Rutazibwa in Bhabra et al. 2020).

Bearing in mind these reasons the academic study of peace and conflict has not sufficiently engaged with love and care, the sections below synthesize some promising areas of resistance to those exclusions and bring together the interdisciplinary bodies of work that have informed our own explorations.¹ In articulating our contributions, we recognize that we exist in communities of thought, practice, and relation that seek to resist silences and challenge individualistic framings of contributions.² Simply put: We are—luckily—neither the first nor the only to be thinking about love and care in this moment. In this section, we, therefore, endeavor to discuss insights into love and care in the existing literature in ways that acknowledge our situatedness within conversations, rather than fetishize our own innovation.

With that in mind, this article first expands the promising work on emotions and IR to go beyond suffering and loss—and, further, treats love and care not only as *emotions* but also as *actions* and *practices*. Second, our analysis builds on the methodological and interpretive frames that have emerged out of the “anthropology of love” to identify ways of inquiring about the simultaneity of harm and care and the political meanings of love in contexts affected by violence and its wake. In so doing, we shed light on how understandings of remaking worlds in the wake of violence shift when researchers employ these interpretive and methodological frames. Third, this article represents an interdisciplinary cross-pollination by applying philosophical and feminist insights on the “ethics of care” to the realm of understanding violence, its wake, and peacebuilding, which, as we demonstrate, has only

¹This literature review focuses primarily on academic scholarship on love and care within the realm of remaking a world in the wake of violence. Academic silences and erasures on this topic are not always coupled with silences in other literature. Outside academia, we have been particularly inspired by the work of Adrienne Maree Brown (2019), among others.

²Our thanks to reviewer 1 for the invitation to think about our contributions as part of our caring practices.

recently begun to engage with these frames. The metaphors in this paragraph—from building to pollination—all represent collective, imaginative, world-creating acts, which capture our hope for how to engage with the existing state of knowledge on love and care.

Emotions and IR

Although our analysis of love and care goes beyond treating them primarily as emotions in favor of understanding them instead as practices and sets of actions, recent attention to affect and emotions within the social sciences and humanities more broadly and IR specifically (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014) has expanded the vocabularies with which scholars can explore the experiences of world politics. As Thomas Gregory and Linda Ahäll point out, “we cannot make sense of war if we are unable or unwilling to pay attention to the sensual experiences of those affected” (Gregory and Ahäll 2015, 2).

This contention operates on the feminist understanding of war as experience (Sylvester 2013), which maintains that “war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from people’s physical, emotional, and social experiences, not only down from ‘high politics’ places that sweep blood, tears, and laughter away, or assign those things to some other field” (Sylvester 2013, 2). Such an engagement thereby departs from much of the dominant theorizing on emotions in IR, which “remain focused on how emotions matter to states, or to how statesmen and women are making decisions in the name of the state,” but which do not yet fully “explore emotions through the everyday experiences of those actually, personally affected by war” (Gregory and Ahäll 2015, 7).

Much of the scholarship on emotions in war is focused predominantly on *certain types* of emotions, including anger, humiliation, shame, fear, rage, or trauma. This article expands the frame to center love and care, thus widening the emotions—and practices—that we consider relevant to the understanding of violence and its wake. As Veronique Pin-Fat argues, there is “an avoidance of love [as a] founding feature of IR that is hidden in plain sight” (Pin-Fat 2019, 181). When Tina Turner, whose curiosity of “What’s love got to do with it?” guides our inquiry in this article, sings that love is “nothing but a secondhand emotion,” she already seems to have an answer about love’s position within literature on emotions in IR.

Despite these overarching erasures, however, our analysis builds on an emergent body of work that has begun to challenge the relative inattention to love in contexts of armed conflict—although, tellingly, as we show below, these explorations are often situated within anthropology. Holly Porter observes how “in the midst and the aftermath of war people continue to fall in love [and] to have intimate encounters” (Porter 2020) and examines how processes of (re-)constituting a home in the aftermath of violence relate to, and can constitute, love and intimate relationships. In the context of the Sierra Leonean civil war, Catherine Bolten similarly investigates the importance of understanding practices of love to fully comprehend “how the war unfolded” (Bolten 2012, 2). Bolten understands love to be a foundational tenet of social personhood that “informed individual actions and influenced major events during the war” (Bolten 2012, 3) and forming “the foundation on which individuals recreated a meaningful world” (Bolten 2012, 5). These analyses have shaped our inquiry by providing interpretive frames for taking love and care seriously as well as by reorienting the understanding of violence and its wake away from individualism and toward a more relational model that takes complex emotions and bonds seriously.

Anthropology of Love

Our analysis is also gratefully indebted to the anthropology of love (Hardt 2011; Govindrajana 2021). This body of scholarship has begun to pay attention to the ways in which discourses, sentiments, and practices of love are (re-) produced through

complex historical, cultural, and sociopolitical processes. Some of this work explores love in connection to livelihoods, social connections, and social capital. The dominant frame in such explorations treats love as a “concept of material loyalty–relationships forged and sustained in complex, often compassionate acts of resource exchange” (Bolten 2012, 3). Yet, other work in this domain pays attention to love and care between humans and nonhumans, shedding light on webs of relation and kinship (Archambault 2016; Govindrajana 2021). The latter work, in particular, draws attention to how frames of mutuality and kinship challenge human-centric narratives of individualism in favor of seeing “webs of reciprocity” (Kimmerer 2020, 20).³ These analyses have informed ours by providing a theoretical and methodological blueprint for understanding how love and care manifest in daily life and how they shape the ways in which people make sense of themselves and their relationships.

At the same time, in much anthropological and sociological writing, romantic(ized), sexual(ized), or material(ized) notions of love often fill the entire frame. As such, much of this engagement often considers love in the context of heterosexual kinship or marriage relations (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006) or in relation to sex and sexuality (p’Bitek 1964). As feminist and queer writing on the erotic has shown (Lorde 1993; Macharia 2019), such a focus on intimacy is potentially important for illuminating the range of manifestations of love and care as well as intimacy and desire (Berlant 1998). At the same time, the “reduction of intimate relations to sex is problematic” (Thomas and Cole 2009, 4) when it insufficiently engages with the other dimensions of relationality that emerge through intimate encounters. This appears particularly dangerous in contexts across sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa or Latin America, where it tends to reproduce colonial tropes of hypersexuality. We propose here that it is possible to learn both from how the existing work across disciplines has engaged with love and care and from the perils of framing love and care only in a particular light.

Ethics of Care

Our analysis has also benefitted from engagement with the growing body of literature on the ethics of care, which has developed as an alternative, feminist moral framework in contrast to the dominant liberal individualism approach (see Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989). The ethics of care sees people as relational, connected, interdependent, and inherently vulnerable, recognizing the moral value and importance of relations and the inescapable reality that care is universally required for all human beings to survive.

In recent years, the ethics of care has developed as a moral outlook with relevance for, among other fields, medical practice, law, political life, and international relations (Robinson 1997, 2011; Robinson and Confortini 2014). Scholars have applied insights on the relevance of care ethics for the domain of global and international politics specifically to questions of armed conflict and peace. According to Sara Ruddick (1989, 141), caring values and practices, such as attentiveness, compassion, responsiveness to needs and integrity, offer a “committed and visionary standpoint, from which war’s destructive nature can be criticised.” Carol Gilligan (1982) likewise identifies care as a strategy for conflict resolution and peacemaking, given that care aims to reduce harm, prevent escalation, and attend to the needs of vulnerable populations (see Pettersen 2021, 29). These interventions highlight the potential for interdisciplinary cross-pollination, wherein feminist philosophers engage with questions of peace and conflict. However, despite the fact that “care cuts through

³ Kimmerer is an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and is part of broader indigenous conversations on relations, care, kinship, and place (see, indicatively, Watts 2013). We thank reviewer 2 for encouraging us to engage more explicitly with this work.

social practices in all contexts of peace and conflict” (Vaittinen et al. 2019, 196), the growing field of peace and conflict studies itself has not yet, with only a few recent exceptions, sufficiently engaged with care (Robinson and Confortini 2014; Vaittinen 2015; Pettersen 2021).

It is possible to conclude this overview of the literature on emotions and IR, the anthropology of love, and the ethics of care with a pessimistic attitude, stemming from noticing the (many) moments in which love and care are made invisible within the academic study of world politics. Even if an engagement with love and care takes place, this mostly occurs in disciplinary isolation and in silos. Yet, this overview also contains a sense of possibility, highlighting that there are scholars working across fields and disciplines to take questions of love and care seriously as subjects of scholarly investigation. In doing so, they both encounter and challenge hierarchies that shape which questions are worthy of study and which experiences scholars (especially at the centers of disciplines) imagine to be sites of politics. As Marie Berry and Milli Lake (2020) write in their reflections on social justice struggles during the Coronavirus pandemic, it is possible to “reimagine alternative forms of counterhegemonic resistance through a politics of love and care.” Echoing the possibility of this reimagination with specific reference to radical care in social movements, Hi’ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese acknowledge “care as a vital but underexamined praxis of radical politics that provides spaces of hope in precarious times” (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 1). And what is that hope? In the words of Lauren Berlant (2011, 690), “a properly transformative political concept [of love] would provide the courage to take the leap into a project of better relationality.” Our own work is inspired by and builds on these collective insights by both acknowledging the omissions or erasures *and* drawing hope from the voices that create space for more meaningful engagement with love and care in exploring the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence.

In proposing a *Care Manifesto*, which recognizes these politics of love and interdependence, *The Care Collective* (2020, 5) invites us to consider: “What, we ask now, would happen if we were to begin instead to put care at the very centre of life?”⁴ In the next sections, we take up this invitation and explore how centering love and care highlights exciting possibilities for understanding the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence.

Context and Methods

Our analysis draws on our respective research engagement in Colombia and Uganda between 2010 and 2018. In Colombia, as of April 2021, the state has officially recognized over nine million citizens as victims of the armed conflict (*Unidad para las Víctimas* 2021).⁵ Over half of those recognized as victims have experienced displacement, often alongside other harms, including extra-judicial killings, gender-based violence, land dispossession, and enforced disappearance. An array of armed actors have participated in the violence since the mid-1960s, ranging from state armed forces to guerrilla groups and paramilitaries to criminal bands, whose motivations to join the conflict have evolved over time. Although the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) remains an important attempt for marking the formal end of

⁴We thank reviewer 2 for also drawing our attention to the resonances between recent work on care collectives, mutual aid, and the anarchist tradition. For a compelling synthesis of the political stakes of this work, see, indicatively, Spade (2020).

⁵This number, like all numbers in this section, should be interpreted carefully, as statistics about violence and harms are part of the contested terrain of the conflict. This number, for instance, does not include people who suffered harms that they did not feel comfortable reporting to state authorities (particularly if the state was the presumed perpetrator) or which fell outside the time period and typology of harms the state determined as giving rise to eligibility for recognition as a victim.

one dimension of the conflict, its implementation has been lacking, particularly in terms of ending insecurity and delivering on the promises of justice. In particular, Afro-Colombian and indigenous community leaders, women, human rights defenders, and former combatants in the process of transition to civilian life continue to face significant threats. Over four hundred human rights defenders and two hundred and fifty former combatants have been assassinated between the signing of the peace accord and February 2021 (Indepaz 2021). As such, alongside the efforts to establish a meaningful peace, violence persists in Colombia, both in the sense of ongoing manifestations of it and in terms of the lasting effects of past crimes and harms.

In Northern Uganda, the more than two-decades long armed conflict (1986–2006/8) between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group and the government of Uganda similarly resulted in internal displacement of almost the entire population, large-scale human suffering caused by abductions, killings, and violence unleashed on the civilian population by both the LRA rebels and the government troops as well as a breakdown of most of the region’s basic infrastructure and social relations. While the war formally ended through the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement in 2008, the LRA remains active, although in severely limited capacities and outside the Ugandan territories. At the same time, in Northern Uganda, various forms of violence and its aftereffects continue to impact the population—whereby war-related hardships, including mental health problems, land disputes’ stigmatization or spiritual distress, and reintegration challenges continue to shape contemporary realities. As one of our interlocutors explained, “the conflict is not yet over; the battlefield has only shifted from the bush to people’s mindsets.”

In recognition of certain similarities in these armed conflicts and peace processes, there have been numerous exchanges between victims/survivors, former combatants, practitioners, and researchers in and from Colombia and Uganda, coming together to think comparatively about insights they can glean from both contexts (see, indicatively, Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011; Campbell, Findley, and Kikuta 2017). In bringing these cases in conversation here, our intention is not to conduct a rigid and systematic comparison of whether and how love and care are similar or different in each case. Instead, our approach echoes Lee Ann Fujii (2017b, 664), who argues for the value of focusing on “diverse settings not as a paired comparison but because different contexts can ‘illuminate’ different pathways [...], thereby helping to sharpen theoretical claims.” Inspired by the resonances across our experiences in our respective research contexts, we illuminate the ways in which love and care shape the dynamics of remaking a world in the wake of violence.

As we emphasized in the introduction, exploring love and care was not, until recently, the primary research question or aim for either of the research projects from which we draw here. In practice, this reality has had several implications for how we approach this discussion: First, we have relied on follow-up questions in our semistructured interviews, rather than on questions we had deliberately asked with this article in mind. Second, and relatedly, we have revisited—in technical terms, recoded—conversations, interview transcripts, and field notes in a different light than the one that shaped our initial analysis of these materials.

Much has been written about the value of listening to silences, omissions, and erasures on the part of research interlocutors (Parpart and Parashar 2019, 8; Fujii 2010, 237–39). Our approach to this article has invited us to correspondingly reflect on how to account for the silences and omissions that arose from what we, as researchers, had failed to initially ask about or had noted down but failed to pay attention to and subsequently set aside in favor of other research priorities and concerns. This process of revisiting also highlights the iterative, relational nature of in-depth research—even after a phase of “fieldwork” appears to have ended. Simply put, we remain not only in dialogue and reflection with our interlocutors through (re)coding, analysis, and writing but also in literal conversation and consultation.

Keeping that conversation open, in the form of continuing to take our interlocutors' words seriously and to make sense of them in new light, as well as in direct conversations with them after we have left "the field,"⁶ is part of our caring commitments in our respective research contexts (Krystalli 2019a).

Roxani has worked in Colombia in various capacities as an academic researcher as well as a peacebuilding and humanitarian practitioner since 2010. For this article, she draws primarily from a broader project on the politics and hierarchies of victimhood during transitions from violence (Krystalli 2019b) as well as from her research on the gendered experiences of former combatants (Mazurana, Krystalli, and Baaré 2017). Collectively, for these projects, she has conducted over three hundred semistructured interviews with bureaucrats engaged in mechanisms of transitional justice, victims/survivors of conflict, former combatants, and human rights defenders. She has also observed over one hundred events linked to the implementation of the transitional justice in Colombia. For this article, the majority of the interviews and observations Roxani relies on took place between July 2016 and September 2018.

Philipp has researched in Northern Uganda over an extended period since 2011. Over these years, he has engaged in ethnographic participant observation and has conducted over two hundred interviews, focus group discussions, and informal conversations with different groups of conflict-affected communities, cultural, political, and religious leaders and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or community-based organizations. Between 2015 and 2018, Philipp conducted doctoral dissertation research in Northern Uganda from which many—albeit not all—of the reflections offered here stem. Conducted in affiliation with the Refugee Law Project (RLP), that project focused specifically on sexual violence against men, drawing on participatory research with groups of male survivors across Northern Uganda (Schulz 2020).

Our research was modeled after a relational (Fujii 2017a, 3–6) and care-based approach to research (Anumol 2021).⁷ In practice, this meant that not only was the research process designed in a way that centered participation and reciprocity (Schulz 2020; Krystalli 2021) but also that we sought to conduct research in relationship *with* groups of interlocutors, rather than *on* them, and that we remain in relationship and conversation beyond the periods of research "in the field."

Spaces and Sites of Violence, Victimhood, Love and Care

In both Colombia and Uganda, victimhood is a site of mobilization and political claim-making during transitions from violence (Baines 2017, xv; García-Godos 2018, 39; Krystalli 2021, 126).⁸ In this context, organized victims' groups and associations play multiple roles: They provide emotional and material support to those who identify as victims/survivors; they assist these individuals, groups, and communities in navigating bureaucracies of peace and justice; and they shape and articulate political claims about experiences of violence, meanings of peace, and expectations of justice (see Edström and Dolan 2019, 176; Schulz 2019, 172).

⁶ We echo critiques of "the field" as a limited, and often colonial and extractive, imagination of where and how research takes place (Shepherd 2017) and are inspired by the recent work to reimagine the sites and temporalities of fieldwork (Knott 2019).

⁷ Among other things, this has meant that we, as researchers, practiced and received different forms of care throughout the research process. This article, however, does not focus on the experience of the researchers themselves and instead centers care as practiced and conceptualized by our interlocutors.

⁸ Consistent with the authors we cite, we use "victim" here as an emic term, reflecting the many meanings different interlocutors attach to it as a label that has the potential to direct state attention and resources, as well as shape claim-making, during transitions from violence. We also recognize that some reject the term "victim" or choose to selectively and strategically embrace it. We, thus, also occasionally refer to survivors or victim/survivors, depending on the respective context of our work.

In this and the following section, we analyze victims' and survivors' associations as sites in which the work of love and care unfolds in the wake of violence. We caution, however, against homogenizing victims/survivors (Rudling 2019, 422) or reifying their associations as pure, passive, or framed in exclusively positive or romanticized terms. Scholars highlight that victims' groups are spaces of contestation (Kovras 2017), manifesting not only in conflicts with the state or other civil society groups but also as tensions *within* each organization. These contestations can result from hierarchies of victimhood (Lawther 2020, 12) as well as from different interpretations among victims/survivors regarding their needs, priorities, relationships to the state, and strategies for organizing and articulating political claims (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021, 88). How, then, do practices of love and care sit alongside these forms of contestation and how do these practices illuminate different understandings of remaking a world in the wake of violence?

Focused on groups of male sexual violence survivors in Northern Uganda, the existing work has explored the roles of survivors' groups in relation to justice-making on the microlevel (Schulz 2019, 172), as pathways of agency (Touquet and Schulz 2021, 225–26), and as local ecologies of resilience (Schulz and Ngomokwe 2021, 120)—all of which tie in with processes of remaking worlds. In these spaces, survivors regularly engage in different kinds of activities, including peer-to-peer counseling, communal income generation, and agricultural activities. What I have not yet paid sufficient enough attention to, however, are the ways in which the groups are also underpinned by loving and caring practices and relations.

Psychosocial support activities and livelihood interventions in the wake of violence have been subjects of important critique, highlighting the inadequacy of these programs and their inconsistencies with victims'/survivors' needs and priorities as well as their neoliberal assumptions about agency and politics (Cronin-Furman, Gowrinathan, and Zakaria 2017). At the same time, however, some survivors also specifically use the language of compassion and care to discuss these spaces and recognize the ways in which through these activities, survivors relate to one another in loving and caring ways. As one survivor explained, "in the groups we are always there for one another, we support our fellow members with compassion and care." During their regular meetings, which are often held in the comfort and intimacies of members' homesteads, survivors share stories of their experiences; they comfort each other and offer solace and consolation and take care of each other's different daily needs.

To illustrate, during one of the group meetings I was fortunate to join in June 2016, a group of fifteen survivors gathered under the comforting shade of a large mango tree in the compound of one of their members, enjoying shared soft drinks, groundnuts, and each other's company. As one of the survivors began narrating his experience of sexual abuse by government soldiers over twenty-five years ago, and was visibly struggling to hold back tears, one of the members sitting next to him held his hand in support while others nodded empathically in shared understanding. Reflecting on these dynamics, one survivor explained to me that "when we meet and sit together, we can talk freely about what happened to us, because everyone understands [...]. We always take care of each other, specifically so when we are struggling."

In a different meeting, a survivor shared with the group that he urgently needed money for his share of the funeral costs of a recently passed cousin but that he struggled to meet these financial demands. In support, several members immediately chipped in and shared their own (scarce) resources, thereby taking care of each other's financial needs. Taking care, in this context, thus extends from emotional to material support, indicating the range of the work of care in such contexts. Ultimately, these dynamics highlight that victim/survivor groups can form a basis for genuine relationships among survivors, shaped by affection, recognition, trust, and

commitment. Not only are these key ingredients of love and care but also, importantly, survivors themselves make sense of these activities through the prism of love and care.

The occasion of the survivor associations' meeting, and the structure of the group at large, thus represents a caring space which "inspires new affective connections [...] and empowers participants by reinforcing feelings of belonging, identity and dignity" (Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt 2017, 97). As one survivor put it: "I found another family to live with and those are the survivors in the group [...]. We started showing love and care to our peers, and [...] today we are strong as a team or even like a family because of our support." Similar to other community-based organizations elsewhere, the survivors' groups in Northern Uganda thereby provide a space wherein "members care for themselves, and in so doing persevere in their search for justice" (Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt 2017, 96)—something that the groups clearly set out to do (see Schulz 2019, 172).

This is reflective of how survivors themselves seem to think about the groups. Julius, the chairperson of the *Men of Courage* survivors' group in Northern Uganda, explained to me the group's overarching objective of raising awareness and advocating for justice on behalf of male survivors. In that process, Julius further explained, the group "allows everyone of us to be free and to support one another," "to find solutions for how to move forward," and "to take care of ourselves and of our fellow members." While the aim of the group is not explicitly to carry out the work of care, but rather to advocate for justice, practices and relations of care nevertheless shape, guide, and result from these interactions, activities, and objectives.

At the same time, however, despite these compassionate dimensions, relations among survivors within the groups are not free of tensions, disagreements, and hierarchies. Some members within the groups, for instance, take on much more prominent roles and get to attend (prestigious) gatherings and events in Gulu or Kampala, or indeed abroad, while others are denied that opportunity, sometimes leading to hierarchies and frictions among members in the groups. Framing the groups (also) as spaces of care, therefore, does not mean to suggest that they are always free of conflict, allowing us to consider conflict, harm, and care side by side, as we explore more fully below.

This analysis of victims/survivors' associations and their gatherings in Northern Uganda as potential sites of love and care has several important implications for research agendas. First, these spaces need to be understood beyond the prism of violation or through the lens of communities bound by harm. Rather, these associations are also, simultaneously, sites of different forms and practices of care and may well be understood as "caring communities" (The Care Collective 2020, 45). In practice, this highlights an opportunity for researchers to ask different sets of questions about where and how the work of care is done and how that work sits alongside (and is a core component of) engaging with harms and pursuing justice.

Second, and relatedly, while love and care appear in the narratives of our interlocutors, suggesting they are rhetorically important to how they make sense of their experiences, the significance of these frames transcends the rhetorical. Practices of care range from victims/survivors supporting one another to responding to the lasting effects and ongoing forms of violence, material support, reciprocity, and forging new relations that shift participants' senses of the self, community, and belonging. Paying close attention to language, and understanding how narratives of love and care correspond to (or are sometimes dissonant with) loving and caring practices, thus highlights opportunities to better understand relationships and survival strategies in the wake of violence.

Third, understanding victims' associations as spaces of care also reminds us to not exclusively look for these practices in the world of what Miriam Ticktin calls "regimes of care," referring to the "diverse set of actors, such as NGOs,

international institutions, legal regimes, corporations, the military and states” that create “regulated discourses and practices grounded on the moral imperative to reduce suffering” (Ticktin 2011, 3). In other words, noticing the work of love and care in less hierarchical, more relational spaces reorients attention away from top—down understandings of assistance, support, and recovery. As the next section explores, these practices also invite us to reconsider how care inflects the meanings of political work in the process of remaking worlds in the wake of violence.

Care as Political Work; Political Work as the Work of Care

As part of their advocacy on behalf of and support to those who identify as victims, leaders and members of victims’ associations do a lot of bureaucratic, logistical, caring, and affective work. In calling it “work” here, we reflect both the meanings our interlocutors have attached to these activities in the Colombia context and the recognition that care is best understood not only as a value but, crucially, also as a practice (Tronto 1993, 108; Held 2006, 9). These types of work are often invisible, meaning that neither does the state formally recognize them as work nor do those who do this work receive appropriate compensation or support for it. In this section, we analyze how victims/survivors make sense of the political dimensions and effects of this care work.

Care work in Colombia on the part of victims/survivors for their peers is similar to the work in Uganda described above and often also unfolds *outside* the context of organized victims/survivors’ associations meetings. In brief, it involves “checking on people, making sure nobody is alone,” as one victim leader said in an interview in rural Antioquia. “Dealing with all the state agencies and the forms is very confusing, very dispiriting,” another victim leader echoed in Bogotá. “We show up, knock on the door, have a coffee, ask how people are feeling. We share strategies, we take [multiple] buses to the Victims’ Unit together. This is how we make the process more human for other victims.” This is a form of care work that does not necessarily require love and, in fact, sometimes drains the caregivers (Tronto 1993, 143). As one victim association leader said in Medellín, “having people knocking on your door for help at 10 nearly every night is harsh.” When I ask her why she still does this work, she simply said “because we must.”

While I did not explicitly ask if these victims’ association leaders made sense of this work through the prism of care, re-reading their narratives in this light made the care dimensions clear, especially through a perceived contrast to the attitude of the state: “The state won’t care for you. We take care of our own selves and each other.” Acknowledging that it is not enough to be recognized as a victim, but one also has to *do* victimhood in particular ways,⁹ these narratives highlight that both the narrative and the practice of care are part of how victims in Colombia make sense of and do the labor of victimhood.

Crucially for this analysis, these victims see the care work of victimhood as part of the *political* work they do. As an interview with a victim leader in the municipality of Rafael Uribe illustrates:

Talking to you is political work. Talking to people all day — victims, state officials, the public — that is political work. I talk to people about being displaced, about losing everything. Then I talk to people about the struggle (*la lucha*) to deal with all these entities. Talking to hundreds of students, from Universidad Nacional, from Spain, from Sweden, that’s work. Knocking on doors all day to see if people have all the

⁹“Doing victimhood” here echoes feminist conceptualizations of “doing gender” (Butler 1988). Feminist theorists emphasize that gender is not something one “is” but something one *does* through the iterative repetition of acts over time. This understanding of both gender and victimhood is simultaneously active and reactive, constantly reconstituting itself depending on context, identities, statuses, and labels that we are accorded and on the ways in which we appropriate or subvert them.

forms they need, if they have medicine, if they have services. That's work, political work.

In this context, “the political” does not refer exclusively or primarily to electoral, official, or state-centric politics. Rather, this victim leader’s articulation of the political tracks more closely with what Erin Baines describes as a “conversation about what it means to be a human being within the realm of social action” (Baines 2017, 13). Thanks to the important interventions of feminist scholars across disciplines (Weeks 2007; Bahn, Cohen, and van der Meulen Rodgers 2020), the insight that care work is *work* and that it is political is well documented (Federici 2012). What our interlocutors now make visible is that political work, too, relies on care work, which often receives less scholarly attention. Inquiring about this care work; understanding its components; exploring its effects on people’s time, well-being, fulfillment and/or exhaustion, and senses of self; and analyzing its connections to imaginations of “the political” open up important avenues for investigating the practices and politics of remaking a world in the wake of violence.

Simultaneity of Harm and Care

As the preceding analysis indicates, during armed conflict and in its wake, experiences of violence and harms often sit alongside practices of love and care. This simultaneity cuts across different aspects and phases of conflicts. One specific context in which this is particularly visible is that of armed groups, and in particular rebel or insurgency groups (Coulter 2009; Bolten 2012), such as the LRA in Northern Uganda (Baines 2014). As documented in a growing body of scholarship (Baines 2017; Kiconco 2021), relations within the LRA were largely founded upon and structured by violence, directed not only against the civilian population but also within the rebel ranks and among recruits, in the forms of abductions, beatings, torture and killings, and gender-based violence (Amony 2015; Baines 2017).

However, rather than only being defined by cruelty, violence and suffering, relations within the LRA *also* involved practices of support, care, and indeed compassion between abductees. As Coulter (2009, 95) notes with reference to Sierra Leone, “everyday rebel life, despite the violence and abuse, still had many similarities with ‘traditional prewar life’”—something that also applies to the context of the LRA. One of our interlocutors in Uganda, a former abductee, explained: “I would compare the environment in ‘the bush’ to that at home. Yes there is violence and brutality, but there is also commonality and caring for each other.” Describing relations between young women and girls in the LRA, one former “forced wife” shared with us: “We were all living under the same roof, and between us wives, we would always help one another in a situation of sickness, delivery, or when taking care of the baby, or nursing after delivery [...]. That is how we took care of each other, and in these situations we were sometimes even full of joy and happiness.” Marginalizing these practices and relations of care, as much the existing scholarship tends to do, thereby risks painting an incomplete picture of life within the LRA, and within rebel ranks more broadly—one that is dominated overtly, if not even exclusively, by violence and cruelty.

At the same time, however, social relations in the LRA, including between women and between commanders’ wives, were not always and exclusively supportive or cathartic but were often also very hostile (Amony 2015; Baines 2017; also see Utas 2003, 180) and the cause of much suffering and harm (see Coulter 2009). As Acan, who was abducted as a girl and forced to marry a commander in captivity, explained, “there were too many quarrels in the bush, always quarrels and fighting. But it was really the worst between the other wives, who always fought me and picked on me all the time.” In her narrative account of life within and upon return from the LRA, Evelyn Amony, who was forced to marry the LRA’s top commander Joseph Kony,

likewise narrates various examples of these tensions, hostilities, and indeed forms of violence between women and co-wives. For example, she recalls an incident when Kony returned from a trip to Khartoum, in Sudan, with a jacket that he gave her as a gift – something which she, importantly, interpreted as a sign of Kony’s care and affection (Amony 2015, 40). Her co-wives, however, were angry that Kony had given that jacket to her. “I put on the jacket to go to get water from the well’, she recalls, where “Fatima [Kony’s first wife] and the elder wives were waiting for me. They started to beat me [...]. Then they told me: [...] ‘today you will see. We are going to beat you and slice your vagina completely’” (Amony 2015).

Offering another illustration of this simultaneity of violence and care in the context of the LRA, Amony recounts a story in her memoir that she herself describes as “particularly painful,” which involves an incident several months after her abduction, when Joseph Kony ordered a boy to whip her, as punishment for her spilling a cup of sorghum (Amony 2015, 19). At some point, she loses consciousness caused by the violence unleashed on her. The very same boy who inflicted the pain and suffering on her “is then ordered to carry her to a nursing station” and assists in “attending to her wounds, using warm water to loosen the threads of fabric that had become enmeshed in her flesh” (Baines 2017, ix), as both of them cried together. While the reflections above show how violence, suffering, love, and care can coexist over longer time horizons, and how there may be moments of care and then moments of violence, this particular example also illuminates the simultaneity of violence and care within one specific event and one particular relationship. This example also aptly illustrates the often highly complex and ambivalent web of social relations within the group and between persons, beyond any universalizing story lines.

Considering these simultaneities, then, has important implications for how we think about violence, harm, and care in the context of rebel groups especially, and in times of violence and its wake more broadly. As our empirical reflections have sought to document, relationships within the LRA were characterized not only by support, care, and compassion for one another but also by violence and suffering. Focusing only on the love and care risks creating a false binary whereby the aggressors are only ever imagined as purveyors of harm and those forcibly recruited to an armed group are imagined to always behave generously toward others. At the same time, focusing only on the harms risks eliding the moments and practices of care that enabled some to survive under violent circumstances. This dual focus is important because, as Eve Tuck writes, “it more closely matches the experiences of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures” (Tuck 2009, 420).

Impermissible Loves

Notably, not all parts of the story of simultaneity of harm and care that we narrate here are equally well received among peacebuilders, transitional justice practitioners and scholars, and other storytellers. As Sara Ahmed writes, there is a “hierarchy between emotions,” with some being more permissible than others to embody and narrate (Ahmed 2014, 3). This hierarchy is particularly observable in the treatment of narratives of love and care within armed groups in Colombia. Speaking of the tendency to discuss sexual violence within armed groups, as opposed to exploring the power dynamics and significance of consensual, loving relationships too, the former FARC combatant Nina¹⁰ said in an interview: “When things go badly, they are well documented. Or at least they can be. But when they go well, there’s silence.” Nina’s observation echoes feminist and indigenous critiques of “damage-centered

¹⁰ All names are pseudonyms to comply with the approved research ethics protocols for the respective studies.

research” (Tuck 2009), defined as research that invites people to “only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing” (hooks quoted in Tuck 2009, 413). As Joel Robbins similarly notes in his call for moving beyond the suffering subject in anthropology, “the subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression now very often stands at the centre of anthropological work” (Robbins 2013, 448), thereby too often overshadowing a “focus on the good,” such as well-being, empathy, care, or hope (Robbins 2013, 457).

What does this silencing of “things going well” or what our interlocutors frame as “the good” miss? To begin with, it fails to account for the ways in which relationships shape women’s experiences within armed groups as well as their attitudes toward a potential return to civilian life. “The word ‘rape’ is allowed in civilian conversations about women in armed groups. The word ‘love’, not so. But there is love everywhere you look,” Nina explained. As her comment highlights, the language and practice of love—not just coexistence or tolerance, not just lack of coercion to join an armed group, but *love* for some of the people in it—open up the possibility of agency. Acknowledging the fact that moments of agency in spaces that, simultaneously, are permeated by violence requires holding multiple complex truths in one embrace. In the words of Eve Tuck (2009, 416), this epistemological approach is “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives.” When I asked Nina to elaborate on the manifestations of love, she said: “Some of those men, I loved like my own brothers. More than my own brothers, to tell you the truth. My brothers were bastards (*hijoeputas*). Some of the [male] insurgents in our group treated me better than my own family.” These sentiments resonate with what some of our interlocutors from Northern Uganda have shared with us: “The people I met in the bush are now more important and close to me than my biological brothers and sisters. [...] We are more than friends. We are more than relatives. I cannot describe the relationships with any words,” one formerly abducted woman narrated.

These intimate attachments—to individual people, communities, and ideas alike—could become sources of worry for civilians surrounding the former combatants who knew of their history in armed groups. In May 2018, Raquel and I sat in the living room of her two-room house in one of Bogotá’s peri-urban peripheries. We had met as part of an NGO initiative to facilitate conversations between former combatants and those recognized as victims of the Colombian armed conflict. Over the years, Raquel had shared with me that she was finding sources of meaning and joy in her life as a civilian. Yet, there was also a persistent nostalgia. “I miss it, to tell you the truth. But if I tell people here, or even in the NGO [name redacted], that I miss my life as a *guerrillera*, they worry I will pick up a weapon and join the guerrilla again. That’s not how it is. I just miss the sense of fraternity, the sense of purpose. It was real love (*amor verdadero*.)” Again, our interlocutors from Uganda voice similar concerns. “Life generally is not easy when you return from the bush. Sometimes I secretly wish I would still be with the rebels. At least there we had a purpose, and a community where I even felt I belong,” Adong, who spent five years with the LRA, explained.

These concerns became a recurrent narrative in our conversations with women combatants, both in Uganda and in Colombia. In December 2017, I sat on Maria’s bed in her prefabricated accommodation in a transition zone for former FARC combatants in the Meta region of Colombia. The walls did not go all the way up to meet the tin roof. When the wind blew, it rained dust on Maria’s bed. Maria told me she missed living in the jungle. “Not the war, not the weapon. The jungle.” She went on to describe missing the natural environment, the moisture, the plants. “I miss how we would read together,” she said. “We would pick a text and we would sit in the trees and think together about it.” I suggested to Maria that this was possible in civilian life and during “transition” too. “Yes, yes,” she said. “But it is not the same

outside the jungle. I loved that life. It was *love*,” she concluded with emphasis, with a hand pointing toward the tin roof.

The interlocutors quoted in the next section highlight how, to the extent that scholars and journalists ask women combatants about love, they are interested narrowly in romance—much in line with the persistent focus in the literature on romantic (and/or sexualized) love, as teased out above. Maria’s story underscores the significance of expanding the frame. The love that Maria narrated transcended romance, or the love for a single person or community, to encompass a sense of place, a way of living, and a way of relating to other sentient beings. That love—and the sense of nostalgia for it—shaped how Maria made sense of her process of transition out of the armed group and how she approached the prospect of relationships to place, people, and the environment in the wake of violence. All of this, then, has important implications for Maria’s (and indeed others’ with similar experiences) journey “remaking a world” in the wake of violence, both in terms of imagining that world into being and in terms of enacting the transition toward it.

It may be possible to interpret Maria’s story or to convey similar insights without relying on the language of love. Indeed, excellent literature on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants in Colombia, Uganda, and beyond powerfully describes the importance of social bonds and relationships among combatants (McMullin 2021), senses of community and cohesion, and the effect of the above on transitional subjects (Theidon 2007; Suarez and Baines 2021). Building on this work, we argue here that when the language of love and care appears in the narratives of research interlocutors, it is essential to reflect it in our own. This is not only an ethical, methodological, and narrative commitment but also an acknowledgment that taking love seriously has important analytical implications by opening up a set of questions: What are the different spaces, forms, and relationships in which love shows up within armed groups? How do those who experience love narrate its effects and orientations? Where do love and care diverge from one another and where do they reinforce each other? How do those experiences of love and care shape attitudes to and trajectories of transition? And, crucially, how do these narratives and experiences of love sit alongside narratives of harm and violation within and outside armed groups?

Words of Caution: The Anti-Politics of Love and Care

While our analysis has emphasized the importance of taking love and care seriously as practices of remaking a world, we must also consider the moments in which our interlocutors worried about making sense of their experiences through this lens. Motivating these concerns was the recognition that, while one’s own understanding of love and care may involve treating these as political practices, others—from scholars to peacebuilders and bureaucrats to journalists—may frame love and care less as practices and more as “traits,” which are associated with the feminine, the emotional, and the intimate (Tronto 1993, 111–12). By emphasizing those connotations at the expense of all others, these actors risk framing love and care as what James Ferguson calls an “anti-politics, depoliticizing everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight” (Ferguson 1990, xv). We illustrate these concerns through two vignettes, drawing from interactions with former combatants in Colombia and bureaucrats and service providers in Colombia and Uganda, respectively. In the case of the former combatants, frames emphasizing the “anti-politics of love” result in the reductive treatment of loving subjects. In the case of bureaucrats, narratives about being motivated by love and care to do their work risk eliding the ways in which the same bureaucracies can simultaneously neglect, cause harm, or reinforce forms of structural and systemic violence against those they purport to serve.

This concern about the reliance on frames of love and care to depoliticize lives and experiences of violence was observable at a gathering of women who had been part of armed groups in Colombia. Eight women, who had joined four different armed groups among them in Colombia over their lifetimes, came together with a group of researchers at a series of gatherings in 2018. Some of the women used the language of “former combatant” to describe themselves; others resisted that language because they felt they still fought, albeit by different means, for different sociopolitical causes yet others now described themselves as peace activists. What united them, on this day, was not only their shared past in armed groups but also a shared interest in their work on the part of both Colombian and foreign researchers. “We are here because you are studying us,” Luciana said in her welcome remarks. “I am speaking in terms of ‘you’ and ‘us’. For us, your questions and research topics are sources of reflection. I would like to remind you: We are not objects of study. We are people, with voice, with politics. We are interlocutors. We are participatory subjects.” Everyone in the room nodded vigorously.

In the context of caring to be seen as “people, with voice, with politics,” as Luciana said, narratives of love were not always welcome companions for these women. “They want to know specific things,” Fernanda said about her interactions with journalists and academic researchers. “Did you kill anyone? Did they rape you? What do you think about love? And what do you do with menstruation in the jungle?” This narrow frame of inquiry not only fails to capture the full range of conversations that these women may be interested in having but also exposes the gendered targeting of certain kinds of questions—notably reducing women to the narrative remit of sexual violence, menstruation, love, and perpetration of harm. As Luciana said: “Did any of these journalists ever ask Marulanda [nom de guerre of top FARC commander] what he thinks about love?” Her question was met with laughter around the table. “Men won’t talk about their pain, about their unfulfilled dreams,” Marcela added. “It’s not that women only talk about emotions. We talk about development, about the environment, about everything. But they [journalists and researchers] talk to us like we only know feelings.” In many ways, Luciana’s reflections make visible the ways in which the language, practices of, and inquiries about love and care are gendered, relegated to the personal domain, and thereby depoliticized.

More specifically, Luciana illustrated how depoliticization on account of love particularly affects women combatants. “Love disqualifies the political project of women,” she said. “‘She was the mum/sister/lover of a *guerrillero*’ always becomes the explanation of how you got there [to the armed group].” At the same time, women combatants reclaim the politics of love for themselves, reminding us not to assume that something is *inherently* depoliticizing and that people sometimes challenge their own depoliticization. Luciana said: “What we say to that: Love does not disqualify your political being and doing. Eugenia and I were talking about love the other day. We said, ‘we didn’t love those men [in the armed group]. We loved their politics. When they stopped having good politics, we stopped loving them.’” Laughter erupted around the table once again. Luciana reminds us that it is essential to pay attention to the complex and shifting relationship between love, politics, and agency: love is not only the outcome of certain choices, relationships, and actions during violence and in its wake; it is also a motivating force for them.

This vignette highlights that a researcher, journalist, or peacebuilding practitioner simply *inquiring* about love does not mean that the exploration that follows will necessarily capture its full texture or political meanings. On the contrary, inquiries about love can be gendered in the narrative expectations they place on certain interlocutors and on the scripts those interlocutors are expected to produce about their experiences during and in the wake of armed conflict. The implication here is that those of us who wish for love and care to be taken seriously need to direct such questions to people of all genders, across the spectrum of actors engaged in both violence and the acts of remaking a world (including victims/survivors,

combatants, bureaucrats and those who complicate and transgress these categories). A meaningful engagement with love and care also requires an openness to documenting not only the presence of emotions but also the meanings and practices people attach to them. This requires not assuming that love is always already political or depoliticizing but, instead, investigating the meaning of politics in a given context and understanding how interlocutors see the (dis-)connections between love, politics, and care.

This exploration of the multiple meanings and practices of love, care, and politics is not always comfortable for researchers. Particular discomfort arises when researchers notice how the *narrative* of love and care does not always go hand in hand with the practices—and, in fact, declarations of love and care can *appear to be* doing the work of love and care without actually enacting it. As Elizabeth Povinelli has warned, a narrative of love can also be a “hegemonic home of liberal logics and aspirations,” reinscribing dynamics of domination (Povinelli 2006, 17). To illustrate: The language of love—and, in particular, references to doing things “with heart”—recurred in encounters with transitional justice bureaucrats and service providers in Uganda and Colombia alike. At times, this led to paradoxical observations. Coming off the elevator at the Office of the High Advisory for Victims in Bogotá in June 2018, I spotted banners hanging above the desks in the communal workspace, one of which contained a big red heart, with “I love the victims” written around it.

The image of the big red heart was not the only manifestation of love in interactions with bureaucrats. In a tense meeting between state officials and those recognized as victims in Colombia, one official said, with tears in her eyes: “Look, we do this work as an offering, a constant offering, an offering of heart. We do it from love.” Other officials standing in the back of the room echoed, like a chorus: “Yes, from love!” Similar sentiments have been shared by those assisting victims and survivors in Northern Uganda. As one of our interlocutors, working as a transitional justice practitioner, explained to us:

“You can only ever support victims of war when you have them in your heart. You need empathy and care to understand them and then be able to assist them. You need to understand them and you need be able to walk in their shoes – and this calls for compassion and care for those you are working with [...]”

These narratives highlight several insights that are relevant to our inquiry. To begin with, echoing the earlier analysis, interlocutors within the bureaucracy and service provision make a case for treating bureaucracy and service provision itself as potential spaces of love and care in ways that may transcend official mandates or expectations on the part of researchers and claimants approaching these institutional sites. This recognition, in turn, requires us to acknowledge the simultaneity of harm and care: bureaucracies, institutions, and formalized processes in the wake of violence can often reinforce and enact harms (Ticktin 2011, 3) and are potentially sites at which various interlocutors narrate, practice, or experience love and care.

Once again, then, the stakes of both engaging with and ignoring love and care are complex, opening up fruitful lines of further inquiry: What work do love and care narratives do, and how do they sit alongside practices that demonstrate a lack of care—or outright neglect and harms—because of actions of those same bureaucracies and service provision? How do interlocutors who declare themselves to do the work of love and care make sense of the moments in which they, and the institutions they are part of, fail to act lovingly and in caring, careful ways? Do those on the receiving end of this love and care, in fact, feel loved and cared for? How and when do these “recipients” reciprocate these feelings and practices, and how do they disrupt or speak back to them? While these questions emerged from the contexts in which we work, we suggest that they represent analytic vectors that apply more widely to those inquiring about love and care in the wake of violence in different settings.

Conclusion

Taking love and care seriously, then, as we propose in this article, renders visible multiple practices, relations, dilemmas and tensions that are attentive to the complex, intertwined, and often unruly dimensions of violence and its wake. In addition to the manifestations of love and care that we have explored in this article, there are numerous dimensions of love and care in the narratives of our interlocutors and beyond that require further exploration. These include, for instance, manifestations of care practiced within the research encounter, among research participants, or between researchers and interlocutors. They also include love that not only unfolds among and between humans but also extends to nonhuman elements, place, nature, and landscape (Archambault 2016; Govindrajana 2021). Critical writing across disciplines (Watts 2013; Kimmerer 2020) reminds us of the connectedness of all living things, as also encapsulated by the Africanist tradition of *ubuntu*, which recognizes mutual and relational bonds between societal, environmental, and spiritual worlds (Hunfeld forthcoming). Importantly, animal and plant life often carry the scars of violence for generations and thus require (human and political) care and compassion to engage with these lasting effects (Killean 2021). At the same time, however, wider ecosystems must themselves be viewed as interconnected organisms that practice and enact care, mutuality, and reciprocity, as forest ecologist Suzanne Simard teaches us (Simard 2021). A research agenda on love and care, such as the one we put forward here, benefits greatly from taking these dimensions into account. Paying attention to all of these dynamics, then, opens up possibilities to paint more careful and *accurate* pictures of the lived realities of violence and processes of remaking a world. In specifically referring to more *accurate* depictions of human experiences of violence and its wake, we are thinking with María Puig de la Bellacasa, who reminds us that fittingly enough, “the term *accurate* derives from care: ‘prepared with care, exact,’” whereby “doing something with care led to that of ‘being exact’” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 91).

Like any other research subject, love and care can be approached with a “hermeneutic of trust” (Ricoeur 1970) or suspicion (or, indeed, a mix of both). We have argued both for the significance of taking love and care seriously and for an awareness of how this frame can either depoliticize the subjects of study or serve to hide ongoing violence, harms, and inequalities. In the face of this complexity, we suggest that it is not helpful to ask “but, do they *really* love and care?” about our respective research interlocutors and subjects. Rather, the lines of inquiry that a focus on love and care draws out seek to shed light on the meanings, effects, and contradictions that narratives and practices of love and care bring to the fore. To bell hooks’ invocation to treat love as a verb rather than a noun (hooks 2001, 4), we add a call to treat love, care, and politics as active questions rather than declarations. Investigating their meanings, tensions, and effects can shed important light on the relationships and practices that enable people to imagine and enact the process of remaking a world in the wake of violence. In more practical and applied ways, then, taking love and care seriously also carries the potential to craft more careful policies and programs (Tironi and Rodríguez-Giralt 2017, 91) in (post-)conflict and transitional settings, which move beyond individualistic and neoliberal approaches and which instead take into account the relationalities, vulnerabilities, and interdependencies of lived experiences in the wake of violence.

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