



HOSPITALITY IN THE REINTEGRATION PROCESS OF EX-FARC COMBATANTS IN THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *EN EL OMBLIGO*

by Gala Rocabert Navarro and Anna-Lina Mattar

INTRODUCTION

The recent US election results, alongside the broader ultra-right shift in Europe and other parts of the globe, reflect a collision of fears and insecurities generated by complex injustices. Radical conservative populism capitalizes on these dynamics, as suggested by scholars across disciplines, such as Beck, Massumi, Wodak, or Ley and Ssorin-Chaikov.¹ Normalized and silenced through its normalization, as Stuart Hall (153–155) elaborates, systemic violence and injustice generate distrust and erode social fabric. In this global atmosphere of fragmentation, it is crucial to explore narratives that seek to repair social bonds and foster peaceful coexistence. Hospitality challenges exclusionary politics and offers a means of rebuilding trust and solidarity in fractured communities. This article focuses on the concept of hospitality as an ethical principle of social cohesion. It explores the practices of hospitality in the conflict-torn community, where violence is recognized and, at least partially, worked through. We analyze the graphic novel *En el ombligo* by Catalan authors Gala Rocabert Navarro and Anna-Lina Mattar, which discusses the process of reintegration of the ex-combatants of the Colombian left-wing self-defense guerrilla

Polina Golovátina-Mora
Norwegian University
of Science and Technology,
Norway

Anna Maria Karczewska
University of Białystok,
Poland



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8644-4723>
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7686-9699>

1 For further discussion on the topic see: Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter, SAGE Publications, 1992; Massumi, Brian, editor. *Politics Of Everyday Fear*. University of MP, 1993; Wodak, Ruth. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE Publications, 2015; Ley, Lukas, and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov. Editorial. *Social Anthropology*, Volume 29, Issue 2, 2021, pp. 281–282.

group FARC-EP² into social, economic, and political processes, soon after the Peace Agreement signed with the Colombian Government in 2016. We examine how the graphic novel engages with the theme of hospitality throughout its narrative within the broader context of current public and scholarly debates regarding the peace process in Colombia.

The article is structured as follows: first, we define the key concepts that inform our framework, such as hospitality and the text-image relations; we then briefly describe the context of the ongoing Colombian armed conflict, peace accord, and reintegration process; finally, we proceed to the graphic novel in question, in which we analyze the role of hospitality in fostering social cohesion.

HOSPITALITY

Hospitality is commonly understood as the individual or collective ability, effort, and infrastructure to welcome a stranger. The etymology of the word, as noted by the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (Harper), indicates the importance of guest-host relations for the ancient Indo-European societies and the bond of trust that comes with it. Deeply embedded in the power dynamics of social organization, this makes hospitality an ethical marker as it reveals the relations with the Other in society.

Both Jacques Derrida (*Of Hospitality* 147–149) and Emmanuel Levinas,³ renowned philosophers of hospitality, distinguish between institutionalized hospitality and an ideal form that could be practiced by some individuals or groups. Institutionalized hospitality is conditional. Bida (22–45), Guia and Jamal (3–4), Kumar (80–103), Robert (153–167), Shapiro (110–131), and Weber (1–17), among other scholars, expand on Derrida's argument that seeing the guest exclusively as the Other implies denying them the right to be themselves. Such hospitality demands the guest to give in their otherness in favor of the homogenized and standardized imagery of the host. Derrida calls this act of hosting *hostipitality* as it inherently contains an element of violence and hostility ("Hostipitality" 16). The homogenized and imagined Otherness is seen as a nuisance rather than a source of new experience, knowledge, and self-growth. Denying the Other their rights to be the Other, hostipitality turns hostile to the hosts

2 The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (Spanish: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC-EP)

3 See: Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Duquesne UP, 1969.

themselves as it denies the Other in themselves and eliminates the possibility of becoming something else.

The unconditional hospitality that would embrace the Otherness is desirable for both Levinas and Derrida, but hardly achievable. Expanding on this, Guia and Jamal (7–8) propose to explore hospitality through the lenses of Deleuze’s philosophy of difference,⁴ and Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad thought (x), and advocate for ongoing mutual transformation that dissolves the binary opposition between a host and a guest. From this perspective, hospitality becomes a context-specific event informed by affect—a recognized ability to affect and be affected. It recognizes the guest as an agent and affirms their right to be the Other through acknowledging the inevitable mutual becoming in the event of encountering the Other. In such an encounter, “the ethical responsibility becomes a (situated) response-ability” (Guia and Jamal 8),⁵ which enables mutual potential change. This ethics is not binding, universal, or presubjective but radically situated, as it calls for a recognition of reality’s complexity and an action informed by this recognition.

Based on such ethics, hospitality is a willingness to learn from each encounter with diverse and multiple Others, and a desire to welcome such encounters altogether. This is a practical proposal which echoes the principle of social sustainability of *nunca más*, the discourse of non-repetition of violence leading the peace process in Colombia. It addresses structural and systemic violence by de-normalizing violence as a foundational value of the state institutions. Restoring trust, as Larsen claims (6–7), is crucial for overcoming the risks and mending social cohesion.

The position of situated ethics of becoming invites the understanding of social cohesion as a community of responsibility, a community of feeling, as solidarity. For Zoë Heyn-Jones and Celeste Mayorga Urbina, hospitality—solidarity is not a choice but culture itself. Drawing on Derrida’s conceptual proposal of unconditional solidarity, they insist that hospitality is always “enacted, embodied, performed” (40). Hospitality, then, is not a law, a thought, but an act, an everyday

4 See: Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton, Columbia UP, 1995.

5 Response-ability constitutes political ethics of care and is understood (after e.g., Haraway 2016) as openness to encounter; as the ability to respond with attentiveness, politeness and curiosity, and rendering each other capable. It is about “collective knowing, being and doing” (Bozalek and Zembylas 64). For further discussion on response-ability see: Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP, 2016.

mode of being and becoming. Such an understanding of hospitality resonates with the multimodal nature of comics and graphic novels, which engage readers through a dynamic interplay of different elements to promote empathy and solidarity.

COMICS: TEXT-IMAGE RELATIONS AND METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

Comics and graphic novels carry enormous pedagogical potential (Blandón Gómez and Golovátina-Mora 149–178) beyond the classroom, and can become an important strategy for public education, for promoting the sensibility of hospitality. Like cinema, graphic novels and comics provide an immersive experience by appealing to multiple senses since they communicate through diverse modes such as the visual, verbal, and sequential (Kukkonen 75). The interplay between the image and the text prompts the reader to engage with the content in a different way, particularly in terms of empathy and identification, as the inclusion of both words and images affects the reader's relationship to protagonists and to the narrative itself. Through their form and techniques, graphic novels encourage active participation and invite readers to interact with the narrative, which transforms passive observation into empathy and sensitivity toward the Other (Polak 25–29; Chute 112). By the same token, Chatman claims that reading a graphic narrative elicits responsiveness by inviting one to look where they might not want to look, and to empathize with the experiences of others (38).

In their work on hospitality and comics, Gusain and Jha elaborate on ethical relations between the reader and the text that such immersiveness generates, ensuring the active participation of the reader, which “converts the passive gaze into empathy and identification” (615). The accessible manner of the narrative allows the comics to present complex ideas; creates “safety” and distance to engage in critical discussion of painful topics; presents the stories of others, those who are put on the margins of society (Gusain and Jha 54). Due to the relations between image and text, which decentralize the power struggle between different media and deconstruct the dominance of the text, comics/graphic novels with their form itself teach hospitality. The images are not illustrations for the text; they have agency of their own. They may lead in one frame, appeal to emotions through color, composition, graphics, and let the word lead in the next frame. As Nick Sousanis summarizes it in his graphic novel, “each informs and enriches the other to achieve a meaning” (64). By the same token, Harvey claims that image and text do not exist independently of each other. Sousanis

further elaborates, “embedded within the sequential-simultaneous ecosystem that is comics, words and pictures, long kept apart are finally allowed to cohabit. Joined in relationship, visual and verbal intermingle...” (64).

These considerations guide our methodology in engaging with the graphic novel *En el ombligo*. It is not limited to semiotic analysis of media representation of the ideas but becomes an immersive, deep reading, which requires allowing oneself to be affected and then reflect on the nature of the impact, feelings, and thoughts the novel and its elements generate. In other words, our methodology is hospitality itself that facilitates our understanding of the subject of the article. This approach to reading, rooted in hospitality and emotional engagement, may be relevant when examining the reintegration challenges faced by former FARC combatants.

Polina Golovátina-Mora
Norwegian University
of Science and Technology,
Norway

Anna Maria Karczewska
University of Białystok,
Poland

COMICS AND THE PEACE PROCESS IN COLOMBIA

The problems and challenges of ex-FARC members and their reintegration process have become the topic of TV series and documentaries, such as, for example, *Strangers to Peace*, which tells the stories of three ex-FARC guerrillas as they try to reintegrate into society, or *La Niña*, the Colombian drama series, based on the true story of the recruitment of children in the armed conflict and their reintegration. Such media play an active and important role in the exploration and communication of difficult and sensitive issues concerning the Colombian context and the ongoing peace process (Redwood and Wedderburn 589–590).

The Colombian government, and national and international NGOs encouraged and enabled communication strategies and narratives in their attempts to address the historical truths, give voice to many victims of the conflict, reveal new details of suffering, and work through memories and traumas. Many of these projects illustrate the reality of Colombian families who have been directly impacted by the armed conflict. The variety of narrative formats creates alternative spaces for reflection, processes for social change, peace and memory. Since the signing of the peace treaty with the FARC guerrillas in 2016, the thematic interest of the literature of the conflict has shifted from the immediate narrative of the horror of war to the question of how to ensure peace and reconciliation. The graphic narrative has been increasingly recognized as a tool to reach out to a broader audience, including younger readers, to discuss the tragedy of the armed conflict in Colombia and sensitize the hardship of the period following the peace treaty.

Catalá-Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer claim, in their introduction to *Comics and Memory in Latin America*, that “comics, and more recently graphic novels, are increasingly understood as cultural artifacts that open unique and compelling windows not only onto mass or popular culture but also onto social, cultural, and political processes that have helped define the region since comic art began to appear in mass media in the early twentieth century” (3). While Colombia does not have a long tradition of comics and graphic novels, it does have a rich history of political and editorial cartoons. In 2012, an amendment to the country’s book law acknowledged graphic narratives and comics as valuable forms of cultural expression, granting them the same tax exemptions as literature and scientific publications.

In 2021, at the School of Social Communication and Journalism of Universidad Externado de Colombia, a group of scholars began to study the ways through which the internal conflict has been represented in comics and graphic novels. The research team wanted to identify the types of stories, the voices, the manifestations of war, etc., and began a project called “Vignettes of War” (Orejuela). The graphic narratives that have been produced since the beginning of the peace process address the conflict in different ways. In some of them, the conflict appears as a backdrop story, as historical or political context, as a mode of naming and defining a character, etc. Many of these narratives are strongly affected by the objectives of truth commissions and their ways of re-constructing the past. Quite often they reflect the official state narrative in relation to the peace process, and often they limit themselves to presenting only one part of the conflict and, thus, omit atrocities and massacres from collective memory (Tutkal 62).

EN EL OMBLIGO: INTRODUCING THE NOVEL

En el ombligo. Diarios de guerra y paz en Colombia, the work we focus on in this article, is an award-winning graphic novel (XIV Premio Fnac-Salamandra Graphic) that tells the story of ex-guerrillas of the FARC-EP during the three years following the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord. In April 2017, a young Catalan anthropologist, Gala Rocabert Navarro, arrived in the town of Pondores, in the department of La Guajira, with a foundation working on the implementation of the agreements to document the DDR process in situ. This visit is the origin of *En el ombligo*, which is a hybrid form of graphic reportage, field diary, and travelogue in which, with the help of the illustrations of her friend Anna-Lina Mattar, Gala recounts her experiences, the problems

she lived through, and the small personal stories of the reintegration of the guerrillas into Colombian society.

The book is 199 pages long. Its graphic style is quite simple. The novel uses only three colors: white, salmon red, and blue, which at times resemble the colors of the Colombian flag print that could be seen in the windows of many neighborhood corner stores, faded with exposure to the sun. This creates a sense of familiarity, an everyday routine, the light of the sun that, in combination with text, might create a distant sense of the heat Gala talks about throughout the novel. The simplicity of the graphic and its colors allows us to concentrate more on the content of the novel, one's own reactions, and the effects the novel produces. It creates the feeling of naivety and youth, the voice of an enthusiastic and idealistic young graduate anthropologist.

En el ombligo does not follow the formal structure of the graphic novel. It contains pages or even double pages with no more than one drawing. There are pages where the graphic elements are accompanied by text, and sometimes there are just drawings. There are also parts that are handwritten pages from a personal diary, and print pages that are emails to family or friends. The intensity of the handwriting reveals the overwhelming intensity of her thoughts and feelings. While the handwriting is quite difficult to read, it could be a graphic choice of the authors. These elements create a form of rhythm of the stop-motion: fluid yet fragmented, which ensures concentration and encourages reflection, and invites us to empathize with the author, the characters, the story, and the reintegration process.

In a cinematic way, the graphics provide the atmosphere. The images do not merely illustrate, but are an active part of the narrative. The distance between the graphic elements creates space for reflection, thinking over, observing together with Gala, or individually. This space is like margins for ethnographic notes, or our own diary. The novel becomes in a way participatory (collaborative) action research with the readers as co-researchers, who feel involved in the peace process, even if they are not Colombian nationals. The authors create the space for engagement, reflection, questions. With the graphics and notes, fragments of the diverse topics and voices, they suggest tools for critical engagement. By the end of the research-novel Gala distances from the reader and the focus of the novel, and finally leaves the camp, leaving the readers empowered and ready for their own journey.

Before we explore the hospitality theme in *En el ombligo*, it is essential to contextualize the Colombian armed conflict and the peace and reintegration processes, which constitute a critical backdrop to understanding the narrative's themes.

COLOMBIAN ARMED CONFLICT

The conflict was initiated in 1964 as a reaction to decades of political redistribution of power between Liberals and Conservatives, which was accompanied by violence, assassinations, and persecutions. The conflict's actors included the Colombian government, far-right paramilitary groups, criminal groups, and far-left guerrilla factions, among which the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was the largest. Various armed actors had different motives. Left-wing guerrillas such as FARC advocated for social justice to address poverty and state violence. The governmental forces would appeal for restoring the preestablished order, whose questioning urged the formation of the left-wing guerrilla groups. The overall methods of combat were quite similar across all the groups (Pizarro Leongómez and Peñaranda 167–172).

The human costs, especially in the rural areas, have been devastating and counted millions of displaced people. Hundreds of thousands disappeared, were killed or kidnapped. Quite often the territories and individuals fell victim to different competing groups, and were caught in the cross-fire. The reports and studies emphasize that despite the horrors of the ongoing conflict and its long nature, despite distrust in neighbors, people developed strategies of resistance with contingent hope and dignity, and rebuilt their communities (“The human cost...”; Sánchez García and Hincapié Gómez 58, 66; Arias López 248–249). Such strategies employed in post-conflict territories (Dasuky Quiceno et al. 77–86) inspired people to embrace the proposals of the peace accords; they explain commitment to civil participation and activism, and the higher approval of forgiveness and FARC reintegration in the social and political life of the country by the victims directly impacted by the conflict than from the non-victims (García-Sánchez and Plata-Caviedes 279–285; “El perdón...”).

The hybridity and complexity of the reality of violence implies the complexity of hospitality as a way of resisting violence, of healing, learning and remembering. The violence of the state and the counter-violence it provoked were met with the hospitality of its main victims, whose only condition was to respect “the basic guarantees of the communities” and “keep the war from their territories” (Rojas).

THE PEACE PROCESS

In 2016, the Colombian government and FARC signed a historic ceasefire agreement, followed by a revised peace deal approved by the Congress. While generally supported, the peace accords

and the following process have been quite controversial (Garzón-Ramírez 651; García-Sánchez and Plata-Caviedes 279–285; “El perdón...”). Ex-FARC members were guaranteed seats in Congress, which sparked opposition from critics of the deal who believed that FARC leaders should be prevented from running for office until they had served their sentences. However, the decision was made to demobilize all those who were part of the guerrilla ranks to facilitate their reintegration into civilian life and to bring an end to the country’s decades-long civil war. *Perdón*, Spanish for forgiveness, was announced as the motor of the peace process and, according to a survey conducted by the Ideas for Peace Foundation in 2015, more than 80% of respondents recognized and supported the idea of forgiveness. In the process of the creation of the culture of forgiveness as an integral part of the process of reconciliation, it has been established that forgiveness does not mean forgetting or ignoring justice (“El perdón...”). The results of the survey showed that while supporting the abstract idea of forgiveness, the number of respondents would also support the idea of forgiving the concrete actors. While 60% of the respondents of the survey were willing to forgive FARC, only 56% were willing to forgive the state, and 54% of the respondents were willing to forgive the paramilitary groups.

The varied attitudes toward forgiveness reflect the complexities of reconciliation in a post-conflict context. In response to these challenges, Colombia embarked on the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process, which contributes to the security and stability of the post-conflict societies by disarming combatants, removing them from military structures, and providing socio-economic programs to integrate them into society. It has become a mainstream procedure in post-conflict stabilization programs proposed by governments and international institutions in their efforts to provide the conditions to pursue recovery and development strategies in conflict-affected countries (IDDRS). According to the *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* of the United Nations (IDDRS), the DDR process encompasses four stages that follow a sequential order: disarmament, demobilization, reinsertion, and reintegration. Recently the mechanism has evolved to include psychological support, social reconciliation, and transitional justice (Jones-Chaljub 15). DDR programs recognize that removing weapons from the hands of fighters and dismantling their organization is certainly a step forward in improving security, but it is by no means enough to achieve peace. The biggest challenges lie in ensuring that the former combatants can reintegrate into society, and in preventing them from taking up arms again (Berdal and Ucko 2–3).

Within the framework of the peace agreement, twenty-four Territorial Training and Reincorporation Spaces were created to temporarily house ex-combatants and to give them a space to set up productive projects as part of their reintegration process. Ex-combatants have opted for quite a diverse range of projects. La Montaña is just one of more than 4,200 *proyectos productivos* in Colombia. Its 24 staff members manufacture backpacks, clothes, hammocks, and money belts in the name of peace (Askham). Under the brand Manigua de Paz (*Jungle of Peace*), nearly 100 former combatants turn cocoa beans into gourmet chocolate bars to create livelihoods for their communities (“hd” Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue). Among the different recovery strategies, tourism (Otis; Van Broeck et.al.) has emerged as an attractive alternative to help restore the economic base and to generate jobs across a wide supply chain.

Many ex-combatants have had to face the overwhelming challenge of creating a path towards stabilization and reconstruction. In the following section, in the form of a summary for this part of the article we will briefly address some problems with their social reintegration.

PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AS THE QUESTION OF HOSTIPITALITY

As with any protracted conflict, Colombia’s armed conflict leaves deep scars in the society: increasing socioeconomic gaps, prejudices that reinforce stigmatization and exclusion. All this makes it even more difficult for demobilized fighters to be accepted as legitimate members of society (IDDRS). Being a multidimensional process, reconciliation requires all the parties to peacefully address any tension and engage in its resolution. It requires the goodwill of all the parties, as well as societal acceptance, forgiveness and support (Murillo Orejuela and Restrepo-Plaza 36), and sufficient infrastructure for reintegration that would ensure fair distribution of the resources (Tutkal 76). This would constitute the culture of forgiveness (“El perdón...”), as well as the culture of hospitality (Robert 156).

The nation-state system and its neoliberal version is intrinsically violent. The neoliberal market discourse appeals to the value of the rights of an individual as a universal value, which is limited to the rights of the privileged social groups. Individual life outside of such groups loses its value beyond the functionality of the productivity of an individual. In other words, a person is valued only to the extent of their service in support of the established hierarchical structures (Shapiro 110–131; Gusain and Jha 53–66; Tutkal 62–78; Hristov 4–5). Speaking about

the neoliberal model of the peace process, Tutkal highlights that “human rights become subordinated to a definition of ‘common good’ in which corporate interests take priority over the interest of local communities, and their resistance to the projects of neoliberal peace precipitates new cycles of disappearance and displacement” (63). The formal peace accords and their implementation did not address social stratification or systemic racism, despite quite strong articulation of the roots of these problems in Colombia and Latin America in general. People, their materiality, and the materiality of their immediate environments, their diversity, and intersectionality are taken outside the brackets of consideration; in other words, they are ignored and silenced.

The strategies of reintegration involved capacity building and training in developing diverse skills for reintegration, such as economic literacy, different crafts and vocational training, and programs of reintegration with families. At the same time, reintegration with the family would imply longitudinal psychological work for all the members of the family. After years of not being able to maintain any communication—for reasons of security, for example, as *En el ombligo* elaborates, the family members may appear as a group of strangers for an ex-combatant with whom they might have nothing in common.

EN EL OMBLIGO: ANALYSIS

REHABILITATION CAMP

The novel’s depiction of the reintegration center in Pondores, Guajira, establishes an immediate sense of place that shapes readers’ perceptions of the former combatants and the beginning of the reintegration process. On the one hand, it conveys a sense of hospitality as the center is a place of refuge, respect, and new beginning, and it highlights the ethical responsibility to provide the ex-combatants with dignity as they transition to civilian life. On the other hand, however, the placement of the rehabilitation camp in the desert (Sánchez Caicedo 3–26; Prieto et al.; Rocabert Navarro and Mattar 48, 146) causes unnecessary hardship for those ex-guerrillas who were used to living in the mountains and forests. The houses eventually built for them were often, as the reports suggest, not designed for the climatic conditions of the desert, and even though they provided shelter from the sun, they were largely unlivable because of the heat. Limitations on the use of land on the territories of rehabilitation camps would, as Prieto et al. indicate in their report, limit the possibilities of economic reintegration and simply be confusing even for a willing, resilient, and enthusiastic individual.

The members of the rehabilitation camp community, *En el ombligo* describes, refer to the difficulties of dealing with bureaucracy. Without the special skills of writing petitions, requests for subsidies or grants, or even knowledge about the available resources, access to them could be limited for the ex-combatants, or they might face certain disadvantages. Gala is aware of these difficulties as she is the one responsible for applying for grants. Another example is the process of obtaining *cédula*, the national identity card, a legal marker of belonging. One of the protagonists of *En el ombligo* receives his Colombian ID by the end of the novel. The long process of waiting for the document illustrates the difficulty, obstructions, prejudices and inefficiencies of the state. It mirrors the slow and painful process of reintegration. However, it may be understood as an act of closure, a moment of reconciliation and full acceptance within the social fabric of the nation.

The issues of security appear, among other difficulties, in literature about reintegration, in reports, and comics. The rejection that the integration process generated in some groups (e.g., victims, other illegal armed groups, the army, etc.) poses security threats to the lives of reintegrating actors. Without arms or community protection, ex-combatants are vulnerable to retaliation (Nussio 580). Since 2016, nearly 400 ex-FARC fighters have been assassinated, with many others displaced, particularly in rural areas. Failures by ex-President Iván Duque's administration to prioritize reforms, such as land redistribution, further deepened inequality and insecurity, leaving ex-combatants as well as other participants of the conflict feeling betrayed (Sponsel; Sánchez Caicedo 74–75; Prieto et al.).

This model follows Derrida's definition of conditional hospitality or rather *hostipitality*. Peace accords and institutionalization of the reintegration process were not collaborative and community-led but constituted a social contract "from outside and above," as it was well summarized in the petitions of the Indigenous authorities of Cauca to Juan Manuel Santos regarding the peace, dignity, and autonomy of the Indigenous territories (Monroy Gómez). Under this social contract, the ex-combatants agree to cease fire and give in their weapons, reintegrate into society, and become productive members of society, in exchange for economic, political, and judicial benefits. In fact, some of the successful business ideas mentioned in this article relied on the skills developed during their life as guerillas: knowing how to read the forest and mountains, knowing how to be part of them (Muggah 124). From this perspective, the value of the ex-combatants as people expands and reveals their multidimensionality without unnecessary romanticization or justification of the committed crimes

and violence. It works even as a resistance to violence, as an affirmative and nonreductive approach.

Reintegration is considered an economic issue, but “it is assumed that the victims may be ‘reintegrated’ by participating in economic activities” (Pardo Abril 31). An abstract uniformed and statically imagined Other is invited to enter the preexisting abstract and statically imagined “home.” The former FARC combatants are positioned within the social contract as the “stranger,” someone who is from outside, beyond the boundaries of the community. The contract implies that only the stranger has to change, and although it announces forgiveness, the implementation of the reintegration process in fact resembles a form of punishment.

Many still see ex-combatants as former enemies rather than neighbors. Reintegration is hindered by lingering fears of a relapse into violence, both systemic and structural, and the government’s insufficient support. This reinforces the stigmatization of ex-FARC combatants as the (only) source of violence (Carranza-Franco 4–5). Throughout the years of violence and political turmoil, this strangeness has become entrenched in armed conflict, blending closeness with distance, belonging with exclusion. The stranger, originating from outside the community, from the Colombian jungles, often provokes hostility and resentment, as when fighting for their convictions, they resorted to organized crime, repressive tactics, and extensive human rights violations. How, then, should we engage with those identified as strangers within the nation due to their engagement in guerrilla warfare? In “Avowing—The Impossible,” Derrida asserts that hospitality is essential for peaceful and true coexistence, and suggests finding ways to live with strangers, embracing both the unfamiliar and the familiar in shared spaces (24).

While this is, of course, an abstract model of reality (Kumar 82–85) that unfortunately often defines the norms and mentality anticipating more efficient practice, the reality is more resilient and complex. This complexity, supported by the long history of its critical revision in Latin America and Colombia in particular, facilitates forgiveness, adaptation, empathy, resistance to violence, and eventually reintegration of the ex-combatants.

Comics, as we suggested earlier, can sensitize the complexity of reality, conflict and its magnitude, its systemic nature. They can open a safe space in which to pose critical questions and hopefully look for more sustainable solutions for peace.

STRANGERS

From the first pages of the novel, the reader, together with the ex-combatants, learns about the new reincorporation space in Pongores. The explorative and observational style of the narrative sets the slower rhythm of figuring out, of making sense of the new reality, understanding what to do next, and who one is when a significant part of oneself has given in. “It is difficult to be locked in one place now; before we would always be on the move,”⁶ confess the women of the camp to Gala (37). “So many years of being a guerrilla. And now what? Who am I then? Submitting the weapons is like giving up part of my soul,” another woman reveals some pages later (76). “It was difficult to be in the war. But it is more difficult now outside. That I know with all clarity,” says another ex-guerrilla woman later in the novel (137). Ex-combatants become strangers to their own selves. What accentuates this fact is their application for identification documents (*cédula*). They have to choose a new civil name, not a war-related one. Yeferson, one of the ex-combatants, claims that people who are strangers to the dominant culture and structures have their original names silenced. The new names are assigned to them (58), which resonates with the common missionary practice of assigning names to Indigenous populations in Colombia as if erasing their originary selves.

Conditional hospitality involves relinquishing the stranger in the Self as irrelevant and insignificant to the new circumstances, focusing instead on constructing a completely new personality. In contrast, unconditional hospitality embraces the Other within the Self, seeking reconciliation, forgiveness, and mutual change. It proposes learning to evolve together, mutating into something new that is enriched by the presence of the Other, by the diversity and complexity of reality.

In the final parts of the book, Gala establishes a routine and feels more at home with the community. However, she can still be confused: being attacked by bees, she goes astray when everyone else acts as one group organism (116). Gala, the protagonist of the novel, is herself a stranger: a Catalan in Colombia; a city person in the wilderness of the rehabilitation camp; a civilian in the community of the ex-combatants; a newcomer and an outsider in the community of people sharing the past experience, beliefs, and fears. We recognize Gala’s strangeness, her liminal position between the ex-combatants, who are, on the one hand, strangers to the peaceful life, but on the other, they are insiders. As a non-national, Gala is a symbolic guide for the reader,

6 All the translations from *En el ombligo* in this article are our own.

for the ex-combatants and the narrative itself. The novel contributes to the long tradition in world literature of liminal characters as guides, mentors and shapeshifters (Vizenor 196; Spisak 79, 122, 128), who deconstruct the monolith of the narrative. Gala's liminality enables navigation between seemingly opposite spaces, and her outsideness questions the monolithic appearance of these spaces, concepts and judgments, and eventually reveals their own liminality or hybridity. This very quality makes Gala an agent of hospitality.

GUIDES

When Gala enters the ex-combatants' camp she is welcomed by their community: strangers to the state. The ex-combatants act as hosts for the stranger, Gala, but guests in the peaceful life she represents. She, as a guest-host embraces the life in the camp, a strange lifestyle for her. Ex-combatants open up to her with their stories, intimate thoughts, their pasts; she learns to know them by allowing the strangeness to affect her: soon enough (50) she stops insisting on filling out her surveys about them, but starts with smaller steps by joining the community and the shared effort of building it. She carries logs, cleans, cooks, contributes to the construction of the camp and crop cultivation, and starts wearing boots and pants as the environment requires, instead of flip-flops and shorts as she initially chose (51, 69, 90). Throughout the novel guest becomes host becomes guest, and reveals the porosity between these two identities. Two strangers, ex-combatant Yeferson and Gala, start a family, share a household, cultivate the land together, and get a pet chicken as a present from a farmer from outside the camp. Gala guides Yeferson toward civil life. Yeferson guides her on her way to embrace the camp life, to get familiar with the ex-combatant experience, knowledge, and being.

At the beginning of the novel, Yeferson, together with other ex-combatants, expresses reluctance to reunite with their long-lost families. In the second half of the novel, Yeferson and Gala walk together out of the camp to search for Yeferson's family. It could be seen as a story of successful reintegration if one focuses on the intentions and efforts of the ex-combatants. As they travel, the world welcomes them with a mix of familiarity and warmth. Family and friends express joy at seeing Yeferson alive, inquiring about his return, while farmers engage them with questions about the harvest. The places they visit are depicted as dynamic, hybrid spaces. Along their path, civilians share personal stories of hardship, highlighting shared vulnerability to exploitation, regardless of whether the perpetrators were the FARC,

the government, the police, or paramilitary forces (139). Yeferson himself recounts a childhood memory of a boy being killed on a local football field, narrating the event without judgment, fear, or a desire for retribution (152). Instead, his reflection underscores the importance of acknowledging, remembering the victim.

Individual, yet intra-connected with the rest of the community, remembering is at the core of hospitality: remembering the victims, respecting one's contribution, thoughts and work. The novel summarizes this idea with the story of weaving a *Wiwa* bag: "The ancestors explained that the plant we use to weave our bags, *maguey*, was a woman who was leaving them, but they asked her for advice and took care of her so that she would stay. That is why, when one knits, one has good thoughts, of good life, gives her love, because she takes care of the family, and supports the work of *los mamos* (spiritual leaders of the Sierra Nevada communities)" (170). This thinking of good life gives another dimension to the contingent hope: it makes it a form of healing through remembering understood as respecting everyone who ever contributed, is contributing and will be contributing to the community, as reconnecting with them, weaving all the memories of past, present and future together (Aldemar Rodríguez, Rodríguez Villamil, and Gutiérrez González 9–16). With its form and content, its careful attention to detail, the graphic novel as if insists that such solidarity cannot be reduced to ten dollars a tourist might pay for a *Wiwa* bag, to a *cédula*, the opening of a bank account or the construction of a little house that is too hot to live in the climate of the desert.

During the course of Gala and Yeferson's trip, after hearing all the stories, the readers learn that the state reduces its citizens to a faceless monolithic mass. They remain outsiders to hierarchical power structures, and they constitute collateral damage in the pursuit of political or strategic objectives. For these civilians, violence and death are ever-present aspects of existence. A village woman warns Gala about the river that recently took a woman's life (162), emphasizing the absence of infrastructure. In their world, threats arise not only from human actors—whether neighbors or state forces—but also from nature itself. Death and danger are not alien intrusions but are deeply integrated into everyday life. Nature, however, is not merely a source of peril. It provides sustenance, shelter, beauty, and opportunities for self-discovery and learning. It communicates its dangers and teaches those willing to listen how to interpret its signs and heal from its challenges. While inherently dangerous, nature is also unconditionally welcoming.

Neighbors, too, are multifaceted figures, capable of dual roles. A neighbor might be a combatant in disguise, someone complicit in violence, or simply someone paralyzed by fear. Yet neighbors and even strangers are also portrayed as agents of solidarity, helping the persecuted to escape or hide (82–83; 138–141). The novel recounts instances where combatants carried wounded comrades, despite the risks and delays, actions that the state soldiers reportedly exploited (82–83). The text highlights the acts of kindness rooted in genuine care for the other, whether stranger or acquaintance. These gestures include offering mosquito repellents, reminding someone to eat, warning about impending storms, or lending resources such as a mule or motorbike. Such acts may sometimes aim to minimize communal risk but are also driven by a desire to alleviate unnecessary suffering. Unconditional hospitality is woven into these small, attentive actions, which blur the line between familiarity and strangeness. Nature, the land, and non-hierarchical, horizontal social networks thrive on diversity and hybridity, forming a resilient foundation for the ecosystem's sustainability.

The state, on the other hand, relies on hierarchy and is driven by the logic of exclusion and unification (monoculture). Its conditional hospitality is hostile. It distorts the fruitful order of life and bends it to the immediate needs of the selected few, which causes the resistance of the excluded, which that state tries to put under control, to eliminate, silence, or punish (128). Everyone is a stranger to the state; and, therefore, anyone can eventually be seen by it as a threat and presented as such. A story, shared by one ex-combatant, about a politician who turned out to be a devil, summarizes this sentiment (96). There is again no judgment in this story. It is recognized as a reality. This is not apathy; nor is it naive ignorance. Gala writes that Yeferson always tells her that one does not have to give in to a bad life (147). This is contingent hope as an expression of resilience nurtured throughout centuries of violence for some, decades, or a few years for others. It is a recognition of one's vulnerability with humility. It is unconditional hospitality to the Other of life.

People give ex-combatants another chance, and welcome them as a marginalized group. This echoes the survey showing higher public support for the idea of ex-FARC political participation among the victims of the conflict than among the non-victims ("El perdón..."). This is not an act of justification or forgiveness of murders and destruction: "The scars can never heal, says one of the ex-combatants, because they are the scars of the soul" (Rocabert Navarro, and Mattar 79). It is an act of non-repetition. "So many years in the guerrilla, and it is still the same

bad,” says Yeferson, looking at the situation in his native community (175). It is an attempt to try a different method of resistance: No one deserves to be silenced and subjected to passive representation. Permitted once, this practice will justify silencing the Others.

The final page, with the representation of a kiss and embrace between Yeferson and Gala might be, then, symbolic: two strangers welcome each other, allow each other to be affected by the other and their knowledge, get transformed, and together transform the community (194).

HOSPITALITY AS COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

The abovementioned encounter of strangers was made possible by the official peace accords. It required the predisposition of all the actors involved. Gala accompanied and guided Yeferson through his journey of reintegration. It might have worked without her. The unconditional hospitality of the horizontal community of strangers, however, would imply welcoming anyone willing to join and welcome anyone's contribution. There is no entitlement or expectation of help, but a readiness to accept it if it is offered. There is no judgment, but a calm embrace of diversity and ever-changing reality. This open, inclusive approach to community is not only vital to personal reintegration but reflects a deeper, cultural understanding of community that is prevalent in Colombia and Latin America.

Community, as a concept, plays a significant role in shaping social structures and individual identities in these regions. It could be explained with Boorstin's idea of community building as compensation for loss and alienation in the immigrant society or the risk society. Gala, indeed, writes in her diary that “a collective is an armor that allows them to overcome pain and fear” (71). She continues that everyone means a lot for the community and brings something unique to it, with their being, past, and their diverse histories.

From the relational perspective, community is a worldview where the world is seen as shared (Kohn 9). This community includes now living human members, ancestors, and non-human members such as land, plants, animals and rivers. This is a hospitable community. Removing one member destroys the ecosystem of the entire collective. Responsive and response-able introduction of a new member may contribute and strengthen the ecosystem.

In a similar way, Gala and Yeferson's process of community building can be seen as collective effort and shared experience, where the inclusion of diverse perspectives and contributions strengthens the whole environment. Together, through the specificity of the genre

of a graphic novel, Gala and Yeferson guide the reader in their recognition of the complexity of the reality they share, in pursuit of building a community of solidarity. "A lot of people come here," Gala writes in her diary. "Journalists, institutions, NGOs, the sensationalists, politicians [...] with a lot of proposals, all disjointed and decontextualized. I feel there is a lack of sensibility and understanding from both sides" (71). The comics could aim at helping to facilitate such sensibility. The travelogue and field trip notes, along with the narrative style of *En el ombligo*, create a sense of external observation. At the same time, the immersive quality of the comic's graphics and rhythm creates an opportunity for readers to co-experience the narrative.

The graphic novel focuses on a fraction of the social reintegration process of ex-FARC guerrillas, offering a glimpse into a small situated experience without an ambition to speak for the entire nation. In fact, Gala speaks for herself, describing her contact with the community. The documentary style of the narrative indicates the diversity of voices in the reality. As an artistic product, the graphic novel manipulates reality: focusing on the underrepresented voices of women, children, and Indigenous people; it is fragmented, at times out of context; at times, it can be too idealistic and even utopian. Yet it is the voice, it is the reality that hopefully can reach out and touch at least one reader.

The simplicity of comics radiant with kindness invites the reader to think of hospitality not as a universal narrative but as an everyday act. This act may appear to be simple, but it requires an everyday work of humility and giving up control and power over the reality and Self. It also refers to the spiritual work of reaching out to the extended community of ancestors and the land, and of asking the community for protection and reintegration (157). This notion of spiritual work and reintegration is deeply rooted in cultural practices such as *ombligamiento*, which underscores the sacred connections between individuals, their communities, and the land.⁷

7 *La ombligada* or *ombligamiento* is an ancestral practice of some black communities settled in the Colombian Pacific territory-region and Indigenous people of Colombia. The rite makes the newborn become a useful person to the community. The first of these rituals is celebrated when someone is born, and the mother buries the placenta and the umbilical cord under the house or the germinating seed. The second occurs when it is necessary to heal the wound left by the umbilicus when it separates from the body. Colombian historian and folklorist Sergio Antonio Mosquera "recognizes that scholars do not understand whether *la ombligada* originated with Indigenous peoples in the Pacific lowlands or if enslaved Africans brought the practice with them. But he insists on a more concrete point: that the different ethnic groups shared the space of the forest and learned from

En el ombligo, the title of the novel, translates into English as “In the belly button.” It refers to aspects of the cosmovision of Indigenous communities and to the spiritual practice of protecting a newborn child. It is understood as disconnection from the human mother and reconnection with Mother Earth (61), the land, and community. In short, it is a ritual in which one becomes part of a bigger structure. The belly button symbolizes personal identity, ancestral wisdom, and cosmic unity, a physical link to cultural heritage. It promotes the holistic well-being of individuals and communities. *El ombligo* is a sensitive scar, an embodied memory of one’s origin and connectivity. Through this practice, cultural socialization begins, creating a sense of belonging to a particular territory and community. This complex system works to maintain collective life. The *ombligamiento* allows the disappearance of the false antagonism between nature and culture driven globally by the rationality of the modern white capitalist world system (Hurtado Garcés). In the context of the novel, it may symbolize the process of reintegration of ex-FARC guerrillas with their community, their symbolic comeback to a life of peace and solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS

En el ombligo shows what the reintegration process has been like and how the demobilized combatants live after laying down their arms. The reader can experience the pitfalls and difficulties the ex-guerrillas had to go through in their lives in the midst of the armed conflict, and in relation to the demobilization programs that the government has offered them. The reader can experience their feelings and frustrations, and also the benefits, hopes, and illusions of a change in their existence. They require a hospitable audience, and therefore the question of ethics is crucial when dealing with their life narratives. *En el ombligo* focuses on a fraction of the social reintegration process of ex-FARC guerrillas, offering a glimpse into a small, localized experience. It does not attempt to portray the national scope of the process; therefore, it should be seen as a modest step towards fostering empathy for the diverse experience of ex-combatants and accepting their complex narratives. In the current context, one can hope that it will also serve as an input to the peace process with the FARC-EP as graphic narrative is not necessarily just a way of simplifying a complex mass of information.

one another, and that *la ombligada* was part of a set of practices that connected the natural and social worlds” (Mosquera 162–165).

Graphic narratives invite readers to feel the experiences of others, making them particularly effective in raising awareness about ex-combatants. The stories presented in *En el ombligo* are as important as official histories and play a key role in forming a holistic understanding of complex events. The decentering nature of the graphic novel's media invites the readers to approach the characters and their stories with empathy and so fosters unconditional hospitality. This empathic engagement is particularly relevant to the reintegration process in Colombia. Graphic novels can play a crucial role in sensibilizing the complexity of this process and its hybridity, by offering a platform for the marginalized voices and narratives; humanizing and diversifying the Other, in this case the ex-combatants as individuals whose lives have been marked by loss, pain, traumas, hopes and beliefs. By encouraging engaged reading, graphic novels foster the construction of a political community of ethical response-ability, and with this the solidarity of hospitality, for which the otherness is the source of new knowledge of self and of the shared inhabited space. As a site of a documentary, graphic novels may contribute to collective memories, and inspire, inform and shape public attitudes that can influence political decisions.

En el ombligo can be viewed as naïve at times but it inspires the readers to think of hospitality not as abstract pre-subjective characteristics but as culture that can be cherished. The culture of hospitality the novel introduces is not a culture of passive welcoming but a toil, an everyday act of care to work together, learn and transform for true long-lasting peace.

Abstract: On 24 November 2016, the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) signed a historic Peace Agreement to put a definitive end to the internal armed conflict that had lasted more than half a century. As part of the Agreement, an Amnesty Law was adopted, and a definitive bilateral ceasefire and cessation of hostilities were ordered. Disarmament measures were implemented and transitional camps were created to facilitate ex-guerrilla combatants' transition to legal life. However, the successful reintegration of individuals during the DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) process is significantly influenced not only by the material conditions and other practical circumstances they encounter upon their return, but also by how they are received within their socio-cultural context.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the graphic novel *En el ombligo* serves as a lens for the theme of hospitality in the context of the peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP. Specifically, it presents the challenges and complexities of transitioning from guerrilla warfare to civilian life. This research seeks to shed light on the potential of graphic novels as a medium for grappling with complex socio-political issues and fos-

tering processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, drawing on, among others, Derrida's philosophy of hospitality and Deleuze's philosophy of difference.

Keywords: Colombian armed conflict, hospitality, forgiveness, the Other, Jacques Derrida

Bios: Polina Golovátina-Mora is Professor in Film and Media in Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway. Polina's research is informed by posthumanist feminism and critical pedagogy and focuses on qualitative, art-based and sensorial research methodologies and pedagogies—questions of multi-species memory and creativity. Polina published extensively on the topics of agency of more-than-human nature and the methodologies such agency inspires, co-authored with Rocha-Bravo, M. G. "A Sentient Planet as a School; a School as a Community Garden: Toward Eco-Creative Thinking-Practicing," at *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol 31, no. 2, 2024, pp. 136–143, and "Follow the River: City Regeneration in Tension as Works of Water" at *Changing Societies & Personalities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2022, pp. 364–379, are among the recent publications on the topic. As an artist, Polina is exploring multisensorial being with the world.

Anna Maria Karczevska is Assistant Professor at the University of Białystok, Poland, where she teaches at the Faculty of Philology. She is a graduate in English and Spanish Philology; she has a PhD in cultural studies from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS) in Warsaw. She has published papers on violence in Colombia and Pablo Escobar. Her current research interests revolve around Colombian literature, posthuman studies and environmental humanities. In August–October 2020 she was a Visiting Fellow at The Pontifical Bolivarian University (UPB) in Medellín, Colombia. She is a recipient of the Polish National Science Center research grant *Miniatura5* (2021) for the project "Medellín: the portrait of trauma and urban violence in the works of Colombian journalists." Her latest article "Hydrocentric reading of rivers. Waterways in Wade Davis' *Magdalena: River of Dreams. A Story of Colombia*" is the result of a research stay in the Colombian city of Honda, at the Magdalena River Museum.

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Polina Golovářina-Mora
Norwegian University
of Science and Technology,
Norway

Anna Maria Karczewska
University of Białystok,
Poland