Constructive agency under duress

A research note on "Witnessing Peace"

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My book *Witnessing Peace: Becoming Agents Under Peace in Colombia* (Routledge, 2022) seeks to honor a key source of hope for transformation amid Colombia's ongoing armed conflict: the violence-affected communities that self-protect to survive amid onslaught and struggle to change the conditions of violence that threaten them. It is rooted in learning alongside and thinking with Colombian communities about peacebuilding as a politics of justpeace. I am a white US American Mennonite who lived in Colombia and worked with the Colombian Mennonite Church based organization Justapaz for eight and a half years (2001–2004; 2006–2010). I then returned to do engaged research with colleagues and friends who became community collaborators in research.

This essay draws from *Witnessing Peace* to define constructive agency under duress. It offers an example of a woman peacebuilder who suffered sexualized violence in the context of the protracted armed conflict and the transformation of relationships of power within a peace community. Reflection on praxis with women peacebuilders in Colombia brings into view the need for precision about power relations in peace communities or "constituencies of peace."[1] It sketches several inadequacies of John Howard Yoder's peace theologies and highlights the conceptual development of a third wave of peace theology.

Constructive agency under duress

When persons enact change amid high levels of constraint, injustice, and direct violence endemic to situations of armed conflict, they participate in what might be called constructive agency under duress. It accounts for agents, actions, and accomplishments that those oriented by the state miss. There are two key elements of this idea. First, *duress* is deeply embedded in histories of injustice. The longitudinal effects of colonial relation-

1 This term is borrowed from John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (United States Institute of Peace, 1998).

ships of power are visible in present hierarchies of class, race, and gender (through patriarchy is also indigenous). These histories inform current relations of power that make some people important at the expense of others who are excluded socially, politically, and economically. They make some lives count at the expense of others that do not count.

Gender norms produce differentiated levels of duress and vulnerability within communities, as patriarchy is experienced differently by different community members.[2] A "wall of silence" often surrounded acts of violence against women in the context of armed conflict.[3] Silence speaks volumes about the patriarchal gender norms that make some bodies count more than others. It often conveys a great deal about the basis and bias grounding some forms of violence, about why some acts of violence are more sayable than others. Naming patriarchal gender norms is important because it elucidates how multiple forms of constraint impact people and how intersecting, interlocking forms place people under duress both simultaneously and differently. It introduces a vocabulary that brings into view and helps us come to grips with different experiences linked to gendered hierarchies of power.

Second, *constructive* responses can occur under duress. This use of *constructive* is linked to the term *under duress* and its place in Catholic conversations, where it refers to constraints on personal freedom that lead someone to cooperate with evil. It is an analogical extension, however, because I am not talking about how people have been forced into entanglements with evil but rather about what people have been able to accomplish under duress.

Becoming agents in God's times

As a human rights and peacebuilding field worker, I was deeply frustrated that the human rights–based frameworks of the dominant state-centered approaches to peacebuilding were unable to detect the transformative agency and generative activity of violence-affected communities on the

2 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (Routledge, 2000), 168–69.

3 "Colombia: 'Scarred Bodies, Hidden Crimes': Sexual Violence against Women in the Armed Conflict," Amnesty International, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr23/040/2004/en/; "La JEP abre macrocaso 11, que investiga la violencia basada en género, incluyendo violencia sexual y reproductiva, y crímenes cometidos por prejuicio," https://www.jep.gov.co:443/Sala-de-Prensa/Paginas/-la-jep-abre-macrocaso-11-que-investiga-la-violencia-basada-en-genero-incluyendo-violencia-sexual-y-reproductiva-y-crimenes.aspx.

ground. War-affected communities taught me to see how they experienced God in the world and the world with God: the conditions they were living under were unacceptable to God, and they cooperated with God to survive and bring about change. As a result, I turned to theology for alternative notions of power, authority, and agency.

Participants in constructive interventions spoke about *how* they were able to respond under duress in terms of God's time. Inspired by them, we might trace the process of victims becoming agents in two kinds of sacred time: (1) interruptive time (best known as *Messianic* time in Mennonite theologies) and (2) gradual time (best known through liberation theologies). Interruptive time is expressed in community-based interventions in moments of crises that allow survival independent of state power and state knowledge. They open up possibilities for further change. Gradual time is expressed in social processes, organizing, movement building, and other collective efforts that address material conditions of injustice. Both times are necessary for thinking about communities' contributions to a more just peace (or "justpeace").

Colombian women peacebuilders' practice and critical reflection brought into view gendered experience and relations of power within communities seeking a justpeace.

Messianic apocalyptic theology provides a rich vocabulary for talking about how communities become political agents through interrupting violence and transcending moments of crisis. Messianic time breaks with the sequential, linear time and ways of seeing of the nation-state. A partnered gradual eschatology is also necessary to account for communities' engagement with state institutions and pluralistic working groups, social movements, and networks that are transformative. Gradual eschatology also accounts for the generative challenges and transformative processes *within* a community building peace.

The pairing of times offers a framework for nonviolent peacebuilding that centers constructive agents under duress. In the lens of these times, change toward justpeace occurs vertically (at various levels of society—namely, locally, regionally, and nationally) and horizontally (within a community).[4] In this approach, churches or peace communities are

4 In John Paul Lederach's influential social change model, people at various locations on a "social pyramid" or "triangle"—grassroots, midlevel, and elite "levels"—look for cross-cutting points of contact and develop synergies. The ability to connect and collaborate

legible as political agents of change within a larger context of subsystems and society-wide systems.[5] However, in this approach peace communities themselves are also *subject to change*.

Colombian women peacebuilders' practice and critical reflection brought into view gendered experience and relations of power within communities seeking a justpeace. They point to the need for conceptual development in the peacebuilding categories of Lederach and to the inadequacies in John Howard Yoder's peace theology. The theology of constructive agency under duress seeks to contribute necessary conceptual resources.

The practice and critical reflection of women peacebuilders

I first learned of Luz (a pseudonym) through documentation of death threats she received.[6] She found a scrawled note on the open-air kitchen table in her rural home: "Withdraw," it said, "or else." Members of a paramilitary organization threatened her in an effort to intimidate and stop her from organizing political power for land reform on the Caribbean coast with her church and local communities. She did not desist in that instance. Nor did the respected and increasingly well-known and effective community leader capitulate to other demands that she cease her "meddling." Rather, her work expanded to national-level advocacy efforts to dismantle structures that consolidated land holdings regionally through direct coercion, economic power, and the power of political elites. I grew to know her personally while working with regional leaders, international nongovernmental organizations, and embassies to advocate for institutional land reform. Her face was impassive, and her voice emerged as from deep still water as she delivered her testimony and the group's proposals. During this time, I learned that when she refused to step down from her political organizing work, the paramilitary group sent men to her home who raped her repeatedly. Luz consistently named violence against women in her advocacy and political organizing at a time when doing so was rare, but she did not speak publicly or with her local community about

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across levels is strategic. This is a key idea in the field of transformative peacebuilding today. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (United States Institute of Peace, 1998), 39.

5 This language draws on Lederach's lens of a nested paradigm. Lederach, *Building Peace*, 60–61.

6 This section of the essay draws from Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, chapter 4, 169–75.

her own horrifying experiences. Instead, she confided in trusted women who supported her in her efforts to survive, maintain a range of relationships, and struggle against paramilitary domination of her community and the territory even as it threatened to splinter her own life. The peace theology and peacebuilding frameworks at my disposal in the early 2000s did not supply sharp tools for evaluating the gendered situation that Luz faced.

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I conducted focus groups with feminist theologians and women peacebuilders who were familiar with the situation and others like it. For the women in the ecumenical group, Luz used the tools at her disposal deliberately and strategically to subvert the paramilitary's efforts to dominate her activity and, by extension, the movement to organize power. She was negotiating pain and discerning her own limits while working with the community-based platform, a source of empowerment and risk she chose to accept. She was exercising a form of constructive agency under duress with the women who supported her. Her negotiation and decisions took on new significance over the years as the social movement recognized, reckoned with, and developed strategies to deal with issues of patriarchal gender norms and sexualized violence. For example, experiences like Luz's and more everyday sexual violence eventually led women and men to create the "gender subgroup" of the land-defense working group catalyzed by churches in which Luz participated. Furthermore, as I write in *Witnessing Peace*, the gender subgroups' practices, which were "rich in psychological content, [began] to heal the pain that [had] seeped into the souls of people who [were] recipients of quotidian gender violence."[7] These are extraordinarily significant developments in the struggle to transform gendered domination of certain bodies over other bodies, over whole communities, and over territory. They speak to the generative challenges, processes of unlearning, and reorganization of power germane to a peace community in gradual time.

In sum, this is a case in which collective agency did not absorb the individual. A small group of women contributed to processes of structural change within a community of peace and altered the flow of power within it. A gradual process *within* the community strengthened collective agency

7 Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, 173.

building peace. It advanced a just peace in society (vertically) through internal transformation (horizontally).[8] Theologically, the need for and enactment of such reckoning does not undermine the peace witness or render the peace community incoherent. *Witnessing Peace* posits this internal reckoning, unlearning and relearning, and reorganization of power within a peace community as a vital aspect of the journey in gradual time. It works against glossing over important internal difference, fixing what is dynamic, and abstracting from history what is always contextual.

Woman peacebuilders and Mennonite models of peacebuilding

Witnessing Peace relies on kinds of time that Mennonites have written about before—namely, eschatologies. It reads John Paul Lederach as a political theologian and one of the foremost proponents of such eschatologies. As I state in the book, "Throughout his career, Lederach has been prompted by his experiences in conflict settings and by the Mennonite tradition that shaped him to challenge the singular, linear view of history presumed in much of conflict resolution and in some peacebuilding and peace studies. He cites Christian eschatology and apocalyptic ethics of Mennonite theologians wherein the present and future—or eschaton—overlap in the 'already, not yet' kingdom as a significant influence on his thinking and action."[9]

Yet the Colombian women peacebuilders help to identify some of the limitations of peacebuilding frames rooted in Anabaptist peace theology. Constructive agency under duress offers the vision of a peace community that interrupts violence, catalyzes processes that involve organizing political power, and *reckons with patterns of injustice engrained not just in society but in the community building peace*. It provides specification about internal relations of power within the peacebuilding community. It therefore brings into view limitations of Lederach's concept of peacebuilding communities ("constituencies of peace")[10]—namely, the lack of sharp con-

8 Lederach, *Building Peace*, 39.

9 Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, 17. See John Paul Lederach, "Recollections and the Construction of a Legacy: The Influence of John Howard Yoder on My Life and Work," paper presented at Believers Church Conference, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, March 7, 2002. Despite some differences I name here, I continue to identify with Lederach's peacebuilding tradition. See Heather DuBois and Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, "The Intersection of Christian Theology and Peacebuilding," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, ed. Atalia Omer, Scott Appleby, and David Little (Oxford University Press, 2015).

10 Lederach, *Building Peace*.

ceptual tools to critique hierarchies of power, patriarchal or otherwise, if the constituencies contribute to peace. It shows that conflict transformation categories themselves are not necessarily sensitive to the structure or quality of relationships within a peace constituency or transformational platform.[11] Conflict transformation rebuilds relationships across divides through context-sensitive, inclusive, multi-level processes that appreciate conflict as a motor of change to address the relational patterns at the epicenter of conflict.[12] The gender-sensitive specification and conceptual development called for by Colombian women peacebuilders is in keeping with Lederach's aims. Yet without precise language about internal power dynamics, equity,[13] and mechanisms for the participation of marginalized voices, the justpeace orientation of conflict transformation "characterized by approaches that reduce violence and destructive cycles of social interaction and at the same time increase justice in any human relationship" may enable gendered forms of duress to persist in the constituency of peace and in the moral imagination that normalizes and sustains it.[14]

Identifying and coming to terms with the limitations of the category prevents us from invisibilizing them and encourages deliberate designs for relational patterns. For example, when the Colombian community-based project Luz inspired refused to further reinforce established gender hierarchies, gendered social norms, and silence about violence against women in its internal workings, it worked against engraining such hierarchies, social norms, and silences into its function of "critical yeast," which Lederach defines as small groups of people who leaven society with moral imagination and new possibilities.[15] Rather than normalizing gendered asymmetries of power, the women wove relational webs of solidarity, provided resources for critical analysis, enhanced interethnic participation

11 John Paul Lederach, "Process Structures as Platforms for Change," in *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Good Books, 2003), 34–38, at 38.

12 See John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse University Press, 1995), 23; Lederach, *Building Peace*, 60–61; 39; Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*.

13 Lederach advocates creating right relationships based on equity in *Preparing for Peace*, 20. This evidences my claim that ethics, development of practices, specification, and conceptualization are needed to develop a Lederachian transformative approach to peace in light of orienting terms and resources that are present yet underdeveloped.

14 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, reprint edition (Oxford University Press, 2010), 182.

15 Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 91.

of women, and introduced critical question posing about topics that had been unspeakable.

I am concerned that theologians and peace scholars operating in the tradition of John Howard Yoder, including Lederach among many others, often oppose the churches (imagined as a fully realized eschatological community instead of a deeply flawed community journeying through *chronos*) to secular discourses and processes. As we have come to understand better in recent years, this excessively clean opposition can usefully highlight the flaws of the latter while disastrously hiding the failings of the former.[16] Here I am talking about the fit of John Howard Yoder's peace theology with Yoder's sexual predation and abuse of power. John Howard Yoder's messianic theology provided a model of Christian peacebuilding, but he mixed eschatologies with problematic results.[17] The communities that I worked alongside should vindicate his theology, but thinking with these Colombian communities instead—especially with the praxis of women peacebuilders—points out the limitations, namely, the fit between his theology and sexualized violence and abuse of power. Under the heading of messianic political theology, he mixes eschatologies in ways that enabled some forms of violence while obscuring others.

The Colombian women peacebuilders help to identify some of the limitations of peacebuilding frames rooted in Anabaptist peace theology.

Thinking with Luz and other constructive agents under duress brings to light the structural, political, and agential inadequacies of past theologies of nonviolent peacebuilding efforts like Yoder's. On a conceptual level, it reveals that his peace theology is of limited usefulness for reckoning with forms of violence within Mennonite peace church communities, institutions, and histories. It is of limited usefulness for bringing into view and coming to terms with hierarchies of power that he exploited. A vision that posits "the church as change" and "a conduit of generative political energy in history" is directed from the church toward transformation of

16 These sentences are reproduced from the introduction to Hunter-Bowman, *Witnessing Peace*, 17.

17 Janna L. Hunter-Bowman, "Constructive Agents Under Duress: Alternatives to the Structural, Political, and Agential Inadequacies of Past Theologies of Nonviolent Peacebuilding Efforts," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (2018): 149–68.

society.[18] It is of limited usefulness for critical self-reflection. After Yoder, those of us in peace theology orbits have no choice but to attend to sin *within* our communities, institutions, theological discourses, and histories. Peace theologies and normative theories of peacebuilding need to account for and resource the work of reckoning and internal transformation. Many are doing so.

Conclusion: Toward a third wave peace theology

Perhaps it is useful to think about peace theology in waves. A wave is a common interpretive framework shaped by historical circumstances. The first wave of peace theology, shaped by World War II, focuses on nonresistance. Guy Hershberger is representative of this wave. The second wave of peace theology, shaped by the Vietnam War and international service through Mennonite Central Committee, emphasizes transformation. John Howard Yoder and John Paul Lederach are leading voices of this wave. The third wave of peace theology *reckons* with the silenced forms of violence that have coexisted with peace theology's rejection of killing for the state (wave one) and emphasis on transformation (wave two). Women survivors of Yoder's violence and those who stood and spoke with them catalyzed the third wave.[19] Third wave peace practitioners and theologians are also reckoning with colonialism, antisemitism, and racism while carrying forward a Lederachian commitment to engagement for transformation. Developing the three waves is beyond the scope of this conclusion, but naming them is crucial to locating constructive agents under duress in the panorama of peace theologies, reflecting on the significance of Anabaptist-inflected peace witness today, and thinking about what comes next.

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18 John Howard Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1998): 43–61, 53.

19 See for example the work of Carol Penner and other women in Elizabeth Yoder, ed., *Peace Theology and Violence against Women* (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992).