v. Victims

I think we have to move away from being victims. My son lived for twenty years. He was a poet, too. And I celebrate those twenty years of life.

Juan Gelman, “Hay que moverse del lugar de la víctima”

Lately, the social sciences and new work on historical memory have insisted on a need to decenter our analyses and move away from the paradigm of human rights. One consequence of this is that the victim ceases to be the main actor in histories of war and in reconstructions of localized memories.

Critiques of a “victim-centered approach” are many and valid. Critics argue that such an approach makes the victim one-dimensional, diverting focus from his or her role as an actor both in wartime and in the postwar era. This approach, too, ignores people’s will and motivations and highlights instead only the harm they suffered. It sets in motion

1. Currently NGOs, particularly international ones, manage an elaborate framework with concepts such as transitional justice that seek to systematize grave political crises and armed conflicts across the globe, primarily through truth commissions, which they understand as replicable. Gonzáles, “Nuevas fronteras,” summarizes this position.

2. See Oglesby, “Educating Citizens”; del Pino and Yezer, Las formas.
a purification process that strips actors of their political agency, turning them into innocent victims. It also doesn’t help us understand the strategies that communities and individuals use to reflect or not reflect on their memories (i.e., selective memory) or the strategies they deploy when tactically approaching organizations that would defend their rights to political reparations or justice (e.g., NGOs, the state, international organizations). Finally, it doesn’t help us analyze the internal dynamics, the micropolitics, that play out in communities such as Ayacucho where everyone is a victim, though some more so than others, and where everyone is a victimizer, though some a little more than others, and where, because of this, the categories of victim and victimizer don’t work.

It’s neither unwarranted nor in error that the victim, for decades, was at the center of discourse about the war. But today that urgency has abated. It’s not that demands for truth, justice, and reparations have been met. It’s that the need to understand the war has also become powerful: the need to understand now has a place alongside the agendas of the victims’ organizations and the NGOs.

Every new study reveals the limitations of a victim-centered approach.3 Towns and neighborhoods are full of memories of people whose experiences were complex, who can’t be contained within the categories of victim and perpetrator. In the old victim-centered approach, the war ap-

3. Reátegui, Criterios básicos, offers a reflection on this perspective on rights, specifically on places of memory. It could be that Reátegui, in an effort to preserve the legacy of the TRC, goes too far in taking from its Final Report only what is ethical and responsible to re-present, thus preventing him from understanding current social struggles about local memories (Portugal, Lugares). Del Pino and Agüero (Cada uno) have underlined this. But is Reátegui completely wrong? Perhaps motivated by our search to find different voices and to criticize transitional justice, we overlook something important that Reátegui insists on: If we don’t commemorate the victims, then why commemorate? And the answer is: we remember not just to commemorate, and we commemorate for others besides the victims. The victims themselves are destabilized as a point of reference, and thus we also need to ask: (a) What is the point of reference for a politics of memory? (b) If we commemorated radically and not as part of a negotiation that allows commemoration, wouldn’t that be sufficient to add purpose to the memorial? (c) Even if a memorial site doesn’t have any more impact than simply being there, has it necessarily failed as a visible object? What would it mean for it to be successful? What would it need to prompt among citizens? It’s true, to remember and to honor might not be enough, but in this indifferent and cynical society, is that so little? Isn’t a little bit of respect radical?
pears extraordinary, like a break in the history of communities or neighbor-
hoods. It’s as if the war befell them, as if they had little to do with it, as if their only connection to the war were suffering. Nor is the experience of the state, at least of the armed forces, a simple memory of evil.

We need subjects with agency, people with will, motivations, and political profiles. We don’t need any more victims, people caught in the crossfire—no more miserable innocents.

39 But before we recover the actor and cast aside the victim with such academic zeal, it might be important to think about a few things.

We might want to think about the forces that shaped, conditioned, and influenced people’s decisions, or that made it difficult if not impossible for them to make those decisions, or that plunged them into the dilemma of having to make decisions whose costs—moral, economic, political, or simply human—were extreme. We’re already familiar with some of those costs: having to decide to kill neighbors, family members, or Shining Path militants to prove their loyalty to the armed forces.

In many cases, that was agency—a miserable kind of agency.

40 Elizabeth Jelin, critiquing the prevalence of the human rights para-
digm, claims that if we preserve the victim’s cultural centrality, then the things a person did no longer matter; all that matters is what was done to that person.4 A victim-centered approach eclipses the actor and instead foregrounds a defenseless, depoliticized individual; it emphasizes only that people’s rights were violated and that they suffered. If we reassess the actor, we take a step toward restoring his or her complex humanity.5

But how can we recover the actor? How deep should we go? Which actors should we recover? And who should recover them? I think these questions are still quite superficial.

Isn’t it enough to recover people’s suffering, which is already a lot to take on, so that they can be acknowledged in the way they deserve? No, it’s not.


5. Torres, interview.
We have to recover and expose the entirety of their miserable lives—
every bit of their small, ruinous, simple, miserable lives, so that we aca-
demics can understand certain processes better and write about them,
or, if we have ethical motivations, so that society can take a better look
at itself and learn civic lessons.

Yet, when has taking a close look at the actors in a war or a massacre
made us better? Does knowing that a carpenter felt hatred at dawn and
in the afternoon went out to buy bread somehow prepare us to confront
the days he didn’t live to see, the days following his torture?

Is it more valuable to focus on what people did than on what was done
to them? Doesn’t what was done to them, what their bodies endured, tell
us more about the type of life and death that fate destined them to share
with others of their time and generation? Isn’t what was done to them
part—perhaps the most vital part—of how their bodies resisted, faded
away, and let themselves be molded? Can we not find an archaeology of
the mechanisms of violence written on their bodies, like a trace?

It pains me not to understand—not to be sure of these things, not to
be able to let go of pain enthusiastically as a bad anchoring point, let go
of tragedy as an error, and instead look at violence with the purpose of
embracing a whole life. “By all the delights that I shall miss, / Help me
to die, O Lord.” William Hodgson wrote these words two days before he
died in one of the most horrible battles of the last century. 6 Fear was his
agency. He wanted and asked for help so he could be a soldier, so he could
be a man, so he could have an ending to his story.

Fear . . . Fear . . . We have to recover not only the terror one feels when
confronting danger but also the fear that destroys all certainty, the fear
that a small, exposed, and confused person feels when facing horror.
Might feeling a little bit of that fear calm our enthusiasm?

41 “We waited for them at night. We let them in, just like always, tell-
ing them their food was there. They arrived suspecting nothing. Once
inside, we took them by surprise and tied them up. Only one of them had

6. William Noel Hodgson (1877–1918) was a British author who wrote in multiple genres.
He was killed in World War I, hit by an artillery shell in the Fourth Battle of Ypres. The
poem is titled “Before Action” (1916).
a weapon. We all dragged them out to the plaza, beating them, stoning them, clubbing them. Then we killed them with machetes. They were just boys. Two of them were schoolkids from this very place. We buried them in a nearby field and kept it a secret. The next year, members of that organization took their revenge on us for rebelling against them. They killed almost all our leaders.”

The members of one community told me a story like this. But they didn’t tell just me; everyone who has dealt with these matters has heard not only dozens but hundreds of similar stories, stories of victims’ families. We’ve heard about victims chopped into pieces by Shining Path or by the military in front of their children, spouses, or parents. And I’m talking about victims who were killers, too, doing “micropolitics.”

Desperation and fear are, therefore, part of the agency we need to recover. That’s fine. But we have to do it unselectively and without compromise. We have to call things by their name and assume the consequences.

In a presentation at LUM, Ponciano del Pino urged us to pay attention to the “impurities of war” in order to narrate the war’s complexity. I understand what he’s trying to say. I even share his motivation: to move beyond naive, stereotypical narratives. But I also think that we have to set aside this kind of rhetoric because, when we use it, we delude ourselves all the more: just as language seems to tell us something, it also masks our confusion. There are no purities or impurities in war. Horror is just that—horror! We have to recover it, describe it, relive it, and later flesh out its consequences. We have to look at ourselves without trickery, examine our shared or individual filth, and see if we can recognize ourselves in it.

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7. Ponciano del Pino, remarks at book presentation of del Pino and Yezer, Las formas (LUM, June 5, 2014). With the term impurezas, del Pino alludes to Primo Levi’s well-known gray zone, which in Peru was rediscovered by those who want to argue that there weren’t victims “caught in the crossfire” and that not everything can be reduced to innocent victims and perpetrators. However, it is worth asking whether there weren’t actually victims caught in the crossfire. It is necessary to revisit this question without naivete and the pressure to defend, which was the mandate of the time when these narratives were constructed. Can we really believe that because they had a small margin of action these peasant communities weren’t caught in a crossfire that ultimately engulfed them? It’s not a matter of pitting one myth against another. This needs to be studied in detail.
Another nonexistent victim.

“They electrocuted me, waterboarded me, all those things you already know. Later, those bastards raped me. For days, weeks, I lost track of time. But I didn’t break the golden rule. I didn’t give them any information. I don’t know if I was alone or if someone else was there. But someone was there; I could hear slow breathing. But I was blindfolded. I couldn’t tell if it was another detained woman or someone from Dircote. I thought I would die there. But, you see, they took me to prison. I got sick, and now this is how I am [she walks with difficulty], because of the torture. But who cares? Here, no one knows any of this. If they did, what would I do? They’d fire me on the spot from my job at the school.”

This Shining Path woman participated actively in missions in Lima. She killed. She irreparably harmed dozens of families. But she’s not crazy, nor is she a sadistic monster. She’s not helpless either, as we typically classify human rights victims. She’s a woman from the city who was born in a marginal and dangerous neighborhood. But for a variety of reasons—whether generational or familial, or because of her own inclinations, or because of influences on her, or because of a thousand other things—she joined Shining Path. We found ourselves there, facing a woman who had committed crimes but whose motivations were not—how shall I say it—base.

I asked my mother if they tortured her when they detained her, prior to her imprisonment in the Chorrillos Prison. She never shared any details. She’d always say, “Later.” That’s because she never felt like a victim, nor did she want us to think of her that way; she also managed sensitive information as anyone would around his or her loved ones: to protect them. But I can assume that she was tortured—and that they also could have raped her, as they did with this old woman who spoke to me from behind a wooden table draped in a checkered, plastic tablecloth.8

8. My brother once again correctly points out that when we were little, we didn’t grow up with the anguish of thinking that our mother could be raped—tortured, yes, but not raped. Yet the way I wrote this makes it appear that this fear was part of our anguish. It’s true that we didn’t live with this fear, but now I know that it could have happened, that our mother could have been raped. Memory is not the only resource on this topic. The TRC confirmed that the vast majority of women prisoners they interviewed had suffered sexual violence by the security forces. And although my memory doesn’t include this fear, looking back from the present, I see that I should have feared it. It’s a revelation to perceive the fears that ignorance or childhood masks. But today I want to tell it this way because these women—the survivors, those terrorists—have rights.
These terrorists or former terrorists—these guilty women—didn’t want to be victims. Nor has anyone bothered to construct them as such. To say “terruco” or “terruca” is like saying “witch” or “devil.” It’s a label that brands a person as horrible, a mistake, a dreadful person, a foreigner to the community, someone who needs to be eliminated. When one is entrenched in such language, it’s impossible to recover who those individuals were as political subjects.

When we dismantle the centrality and social function of victimhood, are we really thinking seriously about people like these, who haven’t even had the pitiful consolation of being treated as victims by their communities? If we’re correct about needing to move beyond the idea of the victim, in what nameless wasteland will these people wind up, in what nameless place within our world of memories and rights?

They are ghosts who can’t even be victims, because they are unnameable in conventional language. They’re semisubjects.

43 I’ve known him since I was a teenager. He sold books at the university. When everyone was being detained or killed, he disappeared. I didn’t think much about him. Later, I saw him again, alive. The first time that we casually bumped into one another he avoided my eye contact, which was my way of gesturing to greet him. He still avoids me. Each of us knows that the other knows, and that must make him uncomfortable.

What place does this old Shining Path militant have in this story, this man who isn’t just guilty but who’s also “traitor”? Did our world full of normal citizens vindicate him simply because, at the time, possibly pressed by torture, he gave up his former comrades and collaborated with state security agents? What does that make him?

This poor guy whom my mother fed so many times—who suffered so much, and whom I remember as a happy, somewhat foolish kid—I wish he wouldn’t avoid me and that he’d talk to me knowing that he has nothing to hide, that no one can blame anyone for how they managed to survive the horror.

That’s his agency, and that’s what I’m trying to recover. It’s OK to do it. We need to go through this hard, critical, even cruel exercise—because truth isn’t an absolute, nor is it just a word (or maybe it is, I don’t know); perhaps it’s a gradual process of revealing, with effort and patience, some
ultimate meaning that, at present, we can barely sense. So, if this is cor-
rect, then we also have to think about what truth is and how much stock
we’re willing to put in it.

44 That’s why when we write and strive to decentralize victimhood
and think instead about the many subjective experiences that wars cre-
ate, we have to remember that there are many memories. Constructing
victims isn’t just a discursive move. Victims get constructed even before
(or at the same time as) bodies and the human will suffer coercion. Vic-
tims are born when people are destroyed. Victimhood alludes to a pro-
cess, however ephemeral, in which an individual or a community is sub-
jected to someone else’s will, which in turn impedes the individual’s or
the community’s reproduction.9

Victimhood is like a brand. It doesn’t get erased simply with the pas-
sage of time or because the social sciences need to understand societies
and their conflicts better. The day before a man is tortured he’s many
things: a worker, a father, a union leader, a soccer player. The day after he
survives torture he’s a wounded man, a prisoner, a suspect, a guilty party,
a potential disappeared person, or a hero. But all of these new properties
become part of him only when he’s labeled a victim. And how long will
they remain part of him?

Who decides? And who decides when a person will no longer be a victim?

45 To be a victim is unstable. There are people who want to be labeled
victims. They’ll pursue that brand because it gives meaning and respect
to a life that was once only death, just another cadaver. Victimhood gives
people a status they desire, and they perceive that this is just. In that
sense, to be a victim is a trophy, an honor, a form of dignity.

9. I would like to underline this basic point: Nobody wants to be a victim of horror. It’s
not just a matter of language or the discourse of those involved; it’s an expression of
their bodies. And here I want to develop the argument made by Manrique, “Generando”;
del Pino and Yezer, Las formas; del Pino and Agüero, Cada uno; and a separate interna-
tional literature, intrigued with the rediscovery that victims are also people.
46 Time also matters. Victimhood remains on the horizon of younger generations, as in Spain’s transition to democracy. After all the political pacts, the forgotten dead, and the hidden mass graves—the price Spain paid for stability—the dead eventually were rescued, their victimhood restored to them. What I mean to say is that, in this case, the term victim doesn’t take anything away but rather adds something; it makes it so that deaths that happened in the past now become public knowledge, so that society can finally name what happened. The status of victim completes the description.

47 We should also critique and approach suspiciously the iconoclastic zeal to destroy labels such as victim and innocent. If there are no victims, then we’re all the same; no one is guilty. History explains everything. Responsibilities become nothing more than a matter of individual morality and relativism, unnecessary for understanding the past and political life.

Social processes, contexts, and medium- and long-term causes eclipse human will. And when human intention falls out of play, other things fall away, too, such as assigning guilt and the need for remedies (both personal and collective) for the harm done to human actors.

48 To be a victim is a long, complex process that we can discuss and historicize because, more than anything, it’s an accumulation of losses. The victim has suffered, and this suffering has its history, its milestones, its contradictions, its moments of decision, its rhythms, its crises.

People are deprived of all they can be and could have been. This drastic change in a life’s possibilities is the victim’s essential condition: his or her life has been disrupted in the extreme. Daily life stops. What would naturally come the next day is forestalled. This change affects the most ordinary and, at the same time, the most intimate aspects of life.

Remember, eternally remember
all the unknown dead of Hiroshima:
the old fisherman who had woven
with strands of sun a new net
through which
petals of the ocean shone
like perfumed violets;
the man who fell in front of his house
at the precise instant at which smiling toward his children
he showed them
an old bicycle he’d just bought

... 
the girl who in fifteen minutes
was supposed to meet her boyfriend. . . .

Eugen Jebeleanu wrote these words, paralyzed by how a few seconds of future could suddenly be cut off, as if they had never been part of a time sequence that would have made them (almost) inevitable and logical.

The victims’ experience belongs to them and their families; the families are another kind of victim. Yet it’s not only up to them to understand and analyze that experience. This is true. But understanding cannot—if it’s to be complete—fail to consider the victims’ condition and their real existence. To understand is not simply to think about victimhood as a label or a strategy for defending human rights.

Because in war, harm is a key to understanding human relations. Harm founds the victims’ world. Communities are full of victims. That’s the first thing we have to remember when we approach them. The country, the whole world, is a mass grave. If we’re not honest with ourselves about that, we fall into intellectual arrogance, snobbery, or, even worse, a new vice that characterizes human rights institutions, and that’s equally as bad as the narcissistic activism we’ve seen in the past: technocracy.

In countries such as Peru that have suffered war, long years of silence, dictatorship, and a truth commission—and that have promoted both a handful of trials and the gradual bureaucratization of justice and reparations, which in the long run have become unstoppable—intellectuals get somewhat anxious.

In workshops and at conferences, we tend to hear things like, “The truth commission’s report is just a catalog of what happened” or “We have to deepen our understanding of memory.” And although these

statements seem reasonable to me, it’s as if they are two or three decades behind the times. Many victims have moved on to other concerns, have died, or are very old. But we still have to rescue them from oblivion or stagnation.

There’s a short story by Isaac Asimov: the one about the alien monkeys who watch and wait for the earthlings to kill one another so they can take over with their science, decontaminate everything, rescue the survivors, and create a new society. The alien monkeys are convinced that theirs is the most benevolent race in the universe. But the earthling, a regular guy whom the monkeys capture to analyze, tells the aliens that “they’re vultures.”¹¹

Seated tonight in the auditorium at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, listening to the experts on transitional justice speak so passionately, I realize that I share certain technical knowledge with them, even though deep down that expertise strikes me as debased: a whole discipline of experts standing untarnished as they scrutinize the people who have killed each other in excess.

⁵⁰ Neville Chamberlain became a marked man in twentieth-century history, perhaps unjustly: he’s remembered as the sad mediator. He didn’t gain anything from the concessions he made to Hitler, not even much time. He simply gave the Nazis the proof they needed of their coercive skills and of their main rival’s weakness.

I think about the trc, the ngos, and the Reparations Council.¹² Without taking anything away from them, they’ve achieved a lot over the years, even considering their limitations. But their defensive position—making concessions to the powers that be in the spirit of realpolitik so as to secure some benefit for those affected by the violence—has also had medium- and long-term costs.

The Reparations Council, the institution that most embodied the trc’s work in its aftermath, exemplifies the perpetual tension that arises

¹¹. Asimov, “Gentle Vultures.”
¹². The Consejo de Reparaciones (the Reparations Council), part of the Justice Ministry, creates the list of those eligible for individual and collective reparations from the Peruvian state.
in world history from making concessions. The council has suffered mistreatment, sudden budgetary and personnel cuts, temporary closures, leadership changes, media trashing, and complaints. And this has been going on for years! Yet it has endured. It has tolerated everything. The question is: Couldn’t the people on the council have simply screamed, “Enough!”? Couldn’t they have chosen to reject the blatant hostility, to reject how various governments have shUNned reparations? Perhaps if they had done this, the process we currently have for documenting victims would have been thwarted. But perhaps we would have gained ground in recovering other meanings of the past.

It has generally become accepted that victims linked to Shining Path shouldn’t receive reparations. These victims know full well that one of their nonnegotiable human rights has been negotiated away. I know a lot of people—and assuredly the council knows many more—who were labeled terrorists and who, because of this, and without ever having been legally judged as such, have been left off the list of victims. We can’t look at these people as more of a victim or as more innocent than anyone else (if we want to use that terminology), as more innocent than I or many others who roll through life peacefully.

I remember when the leader of a group of displaced people was told that he could no longer serve as a leader in his home region of Apurímac. He was an organizer, the heart and soul of that small base of activism. But he was never going to be listed as a victim on the official registry. He was always smiling, and still is. He accepted all of it. He understood. But I’m sure he felt alone, confused.

51 The reasons that motivate some researchers to do away with a victim-centric perspective strike me as useful. We have to decenter the victim, to show that peasants were, in fact, politicized and that they’d

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13. The Registro Único de Víctimas (Sole Register of Victims), overseen by the Repara- tions Council, and the Comisión Multisectorial de Alto Nivel (High-Level Multisector Commission) are the two entities in charge of implementing the individual and collective reparations established by the Peruvian state for those affected by the violence. As of 2015, more than 180,000 people were on the council’s list of those eligible for reparations. Nevertheless, reparations have been in many ways a failure, a lack of respect toward the victims and their families.
done politics in their own way for a long time. People remember anecdotes about Uchuraccay, about how peasants played their part as “poor” and premodern, and then, a minute later, as soon as the meeting with the truth commissioners had ended, they’d ask everyone to photograph the occasion.

I bring this up to call attention to something. Deconstructing the victim should take a back seat to another pressing need: the need to fight against Lima-centric and racist explanations. A research (and political) agenda that decenters the victim is welcome. But should we carry out that agenda at the expense of diminishing or disappearing another problem that resulted from the war? Should rescuing peasants from their subordinate role in history mean that other victims disappear?

A strong push against victim-centrism has taken root among memory scholars. It’s not unwarranted. Victims don’t ask to be treated as such: they don’t want people to treat them as if they had some kind of disability. They stress this more and more. Instead, they want to be recognized as fighters, leaders, people who aren’t paralyzed by tears. They don’t want others to see them as weeping Blessed Virgins.

It’s interesting that researchers and those affected by the violence agree on this issue, because the two groups tend not to listen to one another. Researchers often find support when they iconoclastically thwart the rhetoric of human rights movements, either enthusiastically or cynically (depending on the researcher). Not long ago, I heard someone at LUM say that testimony can show us only victims and that truth commissions, by their nature, can construct only innocent victims; this situation limits our ability to see the complexities of violence. Someone at LUM also said that those who testified to the TRC were more interested in being seen as victims than as “owners of a truth,” which is how one might assume they should understand themselves. Seen in this way, the commission could only aspire to limit the field of possible lies people tell about the past.¹⁴

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¹⁴. Ludwig Huber, remarks at book presentation of del Pino and Yezer, Las formas (LUM, June 5, 2014). Yet I want to ask: Can those affected by violence access a truth commission in any capacity other than as victims? Can they do it as responsible citizens fulfilling their duty to reconstruct historical memory for the good of the community? Why
There are so many more interesting, revealing, and challenging things that we can still say about this subject. It’s worth staying alert and being critical of ourselves.

Is it true that a testimonial account can produce only a victim? And if this is true, is it necessarily bad? Is it counterintuitive to think that testimony can produce something other than a victim? Doesn’t the affected person’s need to be heard take precedence? Doesn’t the offense take precedence? When a violent offense marks someone’s life, he or she can react in many ways: keep silent, take revenge, speak out hoping to achieve personal catharsis, denounce what happened, express confusion, or all of these things at once or at different times. Testimony is just one way of sharing experience. And when we’re talking about horrible experiences, then perhaps the one who speaks is a victim: a real victim who’s been lucky enough to be heard. Testimony isn’t mere wordplay.

Testimony doesn’t exhaust experience. It underlines, if you will, a painful moment and adds another dimension to a fluid identity. Whether we call someone a victim or something else is a matter of convention.

A while after my father was killed on El Frontón Island, perhaps a year later, we were organizing our clothes in burlap sacks that we used as closets. And maybe because we were talking about my father, much to my surprise, I cried. I didn’t know then, nor do I know now, if I was crying over him. I cried for but a moment, silently, without attaching my pain directly to his death or his absence. My mother, moved, accompanied me in my brief seconds of weakness. Later, she told me I shouldn’t cry, that the best way to honor my father was by not abandoning the ideals for which he fought. But she had tears in her eyes, too. They lasted but an instant. She’d taught us not to show our feelings.

“I understand,” I assented, nodding my head, not saying another word. Silently, we kept organizing our clothes for just a little while longer.

Even today I don’t cry about my father or my mother. I don’t visit them on important anniversaries. I don’t go to the Nueva Esperanza cemetery should we ask that they present themselves in ways that we don’t expect of ourselves? If a member of our own family disappeared, wouldn’t we go to the commission to talk about them and our pain?
where my mother is buried or to the island where some bit of my father must remain. I’ve resisted being a victim. I don’t want people to pity me. I’ve also suspected that people wouldn’t be very empathetic to my experience anyway. The son of terrorists, no matter how wrong his parents’ deaths may have been, has to be at least a little bit evil.

But even if I don’t want to be a victim, does that mean that others don’t need to be seen that way? Aren’t there people out there longing for their pain to be validated, so it’s worth something? Is it so hard to create space for them within our typology of those devastated by war?

54 Victimization is the victimizers’ problem. It’s especially a problem for those who act as intermediaries between those who have suffered harm and the public and academic spheres, that is, for those who mediate access to rights, prestige, or even solace.

The victims remain there—indeed, independently of who is doing the victimizing—even if people erase them from speech or refuse to see them. In some corner of the world, secretly, someone pities a family member who has suffered in war. Perhaps the one feeling pity is your neighbor. And you may never know it because that neighbor has kept quiet about it his or her whole life.

55 Therefore, victimization is sometimes a political strategy that gives access to justice and other scarce resources. Those who suffer human rights violations learn this. They adapt to it. They appropriate the tools and language of international law and leverage them to their benefit. How is that surprising? Are we surprised that they behave as any of us would? Are we surprised that they show their wounds to get a little attention? Should this surprise us if we remember that before they became victims society had already excluded them?

This strategy makes sense. It has a purpose. It’s reasonable. Still, in acknowledging the value in their approach, it’s impossible not to ask if there isn’t something lost when certain communities strategically leverage suffering—something of the ethical power of a complaint made with no aspiration other than its own justice.

But it’s not our place to judge others so severely without judging ourselves, at least a little.
56 I want to say this: in countries such as ours where it’s so hard to have any kind of status, being a victim is at least something, perhaps a step toward citizenship.

As we launch our critiques, I simply ask that we think about this a little, about how delicate it can be to take that step.

57 I remember how I felt when I crossed paths at the morgue with a longtime leader of a victims’ organization. She and I were supposedly there to receive my father’s remains. It was offensive, a farce, but we went there to see, anyway.

She saw me near the exit and approached me, frenetic and nervous. She gave me a hug and cried. She said, “Josecito, you’ve spent many years helping us and, secretly, you had your own worries.” We walked across the street, and I bought her an herbal tea. I felt strange. As we left, she insisted on consoling me: “All these years you were one of us.”

I sensed underlying joy in her words: a warm feeling, as if someone shared her plight, as if I were even more on her side.

But I left confused. The fact that some members of the victims’ organization knew my secret might take something away from the years of work I did out of a sense of honor and solidarity—never as an extension of my own needs. I had worked in solidarity with the victims because their stories touched me and because I believed their struggles were just. But what if all the work I did had been only to help myself?

My dear friend—where might she be? When she embraced me and counted me among her inner circle, I thought, “No, I’m not the same as you. I’m not a victim. What happened to me was part of some other process. It’s a brutal fact but not the basis of my identity.” But maybe, just maybe I rejected her only because I wasn’t ready to surrender, to set aside my pride, as my mother had done years earlier in another context.