Although this book focuses on Uganda, where conflict and division have smoldered for more than half a century, a recent election in Colombia is instructive. On 2 October 2016, Colombian voters went to the polls to legitimize the peace agreement in a plebiscite that would have ended the fifty-two-year conflict between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The plebiscite posed a single question: “Do you support the final agreement to end the conflict and build a stable and lasting peace?”

Throughout September and into early October, many prominent Colombians, including pop star Shakira, Hollywood actor John Leguizamo, and politicians including then-President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, vocally supported a “yes” vote, and pollsters and media alike predicted a robust “yes” result. There was also strong international support for the peace agreement; the United Nations Security Council had already begun to put in place the necessary supports to implement the cease-fire agreement. But a growing “no” campaign led by former President Álvaro Uribe countered that what was needed was “harsher punishment for the FARC, even if in the eyes of the negotiators this was impossible because doing so would lead the FARC to reject the deal.”

In a stunning upset, the “no” side prevailed. The plebiscite failed when 50.2 percent of voters voted against it and only 49.8 percent voted for it. In the end, fewer than 38 percent of Colombians even voted.

The result revealed a sharp disconnect between those who had been affected by the conflict, wanted peace, and were willing to settle for less-than-perfect transitional justice programs to help with their own post-conflict transition, and those who were not—many of whom did not understand the extent to which certain regions of the country continued to suffer disproportionately from the FARC conflict. To a large degree, “municipalities with high levels of FARC presence, on average seemed to show greater support...
for the agreement.” In the department of Chocó, for example, 80 percent of voters voted “yes”; “in the town of Bojayá, where at least 119 people were killed when a church was hit by FARC mortar bombs, 96 percent of residents voted ‘yes.’” In that region, “more than two-thirds of the predominantly Afro-Colombian and indigenous inhabitants were . . . victims of the armed conflict. The chronic abandonment of the national government and corrupt local authorities have left the population at the mercy of illegal armed groups for whom the jungle coast is of major strategic importance.”

The result belied any uniform experience of the long conflict across the country. It also revealed a basic lack of understanding of the experiences of the “other.” It was clear from the outcome that people living in one part of Colombia had vastly different concerns from people living in other areas of the country. Despite their relative proximity to Chocó, for example, the people in the neighboring department of Antioquia rejected the peace agreement outright.

In writing about this kind of indifference between members of competing ethnocultural groups, Eisikovits notes:

In the context of ethnic [and other] conflict there is good reason to assume [that people do not know what has happened]. Warring parties are typically pre-occupied with maintaining their sense of self-justification. This virtually ensures neither side will become immersed in the images of the other’s suffering. Both are much likelier to focus on pictures and images of their own misfortune. If there is indifference (as there surely is in each of these cases) to the suffering of an adversary, it is not due to over-exposure. It is, rather, a result of the close-minded, parochial determination so typical of societies at war not to see, not to hear, not to pay attention to the other side’s fate. Adversaries are indifferent, sometimes even immune, to each other’s anguish not because they have seen too much of it but, rather, because they have been conditioned not to see any of it in the first place.

If there had been an appreciation of what people living in the different conflict zones had experienced, though, or what their needs were, would the plebiscite have succeeded? Perhaps. This book lays out a hypothesis that certain preconditions could be developed and put in place that would allow for the durable and robust development of acknowledgement in divided societies like Colombia. In particular, it targets the very beginning stages of the
cognitive development of a basic understanding of the past—not just in perpetrators and victims, but in “everybody else,” who are ultimately outsiders to that past. Although scholars like Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela talk about the noble aim of empathy, or feeling deeply what the other feels, I am simply too pragmatic to imagine that empathy is a feasible or practicable goal. Instead, in places like Uganda, where ethnocultural divides have hardened and people show, at the very least, a lack of interest or concern, if not outright hatred, for each other, the very warm and fuzzy notion of empathy is just not possible. At least, not yet. Where understanding does not exist, communities cannot be expected to make the jump to empathy; first they need to understand.

Although the example above centers around Colombia, this book considers the relative utility of thin sympathy through the lens of Uganda, where conflict and division have festered for more than half a century. This example is equally relevant to settler colonial states like Canada, where structural violence toward and the nonrecognition of Indigenous peoples have caused a deep rupture in society. The implications of this study could be widely applicable, and the final chapter of the book looks at the question of universalizability of the concept.

The book therefore proposes a hypothesis that suggests that the development of even a very rudimentary understanding among individuals from each of the different factions and groups—of what has happened, of the basic facts of the other’s suffering—could be the necessary condition for promoting not just peaceful coexistence but a society’s ability to move forward together. And although many assume that this understanding already exists, my work and the work of others has clearly demonstrated that there is a significant gap in that kind of perception across different groups. In Uganda, for example, very few people know much of anything about what happened in Northern Uganda between the government of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army, and they know still less about the difficult experiences of northerners during the conflict. In fact, there is little cross-group knowledge between the 65 different ethnocultural groups of each other’s experiences. Getting past that knowledge gap would allow them to at least understand why something like transitional justice might be necessary.

Again, I want to reiterate that developing only a basic understanding is far from ideal. In fact, it is the “thinnest” possible response, a very weak form of sympathetic engagement. In this instance, “sympathy” does not mean “I feel sorry for you” but is used, instead, to refer to understanding, awareness, recognition, and appreciation. It is irrational to think that anything approximating
empathy—feelings for, and an emotional resonance with, the other—could be built between every Ugandan, every Canadian, or every Colombian, at least not at this stage. So the best we can hope for is to develop a basic understanding of what others have gone through, or what I have called “thin sympathy.”

That does not mean that we need to throw out transitional justice, as colleagues have asked me. Rather, we can make processes of transitional justice work better. Thin sympathy is a kind of “lubricant” that can make this happen, by giving the population as a whole a basic understanding of what has happened so they know why transitional justice processes are needed for affected populations.

Although what follows is a theoretical examination of the development of thin sympathy in post-conflict reconstruction, theory divorced from real-world situations can be hollow. And so throughout the book I utilize a case study with which to “test” my normative theoretical claims: Uganda, the case I have in mind when I work through the theoretical claims I make.

What drives this study is a deep knowledge of the many ways in which Ugandans have been let down by the government of Uganda. And although as an academic I would like to hope that my work can contribute theoretically, at the root of this work is an even deeper aspiration that my work can somehow benefit my friends and colleagues working to make a difference in Ugandan civil society. I hope this work will contribute to making that difference.