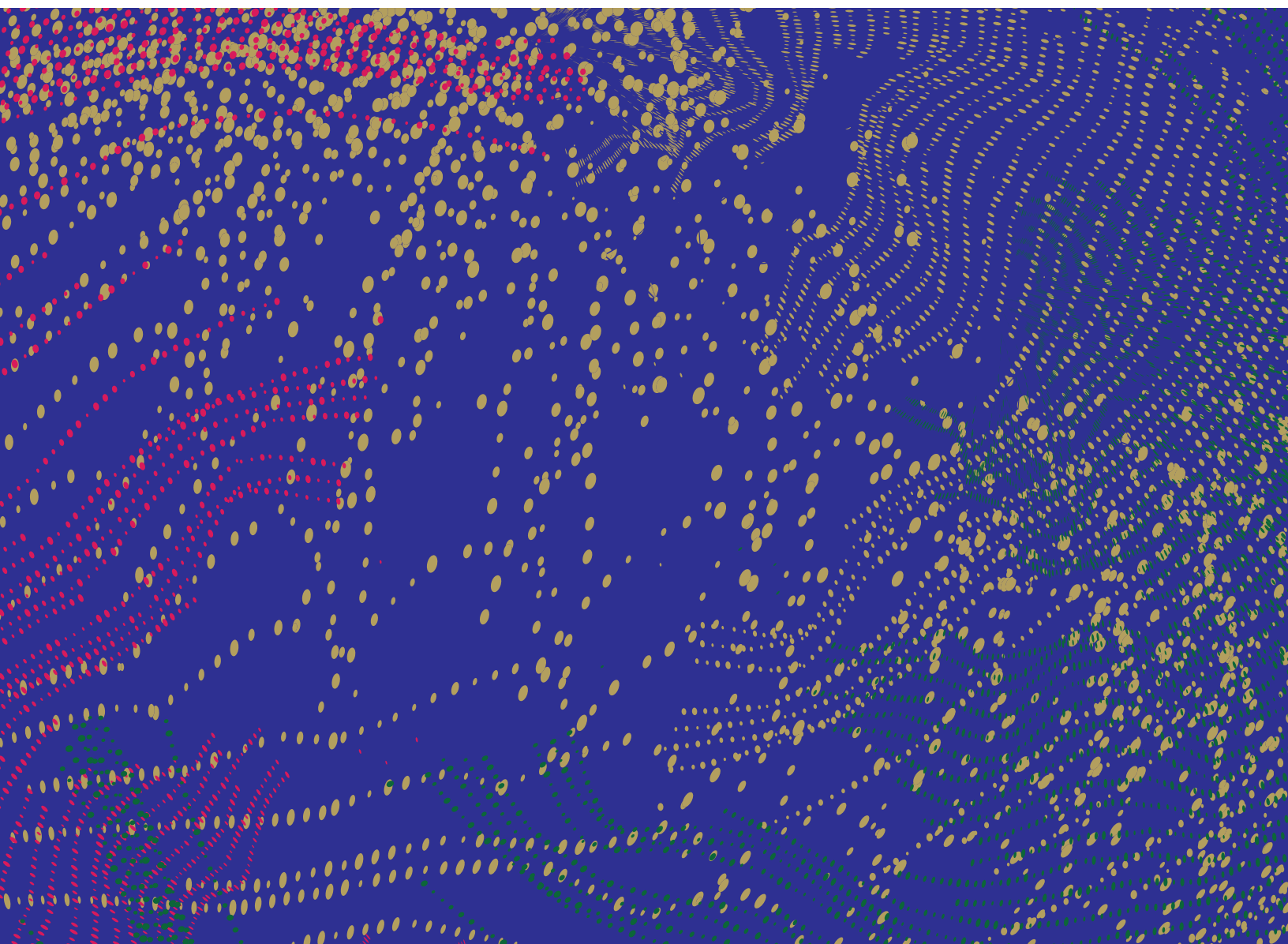


The World Humanities Report

# “Making Memory”: Historical Memory in Colombia and Its Legacies

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María del Rosario Acosta López



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# “Making Memory”: Historical Memory in Colombia and Its Legacies

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When Sara Guyer, at that time president of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes, invited me to contribute to the World Humanities Report with a reflection on the relevance of the humanities in Colombia today, I did not hesitate to propose the project I am about to present, *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*.<sup>1</sup> As I told her from the start, it was crystal clear to me that the work that is being done in Colombia today in the field known as “historical memory”—a term that has also been embraced by government institutions—unquestionably exemplifies the relevance of the humanities and the social sciences. It shows their potential impact on reconfiguring political spaces, the creation of institutional policies, and beyond that, the shaping of a culture and grammars that are capable of decisively transforming social discourses. Initially conceived as an academic undertaking, historical memory has been put into practice as a very interesting and original kind of memory work that integrates academic and state institutions, in sustained collaboration with—and through procedures conceived with and by—local communities. The present volume is the final result of a project that began as a report on the role humanities have played in the configuration and institutionalization of politics of memory in Colombia, starting with the creation and implementation of the National Historical Memory Center and that was followed by local and international initiatives that learned from this experience and took its legacies elsewhere.

Soon enough I realized that building the memory of Colombia’s National Historical Memory Center and its legacies and including the voices of some of those who were key participants in this process could not be just “reported.” I needed to reflect critically on what it has meant for a country like Colombia, after having experienced the longest and cruelest armed conflict in the Southern

<sup>1</sup> The interviews that are part of this volume and this introduction rely on background research conducted by Julian Rios Acuña and Laura Zornosa, whose work as research assistants was funded by the World Humanities Report. I thank both of them for their committed and disciplined approach to this work and their many suggestions regarding key points to be emphasized in this final version.

Cone, to have become a reference for politics of memory and memory-building initiatives. What did it mean, in turn, for historical memory initiatives to have been shaped by this context and to have given way to such rigorous and creative endeavors? I also needed to reconstruct this story following the questions that came up during the conversations with my interviewees, and to reflect with them and beyond each of their answers, into the role that humanities play in the face of such an enormous and difficult, but also so necessary and urgent, task.

What the reader will find in what follows, in two essays (including this one) and eight interviews contained in this volume, is therefore a first attempt to reconstruct critically, with some distance but also with an attentive ear to each one of the participating voices, the story of how the National Historical Memory Center came to be, what challenges it had to face during its operation, and what experiences it left for those who are now engaging, from within but also outside state institutions, in memory work with communities, in Colombia and elsewhere. The volume thus includes interviews with a number of researchers, academics, and memory workers, some of whom were closely involved with the very singular history of the center's emergence—and how its legacies have been appropriated in more recent memory-building experiences.

Let me briefly introduce the interviews that are included in this volume, before I propose a longer reflection on what these interviews have shown me, the history I think they tell, and the challenges they bring up to the question of building memory in the context of state-sponsored, structural, and long-lasting forms of violence.

The first interview is with Steve Stern, historian at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, an expert on memory processes in Latin America who was in charge of producing the first official report on the work of the National Historical Memory Center. The memory that my project attempts to rebuild begins with a history that Stern had started to reconstruct some years ago and is accompanied by the voices of three researchers who were key to the implementation of the work at the center: María Emma Wills, María Victoria Uribe, and Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar. Both Wills and Uribe represent a life-long commitment to recording history of violence in Colombia. In my interviews and presentation of their work below, I focus on showing how they brought to the center an important counter-perspective in the context of a discipline (“violentology”) that has been mostly dominated by male voices and methodologies. The interview with Castillejo-Cuéllar inquires about his work as a researcher for the center and his subsequent work as a member of the Colombian

Truth Commission, reflecting on the possible continuities and discontinuities between these two state-sponsored institutions.

The next two interviews introduce memory initiatives that, starting with methodologies and tools originally implemented by the center, propose to continue the work of historical memory in Colombia in less institutionalized and/or official ways. Thus, Diego Cagüañas Roza tells us about the project that, together with Aurora Vergara (who could not be interviewed for this volume) and a group of researchers from ICESI University in Cali, resulted in the documentary *Voices of Resistance (Voces de resistencia)*, produced in collaboration with a group of *alabao* singers in Bojayá, Chocó, one of the regions most affected by the armed conflict and its various—and continuing—forms of violence in Colombia, including economic and racial components. The next interview is a conversation with some of the team members of the project *Renovando el olvido: Memorias de la L* (Restoring the forgotten: Memories of the L), which has proposed a set of memory initiatives that aim to rebuild the lives and resignify the sites of the former habitants of Bogotá's "El Bronx," who were evicted by the city—criminalized and expelled from their homes—in 2016 and whose memories and forms of life the project wants to recover, historically and in conjunction with art initiatives.

Finally, the Chicago Torture Justice Center and Chicago Torture Justice Memorials make a special appearance in this volume. Laura Zornosa's essay retraces the serendipitous connections that established a special link between Colombia's National Historical Memory Center and these initiatives in the city of Chicago, led by a group of survivors of police torture and made possible by the restless work of survivors together with their families, political activists, and the People's Law Office. Interviews with Elizabeth Deligio, founding member of the Chicago Torture Justice Center, and Jarrett Drake, who was involved in the process of consolidating the center's work as a liberatory memory initiative, tell the story of how the Chicago Torture Justice Center came to be and how liberatory memory is connected to the kind of memory that needs to be produced, implemented, and exercised in the face of structural forms of violence and the erasures that come about in these contexts, as well as the radical imagination that is required to resist them.

## Preamble. The Humanities: A Ceaseless Endeavor against Forgetting

Better not forget, memories  
The certainty of what might have happened  
To keep on  
Able to record  
The very essence of the centuries and their stroll  
As I remember I can call on  
The voice of those they sought to silence.  
—Free Soul collective, “Vehículo del tiempo” (Time vehicle)<sup>2</sup>

As Steve Stern puts it in his interview included in the present volume, “the humanities—whether history, philosophy, or literature—help us to understand . . . that if we cannot record an experience as a story that can be told, then, in a way, that experience disappears. It doesn’t matter if we have statistics—it disappears.”<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to dwell on this claim as a point of departure for the path this volume wants to trace. It is not that we have no need for “statistics” when we set out to collect and record an experience historically, since statistics may allow this experience to be acknowledged politically and legally validated. Here we can also mention the legal records, the archives from which they draw, and all those forms of “codification” that reduce facts to “data” in contexts where doing so is exactly the most adequate way of conferring legitimacy. It is simply that, paradoxically enough (as Stern notes), these data archives often fail to prevent—and instead ensure—the disappearance of the facts or, rather, of the experiences that constitute them. Walter Benjamin had already warned us about this in his

<sup>2</sup> The Free Soul collective is a hip-hop group whose members are former inhabitants of a street in Bogotá known as El Bronx or La L (alluding to its shape on the map). As mentioned, the street’s entire population was evicted by Bogotá’s city government in 2016, and the project *Renovando el olvido* aims, among other things, to reconstruct the memories of the lives that passed through El Bronx and of those who survived the eviction, and to produce narratives that contribute to destigmatizing its former populations. The Free Soul collective is the result of this memory work with a group of former L inhabitants and uses music to repair and recover local memory and histories. See Susana Fergusson, Andrés Leonardo Góngora, Yan Carlos Guerra, and Rayiv David Torres Sánchez, “Humanities That Heal, Objects That Remember,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Steve Stern, “Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit of Invisibilizing Others,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 10.



essay “The Storyteller,” as he reflected on the dangers we might run into when we replace all language, all forms of telling and listening to stories, with the ephemeral and passing temporality of “information.” Where the transmission of experience is devalued, Benjamin warns, “the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears.”<sup>4</sup>

As Stern argues, the humanities allow us to bring those voices back to life, those experiences that might otherwise grow blurry and faint over time. The vigilant ear of someone who heeds and who, by heeding, seeks to understand, to interpret, to apply and create aesthetic and semantic resources that allow us to open up a space of credibility for what is being told: this is what the humanities contribute, and it is for this reason that their work is tightly interwoven, if you will, with the work of memory—and in any case, with an effort to resist forgetting.

Yan Carlos Guerra, a member of the Free Soul collective, makes the same point by saying that the humanities help us to “restore what everyone else wanted to forget so quickly.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the humanities have a unique capacity to “reanimate” what other ways of relating to the past tend to fix and cut off from any possibility of change. To borrow from the verses from “Vehículo del tiempo” (Time vehicle) that I quoted as an epigraph to this preamble, the humanities allow us to arrive at “the certainty of what might have happened” and to imagine other possible pasts for the present—to collect what has been crossed off not only from history but also from the presents that were truncated in the process. However, the critical tools that are proper to humanistic thought also allow us to resist the many erasures imposed through official narratives and hegemonic discourses. They allow us to identify and denounce the interests that seek to uphold the status quo and that protect it from whatever might destabilize the hierarchies and inequalities enforced by the political and economic regimes that sustain it. These are narratives that erase and stigmatize, clearly incapable of listening to the experiences of those who are subjected to their violences. Such violences are not only political or economic but, as I would like to stress in what follows, also aesthetic and epistemological. This is the case because, on the one hand, these forms of violence and the narratives they control and give shape to represent the lives against which they act as erasable, dispensable, and fungible. On the other, they also seek to control the semantic resources and criteria of visibility and audibility that determine

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2002), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 16.

how it is that those lives can appear before others and be heard, remembered, grieved over.<sup>6</sup>

The humanities have the capacity to intervene in these frames of meaning at several levels: conceptual and semantic but also aesthetic and bodily. They can “break through,” as Elizabeth Deligio puts it in her interview for this volume, “the framework that’s been imposed for a long, long time. . . . Something disrupts the pattern, and you have a new thought. . . . When it happens collectively, when something interrupts on the social and political level, that collective level inside of that space of historical memory, it can become an event.” According to Deligio, this capacity to invent, to interrupt, to approach the same thing from another perspective in order to resignify it need not provide us with a “blueprint”; it is not necessarily giving us “an answer, but it’s kind of hijacking us for a minute. It’s spinning the chair around, and it’s making us suddenly consider possibilities that were not available to us before.”<sup>7</sup>

Susana Fergusson, who is an expert in harm reduction and part of the *Renovando el olvido* team, argues that thus understood the humanities are able to “heal,” that they “can become means to heal and build hope.”<sup>8</sup> Deligio sees a connection between this power to cure and the creativity that working with and from the humanities can inspire in survivors, adding: “The minute that you can see someone’s imagination come back to life, that’s when you know that they’re regaining some kind of interiority, they’re regaining some resilience, and then they’re going to be able to begin to move around what is traumatic. And they’re going to be able to look at it from different angles.”<sup>9</sup>

The humanities heal because they build hope; they cure because they allow us to imagine other presents, different from those that have already been imposed onto communities by the kinds of violence to which they have been subjected; they allow us to approach the past with tools that revive it, reactivate it, and

<sup>6</sup> Here I am mainly referring to the category of “grievable lives,” to which Judith Butler has devoted much thought, although she is yet to examine explicitly its relation to the distribution of, and the right to, memory. See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016). For a definition—and a critique—of violence as a way of controlling not only lives but also the semantic resources that make those lives legible (or illegible), see my decolonial account of the grammars of listening in María del Rosario Acosta López, “*Gramáticas de lo inaudito* as Decolonial Grammars: Notes for a Decolonization of Memory,” *Research in Phenomenology* 52, no. 2 (2022): 203–22.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused with the Power of Imagination,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 12, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 14.

<sup>9</sup> Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused,” 11.



transform it from the present in order to make room for other versions of the future—and even other conceptions of time that do not depend on the idea of a “future” to look forward and reimagine the present, to resignify the body, to rewrite our own history.

In the words of Laura Zornosa, “memory work fuses language, history, philosophy, and art to teach, to heal, and to break cycles of violence.”<sup>10</sup> Memory, then, as it is cultivated and conceived within the humanities, is not in these cases a simple *inscription* of facts and histories but a possibility to *amend them*, as Jarrett Drake explains in his interview.<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, memory ultimately becomes an accomplice to violence by overdetermining the life of the bodies that bear those histories and compelling the historical present to perpetuate that past instead of interrupting it.

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The humanities heal because they build hope; they cure because they allow us to imagine other presents. . . . They allow us to approach the past with tools that revive it, reactivate it, and transform it from the present in order to make room for other versions of the future.

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Diego Cagüañas Rozo brings the same point into view when he describes the kind of temporalities that come into play for those who work with survivors—in his particular case, survivors from the Afro-Colombian community of Bellavista, in Chocó, fifteen years after the event known in Colombia as the Bojayá massacre, perpetrated on May 2, 2002, during a bout of confrontations between FARC guerrillas and ACCU paramilitary combatants:<sup>12</sup>

The fact is that the massacre is not over yet. It is not over. The past is in the present. Every time someone in the community wakes up and their leg hurts, it's because they still have shards from the explosion of that day in their flesh . . . We have to understand the situation in these terms: How can we continuously rebuild

<sup>10</sup> Laura Zornosa, “How We Remember: Memory Work in Chicago and Colombia,” in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 4.

<sup>11</sup> “To right” and not just “to write” the past, as Drake puts it. See Jarrett Drake, “The Beauty of Liberatory Memory Work Is in the Ceremony,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 3.

<sup>12</sup> FARC stands for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia); ACCU stands for Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá).

the present? In fact, this is something we all do, but the people of Bojayá have to do it in a radical way because their lives are on the line, often in extremely brutal ways. In the end, this is the main goal: to reconstruct the present and to figure out how to preserve life despite everything. What can be done to keep living in the same place?<sup>13</sup>

As Deligio reminds us, the point is not to close up the past and look only toward the future: “I . . . didn’t see in many of the people that I worked with a desire for the past to be over, but for the harm to be over.”<sup>14</sup> Neither is it a question of having to leave who you are behind, as Guerra explains: “we didn’t want to erase the memory and to wipe away the past. That is what all these machineries . . . intend . . . all the machinery at work in traditional addiction therapy that demands that you forget who you were. . . . That type of approach leads to relapse, to not believing in yourself.”<sup>15</sup> The point is rather to deactivate the ways in which the past continues to harm the present and to introduce possible forms of remembering that, instead of reproducing harm, are able to interrupt the logics and structures—as well as the narratives—that continue to do so in the present.

To “rebuild the present” in order to continue living,<sup>16</sup> “to restore what everyone else wanted to forget so quickly,”<sup>17</sup> and to imagine, in the interval, not only a future in which that “ceaseless” past no longer prevails, but also languages capable of enacting that interruption conclusively and radically. The humanities safeguard, encourage, and generate that “community of listeners”<sup>18</sup>; they enable modes of “narrating violence and exclusion without losing sight of the care and resilience of all living beings”<sup>19</sup>; they provide spaces and temporalities that, just because they are not compelled to move at the pace that is set by the logics of the present, open up the time required to reconstruct other alternative presents, along with the memory of other realities.

<sup>13</sup> Diego Cagüañas Rozo, “Giving a Place to the Dead and Reassembling the Present,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 20.

<sup>14</sup> Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused,” 6.

<sup>15</sup> Guerra, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 15.

<sup>16</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, “Giving a Place to the Dead,” 20.

<sup>17</sup> Guerra, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 16.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 149.

<sup>19</sup> See *Un herbario urbano del Bronx: Vida y memoria entre las ruinas. Agenda IDPC* [An urban herbarium from El Bronx: Life and memory among the ruins. IDPC planner] (Bogotá: Instituto Distrital de Patrimonio Cultural, Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño, Museo Nacional de Colombia and Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, 2021).

This is the testimony that the present volume aims to gather: on the one hand, to bring to concrete, actual experience this way of engaging in the task of memory, as conceived by the humanities and social sciences; on the other hand, to reflect how this has taken shape in the very unique context determined by a precise moment in Colombia's history, when the first steps were being taken to design and implement a political discursive framework for transitional justice. As I will also argue, said design and implementation were eventually tethered to the institutionalization of "memory" as a fundamental component of the state's duty to "offer reparations" and to an effort to foreground the victims' and survivors' claims—perhaps for the first time in the history of Colombia's armed conflict. As will be shown below, the fact that such work was carried out, that it became a possibility and positioned itself at the very core of the country's political culture, beyond the confines of government and state institutions, is due to a convergence of several projects that originated in the academy and the humanities and enabled a definitive transformation of the politics of memory in Colombia.

This introductory study and Zornosa's companion essay aim to present a broad account of these experiences, the links that interconnect them, and the legacies that they leave for posterity, contextualizing them to a certain degree and reflecting on the possible encounters and happy coincidences that enabled this cultural, political, and historical change. The overall aim is to create an adequate setting for hearing the voices that are the true protagonists of this project: the voices of those whose work has made it possible to implement historical memory as a duty of the state in Colombia and who designed pedagogical resources that have led to its widespread practice, beyond state-led initiatives, all over the country, as an interdisciplinary effort that presents many, many challenges but also admirable energies, brilliant projects, and truly moving spaces of community action and work.

## 1. Historical Memory in Colombia: An Unheard-Of Experience

To document violence from the point of view of memory, placing the victims' voices at the forefront, allowed us not only to clarify the facts, establish the motives, interests, and intentions of those who gave the orders and perpetrated the horror but also to get a closer understanding of the victims' experiences and to acknowledge the harm and impacts that they have experienced individually and collectively.

—Marta Nubia Bello, *¡BASTA YA! (ENOUGH!)*

## 1.1. Context: A Hybrid Institution

The history of how the notion of “historical memory,” together with its peculiar methodological and pedagogical resources, came to be institutionalized and integrated into contemporary political discourse in Colombia, eventually playing a central role in the implementation of strategies and mechanisms for the reparation of victims by the state, begins in the years 2005 to 2007, when the Historical Memory Group (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, or GMH) came into being. In 2011, after the group had consolidated and developed a range of investigative and academic projects, the process led to the creation of the National Historical Memory Center (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, or CNMH). An immediate forerunner to the GMH was the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, or CNRR), created by mandate of Law 975 from 2005, better known in Colombia as the Justice and Peace Law. During Álvaro Uribe’s tenure as president, this law enabled a process wherein large paramilitary organizations agreed to surrender peacefully and demobilize politically. Juridical mechanisms were also created within the state in order to implement a “transitional justice” regime, after being reviewed and interpreted by the Supreme Court of Justice and the Constitutional Court (in dialogue with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights).<sup>20</sup>

These were the first stages of a period of so-called transitional justice in Colombia (although many have debated whether the notion applies to the Colombian case<sup>21</sup>). That process is still underway, with considerable shifts being introduced by the ensuing demobilization of the FARC guerrilla organization and their signing of a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016.<sup>22</sup> In 2011 the GMH became part of the CNMH, once the latter had been

<sup>20</sup> See the account of this process by Camila de Gamboa in “Las fórmulas de paz del Gobierno con las AUC, una lectura desde el realismo político” [The government’s formulas for peace with the AUC, a reading from the standpoint of political realism], in *Transiciones en contienda: Disyuntivas de la justicia transicional en Colombia desde la experiencia comparada* [Contested transitions: Dilemmas of transitional justice in Colombia and comparative experience], ed. Michael Reed and María Cristina Rivera (Bogotá: Centro Internacional para la Justicia Transicional, 2010), 61–86.

<sup>21</sup> Regarding the early stages of this debate, see the important contextualization set forth by Rodrigo Uprimny, María Paula Saffon, Camila Botero, and Esteban Restrepo in *¿Justicia transicional sin transición? Verdad, justicia y reparación para Colombia* [Transitional justice without transition? Truth, justice, and reparation for Colombia] (Bogotá: Centro de Estudios de Derecho, Justicia y Sociedad, 2006)

<sup>22</sup> For an account of these shifts, see María Lucía Méndez and Martha Maya, “La transición a pesar de, y gracias a, Justicia y Paz” [The transition in spite of, and thanks to, Justice and Peace], in *Justicia transicional en Colombia: Una mirada retrospectiva* [Transitional justice is Colombia: A retrospective look], ed. Juana Acosta-López and María del Rosario Acosta López (Bogotá: Universidad de la Sabana and Editorial Planeta, 2023), 45–90.

established as an independent government institution under the framework of a new statute, Law 1448 from 2011, known as the Victims and Land Restitution Law. At that point, recently elected president Juan Manuel Santos and his administration had voiced their political willingness to reach an agreement with the FARC, which factored into the process.

The GMH, initially known as the Historical Memory Commission, morphed into a section working on historical memory within the CNRR. From early on, however, as Stern accurately points out in his reconstruction of the group's formative period, the researchers who were part of the GMH, under the direction of Gonzalo Sánchez, perceptively sought to safeguard the autonomy of their approach and of the results of their investigations. They were able to do this, first of all, because they were academics who could work for the CNRR from within their own institutions without compromising their independence. For that reason they were able to ward off the impression that their work was the result of “negotiations with a state political committee.”<sup>23</sup> This, on the other hand, gave them access to financial sources different from those provided and assigned by the state, including grants and funding for projects that also allowed them to maintain the credibility of the GMH's work within the academic community in Colombia and abroad.<sup>24</sup>

This is how, as Stern recalls in his interview, the trajectories of the group and later the CNMH proved to have a *hybridity* that determined their role in Colombia's transitional process from the very start, with the attending advantages and challenges. Their work achieved a tight integration of inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary approaches from the humanities and the social sciences with mechanisms for symbolic reparation coming from the state—which of course, as the interviews show, often gave rise to tension and dissidence. In Stern's words:

<sup>23</sup> Steve Stern, *La memoria nos abre camino: Balance metodológico del CNMH para el esclarecimiento histórico* [Memory opens our path: Methodological balance of the CNMH for historical clarification] (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018), 38.

<sup>24</sup> Under the direction of Gonzalo Sánchez, the first members of the GMH were Absalón Machado, Andrés Fernando Suárez, Álvaro Camacho, Fernán González S. J., Iván Orozco, Jesús Abad Colorado, Jorge Restrepo, León Valencia, María Emma Wills, María Victoria Uribe, Martha Nubia Bello, Pilar Gaitán, Pilar Riaño, Rodrigo Uprimny, and Tatiana Rincón. During its active years and, above all, after the GMH became a section of the CNMH, some of the researchers withdrew from the group and others joined. For this reason, the GMH's last report, *¡BASTA YA! (ENOUGH!)*, also includes Patricia Linares, César Caballero, Paula Andrea Ila, Luis Carlos Sánchez, Teófilo Vásquez, and Nubia Herrera as coauthors.

Our defense of academic autonomy did not prevent us from simultaneously trying to work with and from within the state—in a very unique combination of state and nonstate institutions. . . . In a way, the group and later the center almost became a kind of NGO within the state; that is, you had actors from civil society operating within a state system, and this allowed for a very different kind of institution within the state.<sup>25</sup>

The GMH and later the CNMH can thus be described as the sites of an *unheard-of experience*, not only in the Colombian context but also in the framework of historical memory studies, which was still a young field in Latin America when the GMH was created. There were few examples to refer to, and the available literature was still predominantly focused on the study of Southern Cone dictatorships, a context that was quite different from that of Colombia's conflict and its specific complexities. Indeed, Colombia did not undergo a political transition from a dictatorship to a democratic regime, and the work of memory as reparation was first undertaken while the country was still going through war, rather than after the culmination of the conflict.<sup>26</sup> Adding to this, while Uribe was in office the CNRR and, consequently, the GMH were explicitly charged with the task of reconstructing the history of Colombia's "illegal armed groups" in a political setting that refused to describe the country's historical situation as one of internal armed conflict.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, by virtue of its academic independence and humanistic orientation with a grounding in the social sciences, the GMH was able, very clearly and from the start, to articulate a different and broad interpretation of that mandate and to place a fundamental emphasis on the victims and survivors of the conflict, using a participatory methodology that allowed the communities to play a central role in determining how to approach and narrate the war. The pedagogical dimension of their work would also become progressively clear: the group's concern was not only to produce memories of the conflict but also to make them widely known and available and thus to "educate" the country regarding not only *what* had happened during more than sixty years of armed conflict but also *why* the reconstruction of these memories should be a central task during the transition.

<sup>25</sup> Stern, "Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit," 3.

<sup>26</sup> For an analysis of the resultant challenges for those who went on to engage in historical memory work with communities in Colombia, see above all the historical perspective outlined by Pilar Riaño and María Victoria Uribe in "Constructing Memory amidst War: The Historical Memory Group of Colombia," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10, no. 1 (2016): 6–24.

<sup>27</sup> See Stern, *La memoria nos abre camino*, 23.



## 1.2. A Memory with a Body: The Crucial Contribution of Women Researchers at the GMH

Rather than an “institutional memory” or an “official discourse” regarding past events, what the GMH and later the CNMH *institutionalized* as a “duty of the state” and the “duty of memory” was a way of proceeding governed by the sense that we will not know what happened unless we carry out a responsible task of memory building and engage in a plural and deep listening to the voices of all the survivors. This analytical nuance—which crucially distinguishes the production of an “official” memory from the implementation by the state of “memory as a duty”—could be made precisely because the original group was informed by humanistic, academic, and independent principles, although its wager, then and later on as a memory center, was to work from and with the state.

As María Emma Wills emphasizes in her interview:

The fact that the National Historical Memory Center has placed the victims at the center of the narrative is already a robust pillar to build on. Coming from within the state, this sends a strong message to society. It's not that the center created memory in a country where there were no memories. That is false; there were people working on memory all over the country, in many different ways. There were human rights organizations that were compiling human rights archives. There were monuments and other types of projects devoted to memory. But what the center does when it says: I am not here to take your place but to join you as an ally—when it tries to do this and when it does manage to do it, as I think it has, at points—what it is saying is basically that it can be used as . . . a “lever,” like a strength, like something that those other memory-related initiatives can lean on. . . . I think that—not in all cases, but in many—the people from the center who traveled to the regions, I mean *the body and emotions of those who visited a region*, created a space where the victims could feel *a kind of affection coming from the state, as it were*.<sup>28</sup>

In transitional contexts the state's relation to the victims is usually framed by institutions and juridical mechanisms that, in the best of cases, require the narratives of survivors to be translated into juridical languages validated by criteria of verifiability. In the Colombian case, however, the methodologies conceived from early on by the GMH allowed for an “emotional” relation based on listening to and acknowledging the victims; here, the production of spaces of

<sup>28</sup> María Emma Wills, “To Hear the Other's Pain without Being Shipwrecked in Horror,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 18–19 (italics added).

credibility was the point of departure, rather than a goal to be attained.<sup>29</sup>

This emphasis on the body, on the affects, on an emotional dimension of the work of memory from a position of proximity and involvement with the communities, as Wills puts it, would be central to the work of historical memory in Colombia. For this reason, the project was undoubtedly unique. Those who carried out the work were keenly aware of this feature, which moved them deeply,

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The “duty of memory” was a way of proceeding governed by the sense that we will not know what happened unless we . . . engage in a plural and deep listening to the voices of all the survivors.

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as can also be seen in the personal dimension that comes through in some of the interviews.<sup>30</sup> The methodologies designed from early on to assist the GMH in their work with the communities are all informed by a conviction

that Marta Nubia Bello phrased succinctly in her opening text for *¡BASTA YA!*:<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> On the crucial distinction between *verifiability* and *credibility* as a point of departure for working with survivors on historical memory projects and as a criterion for the *audibility* of testimonies, see María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito: Aproximaciones est-éticas a la memoria después del trauma” [Grammars of the unheard-of: Aesth-ethical approaches to memory after trauma], in *Aproximaciones contemporáneas a la moral*, ed. Maximiliano Martínez and Jorge Galindo (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, forthcoming); see also my talk at the Royal Institute of Philosophy, “Grammars of Listening: Or on the Difficulty of Rendering Trauma Audible,” video, 1:29:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwxg43tZVVM>.

<sup>30</sup> See, above all—and it is no coincidence that it is women who have explored this more personal dimension in their reflections—the interviews in this volume with Wills, “To Hear the Other’s Pain”; María Victoria Uribe, “Rehumanization Must Be Memory’s Task,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023); and Susana Fergusson’s replies in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal.”

<sup>31</sup> It is worth pointing out here that *¡BASTA YA!* marks an extremely important moment of transition connecting the work initiated by the GMH with the work that the CNMH would later go on to support. On the one hand, it counts as the “final report” that the GMH was initially commissioned to produce when it was still functioning as the Historical Memory Commission within the CNRR (for that reason, although it was published in 2013, authorship is still attributed to the Historical Memory Group, and the report includes the work of many who were its researchers from the very beginning). On the other, it is also the point of departure for a pedagogical and communicational work that, as Stern explains, would set the compass for the work of many sections at the CNMH in the future (Stern, *La memoria nos abre camino*, 29–30).

To build the memory of violence is also to build the memory of unwanted changes, of beings, surroundings, relationships, and loved objects that were snatched away. Memory of the humiliation, the dispossession, the truncated projects. Memory of the arbitrariness and the offense. Memory of the anger, the rage, the impotence, the guilt, and the suffering.<sup>32</sup>

Although particular authors and researchers made original contributions to the development of suitable methodologies—indeed, the GMH was very consistent in working as a team and presenting the results of all their research as coauthored (as the interviews show, all of their reports went through a process of review, critique, and commentary by all other members<sup>33</sup>)—it is clear that this fundamental emphasis on affect is due in great part to the orientation that the women in the group introduced into the work from the beginning. The participatory methodologies, the practice of conducting research alongside the communities, the collection of memories, a particular attention to alternative modes of narrating, representing, and dealing with harm, and the workshops that were designed and implemented as a critical support tool for each of the reports produced by the GMH (and later by the CNMH)—these are, for the most part, the result of a collaborative endeavor among the women in the group.

This surfaces time and again in the interviews with the two female researchers from the GMH who are part of this volume: María Emma Wills and María Victoria Uribe. Regrettably, two other women who played a central role in the group's work from the beginning and whom I also invited to participate, Marta Nubia Bello (quoted above) and Patricia Riaño, could not do so due to time constraints and logistical difficulties. What stands out most notably in the case of Riaño—an anthropologist—is that she already had a background in designing, creating, and training others to conduct memory workshops all over Colombia. As she herself explains, this approach was already taking shape while she was working on her PhD dissertation on youth and memory in Medellín,<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Marta Nubia Bello, “Presentación” [Presentation], in Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* [ENOUGH! Colombia: Memories of war and dignity] (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013), 25.

<sup>33</sup> See the following interviews with Wills, “To Hear the Other’s Pain”; Uribe, “Rehumanization”; and Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Toward an Undisciplined Listening,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

<sup>34</sup> See Pilar Riaño, *Antropología del recuerdo y el olvido: Jóvenes, memoria y violencia en Medellín* [Anthropology of remembering and forgetting: Youth, memory, and violence in Medellín] (Medellín: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia-Icanh, Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2007), originally published in English as *Dwellers of Memory: Youth and Violence in Medellín, Colombia* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

and she continued to develop it in a later project that focused on collecting the memories of forced migrations (in cases of displacement and search for asylum) by Colombians within the country and in Ecuador and Canada.<sup>35</sup> As for Bello, the emphasis on the affective is most prominent in her use of psychosocial tools to support GMH's work. She also designed strategies that would make it possible to sustainably provide psychosocial support during the workshops that were the basis and fundamental source for the production of GMH's reports. Bello's earlier experiences—as a social worker—with forced displacement in Colombia have led her to be particularly attentive to the care without which it would be impossible to lend an ear to populations that are in a vulnerable position.

Clearly, what Riaño and Bello brought to the table, along with the interdisciplinary work that they were able to forge in collaboration with other women researchers at the GMH, was an emphasis on the idea that to carry out the work of memory, it is not enough to deploy historical rigor or analytical inquiry—although, of course, these considerations are present in the work of all these

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To carry out the work of memory, it is not enough to deploy historical rigor or analytical inquiry. . . . In order to assess the causes of violence, empathy must also be a fundamental task.

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women researchers. In order to assess the causes of violence, empathy must also be a fundamental task, given the mandate that led to the creation of the GMH in the (post)conflict era.<sup>36</sup> The affective must be taken into account in any

effort to restore memories that are in tension and to reconfigure identities and lives from the vantage point of the present, as Bello highlights in her work.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Pilar Riaño and Marta Inés Villa, eds., *Poniendo tierra de por medio: Migración forzada de colombianos en Colombia, Ecuador y Canadá* [Getting away: Forced migration among Colombians in Colombia, Ecuador, and Canada] (Medellín: Corporación Región, 2008). See also an early article in which Riaño already outlines the main features later to be found in the workshops developed to support the work of the GMH and the CNMH: Pilar Riaño, “Recuerdos metodológicos: El taller y la investigación etnográfica” [Methodological recollections: The workshop and ethnographic research], *Estudios sobre las culturas contemporáneas* 5, no. 10 (2000): 143–68.

<sup>36</sup> A good example of this line of argument can be found in María Emma Wills, “Por qué la guerra nos importa: Memorias desde la escucha y la empatía” [Why war matters to us: Memories out of listening and empathy], *Revista de estudios sociales* 42 (2012): 157–59.

<sup>37</sup> Bello's work on forced displacement is particularly relevant here. See Marta Nubia Bello, *Desplazamiento forzado y reconstrucción de identidades* [Forced displacement and the reconstruction of identities] (Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2001).

One need only approach some of the works, reports, and publications that these women researchers coordinated for the GMH and CNMH to understand the scale of their contribution and their commitment to a politics of memory that is responsible and empathetic. Thus, their concern was not simply to contribute an explicit focus on gender, although this was the reason Sánchez had originally invited Wills to join the group.<sup>38</sup> That was already a crucial issue in its own right at a time when, following recent experiences in Peru and elsewhere, it was becoming progressively clear that an intersectional approach was in order.<sup>39</sup> But they were also interested in implementing *methodologies* that could be used to safeguard and do justice to that intersectional perspective within the group's own *practice*, and not only in the contents to be produced; in doing so, as Uribe stresses in her interview, they also aimed to avoid reproducing the “logics of knowledge production” that had prevailed until then in the field known in Colombia as “violontology” (mostly “male” dominated and whose main interests are very distant from the participatory practices of listening and care that eventually became characteristic of the work of the GMH and later the CNMH).

This is why, in addition to the report on gender violence in Colombia's Caribbean region that Wills coordinated for the GMH,<sup>40</sup> it is worth noting a group of publications known as “toolboxes,” whose aim was to record the experiences of work on memory, the activities used to support them, and methodologies and reflections that others could continue applying in order to continue the work of historical memory anywhere in Colombia. These publications are a fundamental contribution to historical memory work, to a methodological understanding of the experience of this work as it was recorded, and to an effort to transform a work that was initially academic in scope into something decidedly pedagogical and communicative in nature. The toolboxes, moreover, were conceived as support material that would be useful for people organizing memory work: teachers, leaders, and social organizations that were already engaged in that work at the local level, although without any institutional support.<sup>41</sup> Wills

<sup>38</sup> See here Wills's previous work on women and political representation in Colombia: *Inclusión sin representación: La irrupción política de las mujeres en Colombia, 1970–2000* [Inclusion without representation: Women's sudden arrival into Colombian politics, 1970–2000] (Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> In her interview Wills explains how she first became part of the GMH and the reasons for which she was originally invited; Wills, “To Hear the Other's Pain.”

<sup>40</sup> *Mujeres y guerra: Víctimas y resistentes en el Caribe colombiano* [Women and war: Victims and resistance in Colombia's Caribbean region] (Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación–Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2011), <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/mujeres-y-guerra-victimas-y-resistentes-en-el-caribe-colombiano/>.

<sup>41</sup> See the toolboxes developed to date and currently available on the CNMH website: <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/tag/caja-de-herramientas/>.

prepared the first two toolboxes, *Recordar y narrar el conflicto: Herramientas para reconstruir memoria histórica* (Remembering and narrating the conflict: Tools for rebuilding historical memory) (in collaboration with Riaño)<sup>42</sup> and *Un viaje por la memoria histórica: Aprender la paz y desaprender la guerra* (A trip through historical memory: Learning peace and unlearning war) (in collaboration with Bello);<sup>43</sup> many more soon followed, leading to the creation of a section wholly devoted to pedagogy within the CNMH, directed by Wills.

Another work worth mentioning is *Memorias en tiempos de guerra: Repertorio de iniciativas*,<sup>44</sup> a report that is slightly different in tone from others produced at the time by the GMH for the CNRR. The aim of this report, coordinated by Uribe with critical support from Riaño (as she explains in her interview<sup>45</sup>), is to collect experiences of memory work within the communities. This is a framework that does not center on the discursive. Rather, art (broadly understood) and other traditional cultural expressions come to play an essential role in this report. Its publication also allowed the GMH to explicitly address an issue that was always a focus of attention, especially later on, for those who were working on pedagogy at the CNMH: the fact that memory work is not simply a “contribution” on the part of those who carry out the research and lead workshops for the GMH and later the CNMH. Instead, memory work is first and foremost a labor of resistance and deeply creative resilience that is rooted in communities, in their strategies for survival and in their ways of dealing with everyday forms of violence. This symbolic aspect is as fundamental as the structural analysis of historical causes. The tone of this report, thus, is a very important source for understanding a point that has been stressed above: that the GMH worked through a very broad, critical, and creative interpretation of the original mandate that delimited its function within the CNRR.

<sup>42</sup> Pilar Riaño and María Emma Wills, *Recordar y narrar el conflicto: Herramientas para reconstruir memoria histórica* (Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2009), <https://www.centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2009/cajadeherramientas/presentacionbaja.pdf>). This document collects for posterity activities, methodologies, and reflections about the memory workshops, and it provided a fundamental point of departure for the work that was done later in Chicago with survivors of police torture, in an effort to prolong and replicate the experience with historical memory in Colombia. See the text by Zornosa, “How We Remember,” and the continuities outlined by Deligio in her interview, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused.”

<sup>43</sup> *Un viaje por la memoria histórica: Aprender la paz, desaprender la guerra*, Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/un-viaje-por-la-memoria-historica/>.

<sup>44</sup> See Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Memorias en tiempos de guerra: Repertorio de iniciativas* [Memories in times of war: A repertoire of initiatives] (Bogotá: Puntoaparte Editores, 2009), <https://centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/memorias-en-tiempo-de-guerra/>.

<sup>45</sup> Uribe, “Rehumanization.”



### 1.3. A Strategic Conjunction between “Memory” and “History”

It is interesting to see how these elements of care, of attentive listening, of participatory work with communities, and of pedagogical awareness are consistently remarked upon as fundamental by those who, speaking more as observers than as direct participants, explain their interpretation of what came eventually to be perceived, conceptualized, and institutionalized under the term “historical memory” in the particular context of Colombia.<sup>46</sup> Of course, this should in no way lead us to underestimate the immense labor behind the first reports produced by the GMH, as well as those produced later in the context of the CNMH, which have left us with an invaluable repository and an archive of materials regarding the armed conflict, violence, and testimony in Colombia, and which function as a crucial source for understanding and assessing the productive nature of this strategic conjunction between “memory” and “history.”<sup>47</sup> As Stern describes it,

we need to reconstruct historical memory, that is, the *meaning* of painful violent events as *present lived experiences*, which demand human understanding and a civic response. Clarification and acknowledgment are two sides of the same coin: the rigor of contrasting sources and evidence pertaining to crucial events, and an open and solidaristic practice of listening to the experience of the victims who endured the violence.<sup>48</sup>

The encounter between memory and history was certainly a singular one, fostered by the kind of inter- and multidisciplinary work produced inside the GMH and later the CNMH. Key to it was the combination of analytical investigative work coming from political science, history, sociology, and legal studies, among others, with participatory work informed by ethnographic, political, and anthropological approaches. Thus, the fact that the stress was placed on listening to testimonies in and from the communities, with the aim of placing the victims back at the center, led to an experience that stands out not only on account of its originality, but due to the fact that it was carried out with an extreme degree of academic and human quality.

<sup>46</sup> See the descriptions and impressions shared by Stern and Deligio in their respective interviews about historical memory work in Colombia in this report: “Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit,” and “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused.”

<sup>47</sup> These reports can still be viewed and downloaded from the CNMH website (<https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/libros/>) along with another series of investigative and informational works, both by the CNMH and by the regional historical memory groups connected to or in coordination with the CNMH (<https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/publicaciones/>).

<sup>48</sup> Stern, *La memoria nos abre camino*, 16 (italics in the original).

I should also point out—perhaps without drawing a sharp distinction between the two tasks, both of which were present all along and intertwined from the start—that if the work of historical memory was able to gradually shift its focus toward a pedagogical task during the second and, especially, the third stage of the CNMH, this was possible only thanks to the rigorous work found in the first reports (a point that Stern emphasizes in his reconstruction of the history of this process). Indeed, the aim of those reports, whose tone was firmly academic, was to prove conclusively and irrefutably that Colombia’s armed conflict was a reality. To do this, they provided an analysis of the conflict’s structural causes accompanied by accounts by the victims. Their leading intention in doing so was to visibilize the degrees of violence attained by the various armed groups in their modes of operation, often silent and at other times institutionally erased and hidden. Only then, after having to some extent secured the field of credibility, so to speak, the CNMH was able to progressively turn its attention to the construction of a culture and a grammar of peace.

Thus, as Stern points out, early efforts to “visibilize” the victims were combined during later stages into efforts directed “toward intergenerational pedagogy and broad social appropriation, capable of involving new and diverse interlocutors”—none of these, of course, “without abandoning the basic ethical commitments achieved during the first stage.”<sup>49</sup> In both cases, the emphasis was also on creating and institutionalizing spaces and criteria for listening, which would render audible narratives that until then had gone unnoticed in political discourse and which therefore remained absent from a collective memory of the conflict.

The point is worth stressing again: the outline of these basic ethical commitments, which the GMH espoused from the start and which later translated into the methodological and pedagogical commitments developed by the CNMH, was set by the fact that those who were part of and who shaped GMH from early on came from an academic background in the humanities, which uniquely informed their approach to memory work even within the political and institutional setting of the state. The group thus proceeded under the guiding tenet that it should not define completely stable parameters, but rather call attention to the need for a plurality of methodologies in order to confront the complexity of the task at hand. This applies to any location, but it is all the more necessary in Colombia, where the work had to get underway before the conflict was over. One should also note here that the GMH, and later the CNMH, played an important role in getting Colombian society to acknowledge the reality of the conflict and allowing it to be indexed in public discourse.

<sup>49</sup> Stern, *La memoria nos abre camino*, 27.

As is clear in all of the interviews that make up this volume, the strength of this conviction is such that it sustained the GMH during its transition into the CNMH, amid the many ensuing logistical and methodological difficulties. Review, critique, and, above all, openness to multiple methodologies remained throughout as a pillar of their work. Both in Colombia and elsewhere the fundamental legacy left by the experience of the GMH, and later the CNMH, under the direction of Sánchez, is the evidence that there is no one way of making memory or of telling the stories produced by the horror of war and its consequent ruins—material ruins, but also sensorial, symbolic, epistemic. The work that they produced through an approach that was diverse, dynamic, inter- and transdisciplinary shows that it is only possible to do justice to the memory of the victims by resorting to a peculiar combination of multiple perspectives, modes of narrating, and disciplinary frameworks. It also shows that all of this must be invested with a sensitivity to the singular claims coming from that site where all testimonies of violence during Colombia’s conflict originate from: the site of the unheard-of, where any such attempt must meet the challenge of communicating what cannot truly be put into words.

This is how Wills describes it as she recalls the challenges—but also the advantages and even the indispensability—of the multidisciplinary work cultivated within the GMH (the quote refers to their work on the report *Mujeres y guerra*, which she coordinated):

At that point I felt so much sadness, as a citizen, as a human being who listens to another’s pain; I felt absolutely broken. But as a professional academic I felt that I did not have the tools that would allow me to record that suffering and to dignify it through writing. Fortunately, there was a photographer there, and we organized an exhibition as part of the project, because those wonderful photographs do make it possible to dignify the experience of the victims. The photographs could do that because the women’s stories were written into the images, and in the exhibition there were also texts taken from the narratives of the victims themselves.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, as other interviews clearly show, the true legacy of both the GMH and (later) the CNMH consists not only in having been able to institutionalize memory as a duty of the state but also in having introduced into the public discussion the various *tasks* entailed by that duty. They achieved this from an institutional standpoint, but they also brought into view a responsibility that reaches far beyond the state and involves civil society. One of the key tenets of

<sup>50</sup> Wills, “To Hear the Other’s Pain,” 10.

such responsibility is to insist on the need to establish a *culture of memory*, one that is truly committed to listening to the various *effects* of the kinds of violence that traverse a conflict like Colombia's, from those that are predominantly structural to those that can be described as exceptional—and exceptionally cruel—during the conflict, from the most quotidian and normalized to those described by Hannah Arendt as demonstrating a “horrible originality.”<sup>51</sup> Such a culture must begin by radically questioning the criteria that determine in advance what has been rendered historically *audible* or *inaudible*, what is *acknowledged* or not as worthy of being heard from a political point of view, what deserves or not to be *indexed* historically. This calls for a kind of work that is both theoretical and practical and that remains committed to the necessary changes required to produce a real and lasting structural and historical transformation of cultural memory in Colombia; these are not only political and social but also pedagogical and cultural, and even aesthetic and epistemic changes (which reach much deeper and are less evident).

#### 1.4. Listening to the Unheard-Of: Toward a Culture of Memory

Were one to assess the GMH's and CNMH's academic contribution, it should be said that within the established dynamics for the production of historical knowledge, and also within the politics of memory outlined before then in Colombia, both institutions were able to insist on the fact that, beyond any “disposition” or “political will” to listen, beyond the idea of an “inclusion” of “other” voices, a central question remained to be asked: What is it that escapes us not because we fail to listen but because we neglect to interrogate the *criteria* that determine how it is that something may (or may not) become audible?<sup>52</sup> In the words of Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, who both worked for the GMH and was later an elected member of Colombia's Truth Commission, the crucial (and long-term) task was “the creation of appropriate spaces for listening,” the production of a “collective disposition for listening.” For this, Castillejo-Cuéllar insists, we must first create “conditions of audibility”:

<sup>51</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2004), 309.

<sup>52</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this approach to the contribution and the task of historical memory work, see María del Rosario Acosta, “Gramáticas de la escucha: Aproximaciones filosóficas a la construcción de memoria histórica” [Grammars of listening: Philosophical approaches to building historical memory], *Ideas y valores* 68, no. 5 (2019): 59–79; María del Rosario Acosta López, “From Aesthetics as Critique to Grammars of Listening: On Reconfiguring Sensibility as a Political Project,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 139–56.

For me, “listening” is not what a person does when they stand in front of another person with a tape recorder. “Listening” has to do with the possibility of attending to the social processes through which people’s words reverberate and create echoes of previous generations and social contexts. I see listening more as a long and complex social process that begins with the simple desire to go and listen and continues when we sit down and listen in the process of transcription. Transcription is also a form of listening—to transcribe is to hear—and listening passes through what we do after transcription, when we decide what to highlight from what a person said and what ends up domesticated, boxed in the argument of a book, for example, or a report. The report will highlight some words and not others, and therefore, from the perspective of the society to which it is addressed, it will listen to some and not to others. Listening is thus a long process. What we have to ask is: How does this all circulate?<sup>53</sup>

When the guidelines for the GMH were conceived (which for the most part continue to determine the conceptual framework for the CNMH), they were essentially informed by an awareness of these difficulties and of the risks involved in taking up the work of memory thus understood. Their work thus centered on the effort to legitimize discourses that had already been discarded, erased, rejected from an official and institutional history (and in some cases, systematically so), and to find a suitable space where they could be acknowledged. They also set out to make it possible for a larger audience to hear views, versions, and modes of narrating violence which until then had not been part of a collective memory, views that many communities in Colombia had already been assembling, producing, and articulating as vital forms of resistance.

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What is it that escapes us not because we fail to listen but because we neglect to interrogate the criteria that determine how it is that something may (or may not) become audible?

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Briefly put, the work of the CNMH was not only a way of “making memory,” but of subverting *the criteria that decide what “deserves” to be remembered*. In that sense, the group and the center were able if not to solve, then at least to face the challenge of listening to the *unheard-of* and of creating conditions of possibility for its audibility. The expression “the unheard-of” (in Spanish, *lo inaudito*) refers here to two consistently recurring features of the experience of “making memory” in contexts of violence: On the one hand, the term alludes to something that is yet to be made audible—or that cannot yet be made so; this has very much to do with the search for aesthetics and epistemologies committed

<sup>53</sup> Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Toward an Undisciplined Listening,” 12.

to forms of conveying meaning that differ from those established as customary and hegemonic, a search for other forms by which the testimonies of violence can be perceived and sensed. On the other, the notion of the unheard-of is also ethically inflected, since it alludes to something that we experience as deeply outrageous, something that radically tests the capacity of our ethical imagination and for which we still lack adequate concepts. Wills offers a helpful account of this dimension when she says: “I often felt that I was shipwrecked in horror. It was a feeling of being in the middle of a nightmare and of discovering the horror that human beings are capable of without having the tools to process it.”<sup>54</sup> To listen to the unheard-of then is to confront the radical challenge that some historical events—and certain violent events in particular—present to our given semantic categories. It demands that we look for other forms of giving meaning, other conceptual frameworks, other “grammars” that can allow us to listen and confer audibility to something that otherwise is ultimately subjected to a double silencing: by violence, in the first place, and later by an ongoing reticence to let its effects be heard.<sup>55</sup>

Only such a commitment to radically transform criteria and frameworks of meaning and to establish other, new, alternate “grammars of listening” will allow us, first, to *resist the unheard-of* violence and, second—and as a crucial component of that resistance—to address an urgent ethical demand: *to render visible what can no longer be hidden*.<sup>56</sup> The work of the group, and later of the center, abundantly contributed to making this possible. First, by understanding that their task, beyond the “production” of memory, was to alter the criteria that determine how our *senses* operate when it comes to hearing and seeing the effects of violence. Second, by insisting that, in the long term, it is these criteria that also establish the *meaning* of the facts (that is, what eventually becomes

<sup>54</sup> Wills, “To Hear the Other’s Pain,” 10.

<sup>55</sup> See Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito.”

<sup>56</sup> I am here referring to a speech by Francia Márquez, Afrodescendent leader and vice president elect of Colombia as of June 19, 2022. Speaking before the House of Representatives during the 2021 national strike, Márquez used the Spanish expression *lo inocultable* to denote the kind of resistance that becomes necessary when the state and para-state enforce a “politics of death” that seeks by all means to erase what nonetheless can no longer be denied. “What cannot be hidden” refers to paradoxical efforts by former president Iván Duque’s administration to enact a politics of erasure in the face of structural forms of violence, at a time when through their tireless efforts to denounce these forms of violence, the communities had been able to bring them into view as now, clearly, undeniable, something that was, moreover, confirmed by the institutionalization of a culture of listening and memory in Colombia, to which, as I argue here, the GMH and CNHM made a significant contribution. See also María del Rosario Acosta López, “Hacer visible lo inocultable” [To render what cannot be hidden visible], *Revista Tlatelolco*, September 1, 2021, [https://puedjs.unam.mx/revista\\_tlatelolco/dossier-colombia/](https://puedjs.unam.mx/revista_tlatelolco/dossier-colombia/).



legitimate and “true” in public discourse and collective memory). The challenge was thus, ultimately, to produce a new, different *common sense*, capable of taking root in political discourse but also, above all, of becoming embodied in political culture, so that the unheard-of that emerges from violence might no longer be fully vulnerable to attempts at institutional silencing.

Through its work the center was thus able to call attention to the crucial importance of memory building and the central role that the victims should play in the process, as well as to promote a culture of listening to testimony. It also managed to create an institutional setting that made sense of the claim that a “duty of the state” toward memory entails more than a duty to *remember*, to the extent that it must take on the urgent task of *interrupting* all those structures that continue to operate and to perpetuate violence in the present. These are structures that indefinitely prolong forms of violence in which they have been complicit or which they have caused. Moreover, they contribute to their sustained silencing by directly influencing the logics that delimit and control the territories of meaning and the criteria for their audibility.

An unquestionable legacy of the historical memory work that has been done in Colombia is to have acknowledged and pointed out the many levels at which this exercise must be undertaken, while remaining aware of the fact that if there is to be change and if a culture of memory is to be established, it is also necessary to go through the arduous academic, analytic, and critical task that accompanies political resistance. This awareness also factors into the process of empowering communities. It also helps to visibilize that empowerment by strengthening the imaginary of alternative presents, structural changes, and, above all, the possibility of interrupting the cycles of violence that have thus far sustained the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>57</sup>

## 2. Memory against Indifference: Beyond the National Historical Memory Center

We should acknowledge . . . the work that had been done by the victims, who are saying: We are no longer going to accept a country that says that we do not exist, that we are not part of society, that we have no rights, et cetera. You now see that some of that energy is pouring out to the streets and reaching urban areas, even young people who are not necessarily connected to victims from the previous stage. . . . Something happened in Colombia. And I think

<sup>57</sup> See Zornosa, “How We Remember.”

that the work that the center did with the victims . . . has helped to nourish a culture that is saying repeatedly, in all caps, louder and louder each time: “ENOUGH.”

—Steve Stern, “Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit of Invisibilizing Others”

Now the achievements of the Colombian National Historical Memory Center must also be considered in light of the political and institutional circumstances that it was forced to negotiate from the start and which, in many cases, hindered its functioning. The hybrid structure that provided so many advantages from the standpoint of academic independence also entailed the arduous task of translating ideas that originated in discussions often framed in academic terms into the logics of government budget and public policy. This in addition to the pressing and unavoidable needs that became progressively clear through the center’s work with communities. What is more, we must remember and stress the fact that this work was carried out in a context that was never truly that of a post-conflict stage. Among other reasons, using the notion of “transition” in the Colombian case is very problematic, as mentioned before, because the agreements both between the Uribe administration and paramilitary groups (2005–7), in the first place, and later those between the FARC guerrillas and the Santos administration (2014–16), were made while the conflict was underway; moreover, they often brought about renewed waves of violence in areas where the possibility of an agreement was perceived by the politicians and armed groups in control of the territory as a threat, rather than as a desirable political goal.

Thus, many of the survivors who were committed to the work enabled by the CNMH, and to producing an audible and public memory of their histories, in doing so faced a very real threat. By publicly presenting truths that armed groups (in conjunction with state agents or in collaboration with local authorities) had wanted to silence and which territorial powers wanted to remain hidden, many of them were endangering their own lives. As an example, we may recall a circumstance brought up by Riaño and Uribe: when the GMH published its first twenty-four reports, between 2009 and 2013, narratives about the war that had until then received no visibility suddenly gained access to the public sphere. As the two researchers explain,

the fragile security situation, and the risks inherent in participating and offering testimony, posed additional challenges for the documentation of silenced memories and plural voices. In fact, various leaders and local research participants received threats, had to go into hiding or look for protection outside their place

of residence in a different city, region, or in some cases outside Colombia. . . . Certainly, the reports published contain silences [required to protect those who offered their testimonies].<sup>58</sup>

All of these difficulties are compounded by the fact that the government itself was not institutionally willing to guarantee the minimal requirements for a work of memory committed to the victims during the transition. On some occasions the center was forced to counterbalance attempts by the government to instrumentalize or domesticate testimonies and memories of the conflict. At times it had to go even further and protect the credibility of testimonies from attempts to silence and conceal them, since many of them contained politically explosive revelations regarding the roles played by regional politicians, local heavyweights, and agents of the state. To make matters even more complicated, after the failure of the 2016 referendum that sought to validate the peace agreement with the FARC, Iván Duque, elected in 2018, was voted into office precisely because he embraced a discourse explicitly aimed at delegitimizing the transition. This discourse deeply affected institutions that had been designed to guarantee the plurality of voices and narratives about the armed conflict.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, as Stern describes it in his interview,

on the one hand, there was a very strong, and original, and creative project devoted to memory when the war was still underway, as the center itself pointed out in several of its reports. That is to say, some people began to work on this topic without waiting for the transition. On the other hand, the transition did not take place; I mean, it was truncated. So instead of what usually happens in these contexts, where you have a transition one way or another—even if there are difficulties and the state begins to pull back, and you have to keep pushing. In Colombia it was more like a complete break, which means that there was never a transitional government. . . . So the transitional project, at least on the side of the state, was truncated.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Riaño and Uribe, “Constructing Memory amidst War,” 9, 13.

<sup>59</sup> During Duque’s presidency, Sánchez was replaced by Darío Acevedo, who on multiple occasions and in very explicit ways has sought to discredit the work that had been done until then at the CNMH and to alter the criteria for the production of memory, aiming ever more clearly to consolidate an “official” narrative or truth regarding the conflict in order to reduce it (again, as already was the case during Álvaro Uribe’s administration) to a war against illegal armed groups—just the opposite of what the 2016 agreement meant to guarantee. See María Emma Wills, “Las batallas por la memoria: El pulso entre memorias plurales y verdad oficial” [The battles for memory: The struggle between plural memories and official truth], *Razón pública*, March 2, 2020, <https://razonpublica.com/las-batallas-la-memoria-pulso-memorias-plurales-verdad-oficial/>.

<sup>60</sup> Stern, “Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit,” 5.

In spite of all these difficulties, the CNMH managed to leave behind a body of work that, as I have been suggesting, was able to forge a culture of memory, along with methodologies and demands for symbolic reparations by the state. This is a legacy that not even the most stubborn and powerful political voices within the national debate have been able to undermine. “Something happened in Colombia,” a “mobilizing energy” that understands the hope of interrupting the politics of death and silencing as a real possibility.<sup>61</sup>

Parallel to this culture of memory, many local initiatives were encouraged by this historical, political, and cultural change. On some occasions, as in the project *Voces de resistencia* (discussed later and in my conversation with one of its lead coordinators, Diego Cagüñas Rozo), these initiatives were at first linked to and sponsored by the CNMH, mainly through an effort to support the creation of regional historical memory groups. In other cases, the communities had engaged in memory projects that ran side by side with those of the center, as in the lengthy backstory to the project *Renovando el olvido: Memorias de la L*, whose emphasis was on harm reduction. In the conversation with the team behind the project one gets a sense, however, that some of its more recent endeavors have enjoyed greater audibility partly as a result of the efforts toward an institutionalization of memory driven, among others, by the CNMH. Finally, we may also refer to one of the most definitive results of this process as a whole: the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence, and Non-repetition (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición, or CEV), one of the three pillars of the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-repetition (Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición).<sup>62</sup> The CEV was created in the context of the peace agreement with the FARC and grounded on the previous experience developed and consolidated by the CNMH. The conversation with Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, who is currently part of the commission, clearly reconstructs a path that necessarily relies on the experience of historical memory in Colombia

<sup>61</sup> See Stern, “Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit,” 6.

<sup>62</sup> See “Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera, Punto 5.1: Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición” [Final agreement for ending the conflict and building a stable and lasting peace, point 5.1: Integral System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-repetition]. The system comprises the CEV, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz), and the Search Unit for People Taken to Have Disappeared in the Context and Because of the Armed Conflict (Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas en el contexto y en razón del conflicto armado). It also incorporates the measures and agencies established in Law 1448 (administrative program for reparations), passed in 2011, as mechanisms of integral reparation.

as a crucial precedent that, although politically loaded and placed at the center of a dispute around memory, has carved out a path that today makes it possible for the commission to function.<sup>63</sup>

As will be seen below, each of these experiences has multiplied the effects of historical memory work in Colombia. In some cases, they have also led to a critical assessment of what was achieved or not, what mistakes were made and which could have been avoided in the institutionalization of memory work as reparation.<sup>64</sup> The very concept of “historical memory” seems presently to bear a political slant that some have come to perceive as the very opposite of the spirit of *counter-memory* that originally inspired it. At the same time, the terrain already prepared by the GMH and the CNMH enables a progressive transition from an emphasis on the spectacular aspects of the conflict—and what the CNMH defined as “paradigmatic cases” in framing its methodology—to a focus on less “spectacular” forms of violence, which are not thereby less structural and which made themselves felt in everyday life preceding the war and continue to do so after the war.<sup>65</sup>

In any case, this is still a challenge that historical memory is not able to solve entirely. As Uribe puts it: How to “move indifferent people”? How to remove the foundations of a culture of indifference that Colombia’s exceptionally protracted war has managed to establish as the grammar that continues to prevail? This is the case especially for those who, as Uribe stresses, “didn’t experience the conflict.”<sup>66</sup> Each of the projects that are briefly presented below, and whose details will become clearer through the companion interviews included in this volume, presents a creative and compelling take on how to respond to this challenge. Each one aims to surpass “historical memory” in order to take on the challenge of a radical redistribution of affects that must venture beyond the legal and institutional frameworks of memory as reparation. And, most importantly, each one represents a promise of transformation through the exercise of novel ways of building memory and promoting a culture that is different from that of indifference. In so doing, they allow us to imagine a possible end to the cycles of violence and the interruption of a past that will otherwise continue to suffocate the present.

<sup>63</sup> The CEV has now presented and made public the final results of its investigation. The report in its entirety can be consulted in their website (<https://comisiondelaverdad.co/>) and was officially delivered to the recently elected new president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, in a ceremony that took place on June 28, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> See the interview with Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Toward an Undisciplined Listening.”

<sup>65</sup> See here, for example, the points that Wills calls attention to and her critical assessment of her own contribution to the CNMH in “To Hear the Other’s Pain.”

<sup>66</sup> Uribe, “Rehumanization,” 8, 15.

## 2.1. Beyond “Clarification”: The Truth Commission as a Space for Listening

The second group of interviews in this volume explores a few of the many repercussions, resonances, and alternative proposals for historical memory work in Colombia in conversation, first, with CEV Commissioner Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar. There is something remarkable about Castillejo-Cuéllar’s trajectory, something that led me to think that including him in this volume would contribute an interesting take on the history of the construction of historical memory in Colombia in the context of a “transitional” process: he began his academic and research career and fieldwork as an anthropologist studying the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.<sup>67</sup> Thus, his understanding of the task of a truth commission, of the limitations entailed by institutional mandates, and the ways in which these mechanisms are defined in transitional contexts is broadened by a critical perspective developed through several years of research and field practice, including a comparative case study of Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and his own work and collaboration during the early stages of the GMH.

As Castillejo-Cuéllar argues, it is not entirely coherent to understand “truth commission mechanisms” as “centered on the concept of clarification” while one is critically concerned with possible ways of *listening* to testimonies. He adds:

When the moment came, I told [the members of the CEV]: “We have two definitions of testimony here.” One is a function of corroboration. There should, however, be another dimension of testimony that is not about corroboration but, rather, involves trying to understand, as anthropologists say, the words of people from their own point of view and their own worlds. I believe that is an interesting task. It is innovative in some capacity because there have not been many commissions that do this; they have not tried to understand the languages of pain and hope from the point of view of the society where the hope and pain are happening.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, the CEV has as an official mandate to publish a final report by June 2022, at the latest, for which they have collected around 25,000 testimonies and interviews through the efforts of a national team and twenty-eight local houses of truth. Nonetheless, just like the GMH and later the CNMH, the CEV has

<sup>67</sup> See Alejandro Castillejo Cuéllar, *Los archivos del dolor: Ensayos sobre la violencia y el recuerdo en la Suráfrica contemporánea* (II) [The archives of pain: Essays on violence and memory in contemporary South Africa (II)] (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2013); in English: *The Invisible Corner: Essays on Violence and Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Toward an Undisciplined Listening,” 14.



emphatically chosen to interpret its mandate in a way that reaches far beyond what is required to prepare this final report. They have done this, mainly, by attending closely to the practice of “listening,” which, as Castillejo-Cuéllar also points out, has been neglected by other truth commissions elsewhere in the world that have placed the burden on the responsibility of “clarification” (a notion that remains linked to those of “corroboration” and “verification”).

Thus, beyond the task of “clarification,” or as a complement to it, the CEV has endeavored to find other spaces of listening, guaranteeing conditions of audibility for all those groups that have been historically marginalized in the framework of the production and acknowledgment of histories and memories, and to advance further in constructing a culture of memory—or, in its particular case, a culture

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It is necessary to create spaces of credibility that make the very experience of listening their focal point.

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of listening—that aligns with the two additional guidelines of its mandate: “coexistence” and “non-repetition.” To this end they have conceived projects such as the Meetings for Truth, organized by Commissioner Francisco de Roux, through which the CEV promotes face-to-face encounters between victims and perpetrators. Such projects are a way of breaking away from the notion of traditional “institutional settings” where truth is conceived as the result and the sole aim of the process; instead, the truth is here the point of departure, a meeting point where *credibility*, rather than *verifiability*, is the opening criterion for a space of listening.<sup>69</sup> They have also undertaken pedagogical efforts to bring cultural sectors that are usually marginalized from these processes into the conversation regarding the construction of memory in the post-conflict. An example of this is a series of events titled Naming the Unnamable: Conversations about Art and Truth, organized by Commissioner Lucía González.<sup>70</sup> Castillejo-Cuéllar, for his part, is at work on a project titled “Territorios de la escucha” (Territories

<sup>69</sup> Many of these meetings are already available for viewing on the CEV’s YouTube channel. For an analysis of the meetings in the terms described above, see María Victoria Uribe, “Escuchar y ser escuchado: Los Encuentros por la Verdad de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición” [To listen and to be heard: The Meetings for Truth held by the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence, and Non-repetition], *Policy Brief* 6 (2021): 1–12, a paper produced with support and funding from the Instituto CAPAZ (Colombo-Alemán para la Paz); see also my commentary and response to Uribe’s paper, likewise published as a *Policy Brief* by CAPAZ in 2022: María del Rosario Acosta López, “El perdón como espacio de escucha, la escucha como espacio de perdón” [Forgiveness as space of listening, listening as space of forgiveness].

<sup>70</sup> All events to date can be viewed on CEV’s website, <https://comisiondelaverdad.co/nombrar-innombrable-conversaciones-arte-verdad>.

of listening), whose main concern is to engage the CEV in an effort to reflect not only on listening but also on the various epistemologies and aesthetics of listening that we should begin to question, subvert, and transform in order to make listening a truly inclusive and plural practice.<sup>71</sup>

To go beyond clarification, then, it is not enough to produce other criteria for the validation of historical knowledge—something that, as I have already mentioned, the CNMH also sought to do in practice by vindicating the value of the victims' voices beyond, outside of, and occasionally in resistance to the juridical languages that determine the legitimacy of testimonies; it is also necessary to create spaces of credibility that make the very experience of listening their focal point. Only such critical engagement can contribute to interrupting the cycles of silencing, with the awareness that these cycles are the result not only of a will to silence but also of the silent but structurally operative grammars that organize and direct hegemonic criteria for audibility.

All of this goes hand in hand with a unique emphasis that seems to distinguish, in any case, the work of the Historical Memory Group in Colombia from that which the Truth Commission has set out to produce. In the words of Uribe,

The commission wants to rehumanize both victims and perpetrators. This was never an interest of the [GMH]. The group wanted to describe in detail what had happened while taking the voice of the protagonists, mostly victims and survivors, as the starting point. What the commission intends, and I think achieves in some way, is to rehumanize.<sup>72</sup>

Castillejo-Cuéllar uses similar terms to describe the difference, which he regards as essential, between his own (past) work researching for the GMH and his current work within the CEV. As Uribe also remarks, the deep questions and challenges that guide the commission's work lead beyond the "historical" and "documentary" aspects of memory toward what Castillejo-Cuéllar calls the personal and affective:

How do macro-historical general processes become conjugated and intersect with intimate and personal processes . . . ? What are the corporeal, aesthetic-political, or sensorial languages in which this intersection is materialized? . . . [In the commission] I situate this intersection in the phenomenological everydayness of

<sup>71</sup> See the presentation of the project and the first episode here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yE-J59GqZkI>.

<sup>72</sup> Uribe, "Rehumanization," 12.

people, unlike a project of historical memory that is actually preoccupied with looking for the historical causality of events. So the volume that I am editing for the Truth Commission is actually situated in what I call the “reverberations of violence” or the “echoes of violence” in the lives of people, particularly their everyday lives.<sup>73</sup>

Here again we find an emphasis on the affects. The question, however, is not only about the role affects can play in the kind of work that must be carried out in order to respect singular and local forms of historical knowledge and the truths that survivors would like to present as testimony (as I have noted, this is the approach that the GMH introduced and institutionalized through the CNMH as a methodology for historical memory work). The task is now to also allow those affects to be at the center of the narrative, to allow everyday forms of dwelling and coping with those languages and spaces of pain to shape other modalities of memory that seek not only to understand and reconstruct the past but to open other possible futures. This is what Castillejo-Cuéllar describes in his interview as a “prospective listening”<sup>74</sup> and what Uribe seems to be getting at through the idea of “rehumanization.”

This approach connects the CEV with other attempts to rescue the affective and material aspects of listening in the construction of memory in Colombia. The present volume discusses two projects that are particularly representative of this most recent strand of community-based memory work in Colombia; each one combines and builds on, in their own way, the experience institutionalized by the CNMH but also brings into play, as the CEV does as well, other possibilities for thinking, collecting, and assisting in situations of harm and the appropriate forms of reparation.

## 2.2. Singing to Remember: The *Albaos* and Memory as Denunciation

In his interview Diego Cagüañas Roza discusses in detail the process that led to the first stage of a large-scale project titled *Voces de resistencia* (Voices of resistance), currently led by Aurora Vergara from ICESI University in Cali.<sup>75</sup> The aim of the project is to visibilize and strengthen organizational processes developed by Afrodescendent women in Colombia’s Pacific region. During the

<sup>73</sup> Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Toward an Undisciplined Listening,” 5.

<sup>74</sup> Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Toward an Undisciplined Listening,” 15.

<sup>75</sup> As this volume was being prepared for publication, Vergara has become the minister of education for Gustavo Petro’s government. Nevertheless, she continues to lead *Voces de resistencia*, but the project is now being administered by other team members at ICESI, led by Melissa Gómez Hernández, current director of the Center for Afrodiasporic Studies.

first stage of the project, coordinated by ICESI's Center for Afrodiaspora Studies (which Vergara directs) in alliance with the Center for Ethics and Democracy (which Cagüañas Rozo directs), the team collaborated with a group of *alabadoras* and *alabadores* from Pogue-Bojayá, in the Chocó region, to produce a documentary film and a set of audiovisual and musical recordings.<sup>76</sup> As Cagüañas Rozo explains in his interview, the project is a merger of two earlier initiatives: a research project led by Vergara in the community of Bellavista-Bojayá<sup>77</sup> and a proposal by Cagüañas Rozo to assemble a regional historical memory group that would have been hosted by ICESI in coordination with the CNMH.

At that time, the community of Bellavista was already well known in the history of Colombia's armed conflict due to the massacre, that took place on May 2, 2002. On that day, a gas cylinder exploded in the Church of San Pablo Apóstol, where dozens of families had gathered to take shelter during a confrontation between FARC guerrilla combatants and a paramilitary group active in the region (the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá).<sup>78</sup> Around the fifteenth anniversary of the massacre, the team of researchers from ICESI set out to collaboratively review with the community the reparatory measures taken until then, as recommended by the CNMH and promised by the state; they also collected and recorded the commemorative projects conceived by the community itself. Their initial intention was to compile a report, following the guidelines set by the CNMH, about the massacre and its long-term effects on the community, followed by further recommendations for reparation; however, the project quickly changed course in light of their conversations with the

<sup>76</sup> According to the information compiled in the group's website (<https://www.icesi.edu.co/vocesderesistencia/>), as confirmed by Vergara, the project *Voces de resistencia* involves a very large team and is already in its fifth version (each version leads to the production of a documentary film). Vergara was initially going to join Cagüañas Rozo in the interview but was unable to do so for last-minute reasons, due to her many occupations and a temporary stay at Harvard University for a postdoc. I thank Vergara for sharing all the material about her research in the Bojayá region and her thoughts about the first stage of the project. See Jerónimo Botero and Aurora Vergara-Figueroa, "Cantando el territorio" [Singing the territory], a lecture presented at the Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Barcelona, May 23, 2018. The project has also inspired an adjoining project that aims to recover Colombian and Brazilian voices of leadership in racialized contexts, which Vergara is currently coordinating; see *Voces de la equidad* [Voices of equity], <https://www.icesi.edu.co/sitios/voces-de-la-equidad/sobre-el-proyecto/voces-de-la-equidad>.

<sup>77</sup> See the results of this research in Aurora Vergara-Figueroa, *Afrodescendent Resistance to Deracination in Colombia: Massacre at Bellavista-Bojayá-Colombia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> The massacre left behind seventy-eight dead, forty-eight of whom were children. See the report presented in 2010 by the CNMH, *Bojayá: La guerra sin límites* [Bojayá: War without limits] (Bogotá: Ediciones Semana, 2010), <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/bojaya-la-guerra-sin-limites/>.

survivors and organizations of victims.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the team of researchers from ICESI shifted their focus away from the massacre in order to consider one of the most compelling expressions of resilience and resistance to forgetting to have emerged from within the community, the *alabaos*.

*Alabaos* are mortuary chants that accompany souls and bid them farewell at the time of death. They are one of the ancestral traditions of Afro-Colombian inhabitants of Colombia's Pacific region. The bodies of those who died in the 2002 massacre were piled up

in mass graves, which meant that traditional funerary rituals could not be performed.<sup>80</sup> Unable to bid farewell to their dead, the *cantaoras* of the Bellavista community began to use the *alabaos* to remember and commemorate

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The *alabaos* [funeral chants] force us to listen to . . . aspects of the harm that official reports have not been able to register and that traditional conceptual frameworks necessarily fail to grasp.

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the massacre but also as a powerful tool for denunciation.<sup>81</sup> The *alabaos* are a way for the community to tell their own version of the facts and to voice the need to remember them, but that is not all: their efforts to preserve this tradition while creatively resignifying it have allowed them to repair bonds damaged by violence, to restore a tradition neglected by the younger generations, and thereby to rebuild a common life amid deep-set violences that are not only a result of the massacre, but which often preceded it and remain unattended. The community thus came to understand these mortuary chants as chants of

<sup>79</sup> An account of the process, the methodology employed in working with the community, and the joint decisions made in the context of that work can be found in María Paola Herrera Valencia, Lina Marcela Mosquera Lemus, Diego Cagüañas Rozo, and Aurora Vergara-Figeroa, "El objeto-relato como dispositivo de memoria: El caso del Grupo de Alabao de Pogue, Bojayá, Chocó" [The object-story as memory device: The case of the Grupo de Alabao from Pogue, Bojayá, Chocó], in *Lugares, sentidos y recorridos de la memoria histórica: Acercamientos metodológicos*, ed. Laura Fonseca Durán et al. (Bogotá: Universidad de la Sabana, 2019), 27–47.

<sup>80</sup> After years of struggle and political activism, the community of Bellavista was able to get the Colombian government to agree to the exhumation and recovery of those who died in the Bojayá massacre as a reparatory measure. See "Inicia la entrega de los cuerpos de las víctimas de masacre de Bojayá" [The first bodies of victims from the Bojayá massacre are being handed over], *El Tiempo*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/conflicto-y-narcotrafico/inicia-la-entrega-de-los-cuerpos-de-las-victimas-de-masacre-de-bojaya-432424>.

<sup>81</sup> See for example the *alabao* titled "Decimoquinto aniversario" [Fifteenth anniversary], <https://soundcloud.com/user-406615039/09-decimoquinto-aniversario>.

resistance, and the *alabaos* have indeed played a crucial role in the activism and political visibility of these communities in the national context.<sup>82</sup>

The project *Voces de resistencia: Cantoras de Pogue* (Voices of resistance: Traditional women singers from Pogue) has also contributed to this visibility. The documentary film<sup>83</sup> and musical recordings<sup>84</sup> are only two of the more accessible “products” of a complex and creative project that sought to accompany a process of mourning as an instance of active political resistance, rooted in and driven by the community itself. A particularly interesting aspect of this project as a whole is that it requires a very different approach to the very idea of “memory building” and to its implementation. It also demands a different understanding of the kind of harm caused by the massacre and the multiplicity of its dimensions. Cagüañas Rozo insists on this point in his interview, as he has done so in the written work he has produced in the context of his engagement with the community.<sup>85</sup> If indeed the *alabaos* are “shields of truth,” as described by Saulo Mosquera (one of the *cantaos* interviewed in the documentary), what they convey is a truth that is not limited to the history of the massacre or its material consequences. The *alabaos* force us to listen to other aspects of the harm that official reports have not been able to register and that traditional conceptual frameworks necessarily fail to grasp.

As Cagüañas Rozo writes: “Figures like that of a radical evil, of a culture of violence, or of an imprescriptible crime are too broad to measure what it is that stands in need of reparation [in the Bojayá case].” The context calls for other grammars, other modes of listening, which the *alabaos* at once articulate and demand, both on their own and through the repercussions of their practice. The tissues of the community are broken, the work of memory has been made impossible because there is no past as long as the present is stalked by the thirst of the dead who have not yet received the tears that they are due: “In one of the planet’s rainiest regions, the ancestors are thirsty. With thirst, one does not forget. Thirst is the recollection and insistence of something that must be

<sup>82</sup> See Paola Marín and Gastón Alzate, “Ethical and Political Implications of ‘Performance’ in a Rural Cultural Practice: Afro-Colombian Women Singers from the Town of Pogue,” *Journal of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy* 32 (2021): 1–22.

<sup>83</sup> The film can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pKUJYzaWcQ>.

<sup>84</sup> Two samples are available here: <https://www.icesi.edu.co/vocesderesistencia/musica.php>.

<sup>85</sup> See for example Diego Cagüañas Rozo, “Historia como fantología: Vida onírica, cantos mortuorios y el deber para con los espectros en Bojayá, Chocó” [History as hauntology: Dreamlife, mortuary chants, and the duty toward specters in Bojayá, Chocó], *Philosophical Readings* 11, no. 3 (2019): 140–46; and Diego Cagüañas Rozo, “Almas dañadas, rostro, perdón y milagro: Reflexiones a propósito de Bojayá, Chocó” [Damaged souls, the face, forgiveness, and miracle: Reflections about Bojayá, Chocó], *Estudios políticos* 61 (2021): 48–71.



quenched. It is exhaustion and unease. In Bojayá the body suffers from it, and it harms the soul.”<sup>86</sup>

When the inhabitants of Bojayá speak of a “harm to the soul” in the context of the massacre, they are referring to the ongoing harm suffered by those who died “a bad death” and who have not been mourned as they should; they are also referring to the harm endured by the soul of those who survive them, of a community whose tissues need to be mended through the recovery of traditions inherited from their ancestors. In that sense, *Voces de resistencia* is not only about funerary traditions, some of which were collected during the first stage of the project; it is also about traditions for life: forms of play, for instance, such as those beautifully depicted in *Murebe*, the second documentary film produced during the project.<sup>87</sup> Here the work of memory is not so much about reconstructing the past as it is about everyday forms of negotiating with harm from other registers.

For Cagüañas Rozo this is indeed one of the crucial differences between their work with the *cantaoras* and previous memory work done by the CNMH in Bellavista. As he explains in his interview, the community was no longer being asked to narrate the massacre one more time; to narrate it, as he recounts, to “the memory people” (a remark that, by the way, offers a glimpse of yet another aspect of historical memory work: the community’s own perception of what the CNMH was doing and the fact that for some communities it may have been too much to be asked to do this repeatedly). Rather, they were now invited to collaborate on projects that could resignify sites and agencies beyond the categories of “victim,” “memory,” and “reparation.” “The *alabaos*, as the articulating axis of the project,” Cagüañas Rozo explains, “led us to a much more productive relationship with the community because they allowed us to do something *with* them and not only to write *about* them; *alabaos* allowed us to be there in and with the community.”<sup>88</sup> This is a work of memory that is done with the community and articulated by them, closely attuned to the work of mourning, and conceived as a way of adding to, but also moving away from, the work initiated by the CNMH; a work, moreover, whose results do even more to empower those voices that are coming into audibility—for themselves and for others.

<sup>86</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, “Almas dañadas,” 51, 59.

<sup>87</sup> Directed by Eduardo Montenegro in coordination with Tikal Producciones. See the teaser for the documentary here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5\\_0kzTB9vs&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5_0kzTB9vs&t=5s).

<sup>88</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, “Giving a Place to the Dead,” 10 (italics in the original).

### 2.3. From the Street to the Museum and from the Museum to the Street: Art as a Tool for Healing

A very similar process, also driven by efforts to empower, is the topic of the group of interviews that concludes the second section of this volume. I am referring to a project titled *Renovando el olvido: Memorias de la L*, concerned with and located at a neighborhood formerly known as Bronx Street in Bogotá, although its inhabitants call it La L due to its shape on the map. For decades La L was described as one of the epicenters of drug trafficking in the city, subjected to stigmatization and criminalization, and intentionally “abandoned” in terms of public policy. The police forces conducted an “intervention” on May 28, 2016, and, as a result, everyone living at La L was evicted as part of a program to “recover the sector” by the city administration, led at the time by Mayor Enrique Peñalosa. The whereabouts of many of former El Bronx inhabitants after the intervention are to this day unknown.<sup>89</sup>

The interview with the team brings into view the various facets that make up the project, conceived as a group of initiatives based on the site and developed in collaboration with many of its former inhabitants. The site is now abandoned and almost completely demolished. The aim of the work has been therefore to resignify the space and its history and to produce a critical view of the stigmatization to which its inhabitants were historically and politically subjected. The guiding thread of these initiatives was a broad understanding of the “museum” as an institution, a singular approach that foregrounds a relation between memory and art in which the latter functions not so much as a point of departure or a “tool” for managing harm (as it does in other contexts) but rather as an (unexpected) point of arrival. Here, various forms of artistic expression—music (hip-hop), installation art (*The Scale Model of El Bronx*), memorials (*The Wall of Presence*), the resignification of spaces (*El Bronx Herbarium*), and the creation of a local museum (The Round Corner of El Bronx)<sup>90</sup>—were used to conjoin the

<sup>89</sup> See a critical account of the so-called intervention by the city government in Andrés Góngora, Angela Viviana Cano, Juan Diego Jiménez, María Alejandra Rodríguez, and Nelson Camilo Jiménez, “La *Maqueta de la L*, experimentación etnográfica, antiprohibicionismo y espacios heterotópicos” [The *Scale Model of the L*, ethnographic experimentation, anti-prohibitionism, and heterotopian spaces], in *Etnografía y espacio: Tránsitos conceptuales y desafíos del hacer*, comp. Natalia Quiceno Toro and Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga (Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia, 2021), 118–49. See also, in English, Andrés Góngora and Francisca González, “Awkward Ruins: Topophilia and the Narratives of Stripping in Santiago and Bogotá,” in *Incarnating Feelings, Constructing Communities*, ed. Ana María Forero Angel, Catalina González Quintero, and Allison B. Wolff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 183–227.

<sup>90</sup> See the interview with the project team for details about the multiple sides of the project, Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal.”

creative results of resilience and the socialization of harm with memory work and critical historiography.

The work originated in a context that is very different from that of the museum: an initiative for the “reduction of considerable harm”<sup>91</sup> led by community educator Susana Fergusson in La Rioja, one of the houses maintained by the City Institute for the Protection of Children and Youth (Instituto Distrital para la Protección de la Niñez y la Juventud, or IDIPRON). Fergusson began to work with a group of former El Bronx inhabitants who were living at La Rioja as beneficiaries of programs offered by the institution to those who had been evicted from La L. A few encounters with people working in the field of art, at first occasional and personal,<sup>92</sup> eventually developed into institutional relations with museum spaces and projects supported by the National Museum of Colombia and, later, by the Gilberto Alzate Avendaño Foundation. The idea that art could be understood as a place for the production of memory, for working through and dealing with harm, and for socializing invisibilized histories and experiences emerged then as a premise for the project *Renovando el olvido: Memorias de la L*. Conversely, by engaging in collaborative work with La L’s former inhabitants, supporting their creative and resilient ways of narrating and inhabiting their memories, and being attentive as well to the ways in which the site has transformed itself after being rehabilitated (and repopulated) by other (not only human) lives, the project sheds light on a capacity of art that is not necessarily visible from the traditional space of the museum. Truly wonderful things have sprung from this encounter, as can be read in the interview with some of its promoters and protagonists.

This sense of wonder is captured in the words of Yan Carlos Guerra as he describes the role that music has played for him throughout this process. Guerra is a member of the Free Soul collective, a hip-hop group that emerged out of their work with Fergusson, both drawing from and contributing to a collective inquiry into the history of La L:

<sup>91</sup> See Góngora et al., “La Maqueta de la L”; Susana Fergusson and Andrés Góngora, “La relación entre personas y drogas y los dispositivos de inclusión social basados en la comunidad” [The relationship between individuals and drugs and community-based devices of social inclusion], presented at the Second Annual Conference of the Cooperation Programme between Latin America, the Caribbean, and the European Union on Drug Policies (COPOLAD), Brussels, June 7, 2012; and Ramiro Borja, Andrés Góngora, and Carlos Sánchez, “Ensamblajes globales y ‘reducción de daño’: Apuntes en torno a la lucha antidroga y al movimiento anti-prohibicionista” [Global assemblages and “harm reduction”: Notes on the antidrug struggle and the anti-prohibitionist movement], *Revista cultura y droga* 22, no. 24 (2017): 106–18.

<sup>92</sup> See the interview with the project team in which they reveal the happenstances that allowed for the project to eventually connect with museum institutions, Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal.”

Art helped mediate this process. . . . Everything that goes into research, writing, and interpreting involves a kind of artistic passion. There is an art to explaining and putting the right words on the table. I think the orality that we have carried with us is also a form of art; we have learned it and practiced it very well.<sup>93</sup>

Just by hearing the first verses of “Nosotros somos” (We are) or “Vehículo del tiempo”<sup>94</sup> one can understand the role played by hip-hop in this context as a place of audibility. Like the *alabaos*—although here perhaps in the opposite direction—hip-hop is resignified and transformed into a practice of remembrance and working through harm, reaching beyond its use as a tool of denunciation and resistance. Here, to remember through music is also to bring testimony into hip-hop. However, testimony here should be understood in a broader sense, not simply as a way of collecting “the memories of La L,” but also as a space for producing the contexts and narratives that make such memories audible outside of the grids that stigmatize, criminalize, and pathologize La L’s former inhabitants and that have previously engaged with them only through the clinical framework of a “treatment” for addiction.

We should also bear in mind that, in this case, the task is that of constructing memories of a place that no longer exists. As Andrés Góngora, curator at the National Museum of Colombia and member of the *Renovando el olvido* team, frames it in the interview: “How to create a social cartography of a place that no longer exists? How to memorialize the ruins? How to memorialize a demolished materiality that is not at all what it used to be? How to memorialize a materiality that is in the process of disappearing, of being dismantled?”<sup>95</sup> The experiences that led to the *Maqueta del Bronx* (Scale model of El Bronx) project can be read as a response to these challenges, one that was not planned in advance and that emerged spontaneously out of a workshop led by Fergusson. At first the context was a memory project involving young participants at IDIPRON; the material nature of the activity drew in a growing number of participants until the project morphed into an unheard-of exploration of the museum as a form—unheard-of both for the museum as an institution and its audience and for the community that came to be contained and narrated in those “cardboard boxes,” as Guerra describes them:

<sup>93</sup> Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 13.

<sup>94</sup> The lyrics to “Vehículo del tiempo” can be read at the end of the interview with the *Renovando el olvido* project team, Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 31–34.

<sup>95</sup> Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 4.

Everyone wanted to contribute their two cents to the historical reconstruction because they knew that it was going to be preserved for the future, that we were going to be able to use it to tell our story and to teach as well. They realized that the scale model was not just a bunch of cardboard houses on a board. They realized that we all had a story to tell through those cardboard houses.<sup>96</sup>

The idea of reconstructing the space in order to activate memories was thus transformed, first into a tool that La L's former inhabitants could use to socialize their experiences and later, when it was exhibited as an object at the National Museum of Colombia, into a *historical* piece: an acknowledgment of the role played by La L not only in the lives of those who tell its story but also in the cultural, social, and political context within which El Bronx was inscribed as a marginalization device within the city. Here, memory moves at several levels: from testimony and translation of the oral into the material, and of the material into the audibility of these stories, passing through a dimension of historical indexing and acknowledgment, to finally return to its protagonists. Once the work was socialized and presented to a much broader audience, the experience allowed the former L inhabitants to reframe the question that originally motivated the exercise. As implied by Guerra, the scale model, as a piece and as a museum experience, urged them to discover and open other unexpected paths for memory:

Coming to a museum and finding a room with materials to create, to discuss, to interact with different kinds of people, to inhabit other social roles, helps us, people like us, grow both artistically and personally. Indeed, what came out of the scale model, beyond the piece itself, is that stories were clarified, and a lot of taboos—many social paradigms that held us captive—were broken. Each one of us brought our own contribution, including forgetfulness (this is why the project was called *Restoring the Forgotten*), because this is what it was: to restore what everyone else wanted to forget so quickly.<sup>97</sup>

An unprecedented experience of listening was thus achieved in this context. We might even describe it as an experience of “radical listening,”<sup>98</sup> bearing in mind that here the categories that make listening possible emerge out of the process itself and that this process is also subverting the kind of preconceptions that have prevented listening from taking place in other contexts:

<sup>96</sup> Guerra, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 15.

<sup>97</sup> Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 16.

<sup>98</sup> On the concept of radical listening, see María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito: Aproximaciones est-éticas.”

Very soon we realized that this work at the National Museum required languages that we had not used until then, languages that differed from the ones required by the processes with the community. How to show, for example, that people in the community have the capacity to serve as a bridge to approach difficult and highly marginalized contexts? But how to do it while also showcasing that people in the community have the capacity to produce social transformations through changing the ways in which narratives about them circulate and by resignifying their stories and even spaces in front of a broad audience?<sup>99</sup>

In order to build on this experience, the team—which has always involved former El Bronx inhabitants—decided to launch a long-term research project titled *200 años de vida callejera* (200 years of street life),<sup>100</sup> which reviews the historical and cultural sources of these preconceptions and the way in which marginalizing narratives about these communities circulate. In the words of Rayiv Torres, who is leading this part of the project, they “intend to evaluate the full historical arc of the development of certain narratives of disdain that have become ingrained in Colombian society and that make possible genocides like the one that took place at the Cartucho Street’s ‘first eviction’ and, later of course, at the intervention in El Bronx.”<sup>101</sup> The verses of “Vehículo del tiempo” are to a great extent also a component and result of this collective research effort,<sup>102</sup> which will conclude with an opening exhibition for a new cultural space and community museum at La Esquina Redonda, the only building left standing after La L was cleared of its inhabitants and demolished (an additional effort to resignify the space through art and museum-based projects).<sup>103</sup>

*Renovando el olvido* is a project that presents and inaugurates a set of memory practices that have turned out to be deeply transformative, both for their organizers and for their audiences. Moreover, these practices also consistently enact the idea that memory must be driven by those communities that have been directly affected by violence and that it must provide narratives capable of

<sup>99</sup> Góngora, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 5.

<sup>100</sup> The still unpublished script for that exhibition, coordinated by Rayiv David Torres, was generously shared by the team in preparation for the interview included in this volume.

<sup>101</sup> Torres, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 21.

<sup>102</sup> For example: “I analyze the package that was delivered to the gallows, biopolitics of the state, we’re in the wrong, the city, the great legacy of kings spreading out, never without symbiosis, died on the line. With no memory and little ethics, submerged in aesthetics, parliaments are put together with arithmetical answers, monuments are raised and death becomes epic, they split up the fragments on Caracas and Tenth.” Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 32.

<sup>103</sup> For more information about the project, see the website of El Bronx Creative District, <https://bronxdistritocreativo.gov.co/la-esquina-redonda-un-espacio-de-memoria-en-el-antiguo-bronx-narrado-desde-las-vozes-de-sus-protagonistas/>.



healing those who play a part in these exercises. This also means, as Góngora puts in his interview as he explains the links between the project and the work coordinated by Fergusson, that “it is possible to carry out harm reduction work through the development of artistic projects.”<sup>104</sup>

On the other hand, this multifaceted project is able to advance a different understanding of what it means to remember, to return to a space and resignify it, and the implications for rethinking the very idea of historical patrimony. It is about resignifying not only places but bodies as well, and with them the spaces that preserve, through other forms of life, in other temporalities, another memory of these sites.

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This is precisely what is at stake in the project’s fourth component, described in detail in the interview: the exercise titled *Herbario del Bronx* (El Bronx Herbarium), whose results were recorded in a weekly planner for 2021<sup>105</sup> (note that this is yet another memory device<sup>106</sup>), published by the City Institute for Cultural Patrimony (Instituto Distrital de Patrimonio Cultural).<sup>107</sup> In their presentation of this publication, the curatorial team writes:<sup>108</sup>

Which kinds of memory exercises could we use to tell the subterranean stories of this place? How to narrate the violence and exclusion without losing sight of the care and resilience of all living beings? It makes sense to think that in the plants that currently spring in El Bronx [that is, in its ruins, after the eviction and demolition] we might find an alternative way of making memory. . . . This landscape is also a patrimony that emerges from ruins that corroborate the advance of modernity and capitalist city planning, as well as an aesthetic horizon based on the language of nature, the diversity of the living, and the spontaneity of plant life.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Góngora, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 6.

<sup>105</sup> See *Un herbario urbano*.

<sup>106</sup> I thank Julián Ríos-Acosta for suggesting this connection, which I had not noticed before when considering the planner.

<sup>107</sup> It is not superfluous to mention here that, at the time, the institute was directed by Patrick Morales Thomas, who previously worked for several years at the CNMH. These are not just coincidences; instead, as I have noted before, it is the case that the criteria and aesthetic and conceptual frameworks for memory work set forth by the CNMH continue to actualize its legacy in more recent projects, through other institutions.

<sup>108</sup> The team includes Góngora, Torres, and Ximena Castillo, with support from a research group consisting of Cristian Montoya, John Hernández Smith, Guerra, and Fergusson.

<sup>109</sup> “Plantas insurrectas” [Rebel plants], in *Un herbario urbano*.

The herbarium comes to symbolize how this context is also a site for the reemergence of life. This rebirth can also be interpreted as a sign of the many other elements that surround the act of recollection, of other ways of telling these stories, and of how life can come up with unexpected modalities of resilience. As Torres remarks, the discovery of several medicinal plants now growing on the site led them to unexpectedly focus on this aspect in the *Herbario*: “How did the ruins of a place that we know was so loaded with horrors produce medicinal plants? . . . We then started thinking of the ruins as witnesses from another, mineral, non-anthropocentric logic and corporeality and asking what it could mean to produce memory in spaces loaded with pain.”<sup>110</sup> These words echo the testimony by Winder Jojoa, a former inhabitant of La L, which opens the *Herbario*:

As we collected the plants, some of which were medicinal, we were reminded of the people who used to be there. This is how, even among ruins, . . . we found memories through these plants. This place was labeled as a site of horror . . . and now we come back, we have a look, and we see that life springs here, even for self-healing.<sup>111</sup>

These words bring us back to Susana Fergusson’s statement quoted at the beginning of this introduction: the humanities, she claims, “heal,” they “can become means to heal and build hope.”<sup>112</sup> Here, to heal is not to overcome the past but to produce it by reappropriating its meanings and narratives in order to build a ground where it might be possible to grow amid the ruins, as El Bronx plants do. Here the aim of memory is not to compensate or suture wounds but to enable a different and productive relation with something that otherwise hurts and harms. Memory heals because it liberates, not from recollection but from the impossibility of producing it. The space between the two—between harm and memory, between trauma and the possibility of its testimony—is the site for all potentially productive ways of articulating a broad understanding of what is conceptualized as a work of “liberatory memory” in the final group of interviews that concludes this volume.

<sup>110</sup> Torres, in Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 24.

<sup>111</sup> Winder Jojoa, in *Un herbario urbano*.

<sup>112</sup> Fergusson et al., “Humanities That Heal,” 14.

### 3. From Colombia to Chicago and Back: “To Politicize Healing”

Inside of North America, the left side of politics had made . . . two separate spaces. One was for seeking justice and one was for seeking healing. And the healing was dealt with mostly at the individual level. It was private. It was in therapy. And justice was the collective space where we could connect to history and sociopolitical analysis. I wanted . . . to put those two levels together because that’s how I had experienced them in my work in Colombia.

—Elizabeth Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused with the Power of Imagination”

As many of the interviews clearly suggest, these diverse memory initiatives stem from years of work and the coming together of various projects that have gradually developed at the local level; indeed, some also arose out of the often coincidental convergence of shared interests and commitments. In several cases one could even speak of “happy coincidences”: friends who discover that they can join forces to shape a broader project; communities that are carrying out an extremely empowering work at the local level and suddenly come across an external agent who commits to supporting them and making their projects known; researchers who manage to create a conversation between work that is being carried out in entirely different territories and thus promote an unexpected dialogue between communities that may not have unfolded otherwise. A series of such happy coincidences underlies the project that concludes this report. It results from unexpected connections between historical memory work in Colombia and a similar attempt to work toward a liberatory form of memory with survivors of police torture in the city of Chicago. Although the ensuing text by Laura Zornosa examines in detail the coincidences between these two contexts and reconstructs the threads that allowed for those unexpected encounters between both projects, I will conclude my remarks by adding a few words about this last aspect of the present volume as recounted in its two final interviews.

In May 2015, after Chicago’s mayor and chief of police both publicly acknowledged that ninety-six people, most of them African American, had been tortured between the years 1972 and 1991 by orders of then Chicago Police Department Commander Jon Burge, the city council approved an ordinance<sup>113</sup> and issued

<sup>113</sup> See the complete ordinance, which includes the package of economic reparations for the victims: Chicago City Council, “Ordinance SO2015-2687: Establishment of ‘Reparations for Burge Torture Victims’ Fund,” May 6, 2015, [https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp\\_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/ORDINANCE.pdf](https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/ORDINANCE.pdf).

a resolution<sup>114</sup> comprising a package of reparations that was unprecedented in the political and judicial context of the United States: in addition to economic compensation for each victim, the resolution called for the creation of a center in Chicago's South Side that would provide labor support and mental health services to the survivors and their families, and for the design and construction of a permanent memorial for "Burge's victims." It also mandated, among other things, that the city's public schools should teach, as part of the history curriculum in the eighth and eleventh grades, about the survivors and their histories, including their legal battles and the activism that allowed their cases to be publicly acknowledged.

The reparations package was based on a model drawn up in 2012 by lawyer Joe Mogul, from the People's Law Office, for an exhibition organized by the recently created Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM),<sup>115</sup> a collective of activists, artists, and academics working together with the survivors (many of whom were still imprisoned) and their families, to call attention to the Burge case in the interest of obtaining reparations. Mogul's model was conceived in conversation with the survivors during the process leading up to the exhibition *Opening the Black Box: The Charge Is Torture*, in which the CTJM called for the "radical imagination" for potential memorials for Burge's victims. The reparations package was thus first presented as an art installation in 2012, but by 2015 it had become a reality, and in doing so it also outlined a path that shows that the act of imagining other possible worlds in the present—of demanding of the present something that seems impossible, nearly unimaginable—has been an essential aspect of the historical and political process that led to the reparations ordinance and the political visibility of structural racial violences within the police department in the city of Chicago.

The CTJM was commissioned to design the memorial and establish the visual and conceptual guidelines of the center described in the resolution. As in other experiences discussed in these pages, all of which have developed in connection with government-led initiatives, the community of survivors, their relatives, and the group of activists who advocated for Burge's victims felt the need to set guidelines for the center that went beyond the tasks established by the city. The creation of the Chicago Torture Justice Center (CTJC) was thus part of a process that continued to foster the radical imagination that had already

<sup>114</sup> See the resolution that details the package of "symbolic" reparations, Chicago City Council, "Resolution SR2015-256: Establishment of Reparations to Victims of Torture by Police Commander Jon Burge," May 6, 2015, [https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp\\_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/BurgeRESOLUTION.pdf](https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/dol/supp_info/Burge-Reparations-Information-Center/BurgeRESOLUTION.pdf).

<sup>115</sup> For more information on the CTJM, see their website, <https://chicagotorture.org/about/>.

powered the campaign of political activism on behalf of the memorial and the reparations ordinance. The survivors wanted, imagined, and suggested a place that would provide the labor support and mental health services guaranteed by the ordinance and that would also function as a space of encounter, community building, memory, and testimony: a living archive that, in addition to assisting the survivors, could keep up the legal battle and the visibilization of the structural nature of racial and racially motivated police violence in the city of Chicago.

At the time, Elizabeth Deligio was part of the team charged with carrying out that task (she is now a member of the board of founders at the CTJC), and this is the first of the happy coincidences mentioned above. Deligio had previously worked in Colombia and witnessed the historical moment that led to the creation of the CNMH and the memory work that was later being done much more explicitly in the context of the transitional justice process and the Justice and Peace Law. She was already thinking of ways in which she could bring and translate to the CTJC's project in Chicago some of what she had experienced firsthand in Colombia. This is how she describes it in her interview:

In that way, it was Colombians who taught me about the concept of historical memory and the kind of tension that exists between history and memory, and it was them who taught me what it means for people who are impacted by violence and written out of history to do with the work of creating memory. So I was, with really amazing generosity and passion, taught by these Colombian communities. . . . And that led me to work with a specific community in Chicago that was dealing with a history that the city of Chicago refused to recognize, which had happened with a specific group of police officers. They weren't calling it "historical memory work," but in their work to have that recognized and to have a form of repair for the community that had been impacted, I saw the relationship between the two contexts, and I wanted to be able to have those worlds talk to one another, because I felt like they needed each other.<sup>116</sup>

It was under these circumstances that Deligio got in touch with me. I had just arrived in Chicago to work in DePaul University's Department of Philosophy. Deligio knew about my work with the CNMH back in Colombia and was interested in working toward conceptualizing the CTJC as a "memory center." As is clear from the lines quoted above, she did not mean to import something external to the work being done in Chicago by bringing in the concept of "historical memory"; instead, she was convinced that the kind of work that was being done and imagined as possible in the context of the legal

<sup>116</sup> Deligio, "Memory Work Needs to Be Infused," 2–3.

battles for reparations was itself already an important contribution to historical memory—although it might not have been labeled or understood in those terms.

I could see this just as clearly after I accepted Deligio’s invitation and joined the team, when I had the opportunity—indeed, the honor—of being involved in the conceptualization, inauguration, and early implementation of the CTJC as a memory center.<sup>117</sup> Through DePaul we gained access to funding from the Wicklander Fellowship, the Vincentian Fund, and the Steins Center<sup>118</sup> and were able to put together a series of memory workshops and create a conversation between the ways of working already developed in Chicago and the experience of historical memory in Colombia. We were also able to explore networks enabled by connections created around historical memory initiatives elsewhere in the world. We organized meetings with the team working at the recently inaugurated CTJC and the community that the center assembled or hoped to eventually assemble. Some of these meetings, such as those coordinated by Pilar Riaño and María Emma Wills, were conceived as an introduction to the discussion around historical memory and to tools that might prove useful for its conceptualization and local development; others, like an opening workshop led by Jarrett Drake, focused on efforts by the CTJC community—in conversation with the survivors—to elaborate the idea of “liberatory memory.”<sup>119</sup> The concept, brought up by Drake, turned out to be a very helpful way of approaching the kind of historical and political activity that the community had been engaged in for years, perhaps even more so than the idea of “historical memory,” which some regarded as too abstract. Drake and Deligio are the two interviewees in the concluding section of this volume; Drake’s work as an archivist has focused precisely on racial police violence in the United States,<sup>120</sup> and his current research project as an anthropologist collects oral histories of resistance

<sup>117</sup> See the short interview for DePaul University that collects important vectors of this project, IBPE DePaul, “María Acosta Interview,” June 21, 2018, video, 9:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxBRKd2fank>.

<sup>118</sup> During my work on all these projects I received invaluable assistance from Amelia Hruby, who at the time was a PhD student in DePaul University’s Department of Philosophy. Also, this work would not have been possible without the constant support of Cindy Eigler, who eventually became a codirector of CTJC.

<sup>119</sup> Drake also had links to the experience of historical memory in Colombia through a global network of memory workers promoted by the Nelson Mandela International Dialogues in 2016; there he met Wills and came into contact with the work that was being done in Colombia.

<sup>120</sup> See in particular his project for an “archive” of police violence in Cleveland, OH, A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, whose documentation is available at <http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/>. See also Drake’s account of his work on this project, coauthored with Stacie M. Williams, “Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017).



and the preservation of community bonds among African Americans in the Louisiana prison system.

This series of events ended with the workshop discussed by Zornosa in her essay, coordinated by Wills and Drake. This was the first effort at the CTJC to organize a workshop on the topic of historical memory where participants could put into practice all of the tools and concepts introduced, discussed, and jointly elaborated in the previous workshops.<sup>121</sup> Given the differences between a conspicuously racial form of violence in the case of Chicago and the violence of the Colombian conflict

(whose racial component is undeniable, but has been less thematized in the more traditional narratives of the conflict), what is interesting about this connection is also the fact that in both cases the violence is not just a thing of

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What kind of work with memory can both commit to historical reparation and concurrently venture to imagine worlds that are radically different from the present?

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the past (as the discourse that prevails in Chicago at the institutional level tends to present it), a point that the Chicago survivors have repeatedly sought to make after the ordinance and the reparations package. Much to the contrary, these forms of violence are connected to structures that remain at work in the present and perpetuate them. In Deligio's words: "Understanding the past as over misses the needs, questions, and challenges that transcend linear time as well as the opportunities to transform and repair."<sup>122</sup>

In this context, the work of memory plays a fundamental role, not only because it offers a standpoint from which to understand the reconstruction of the past as social agency and as resistance to forgetting, but also because it can be framed as a labor that calls for an understanding of history as a possible place for reclamation and response, historical debt and reparation. The task, moreover, raises questions that are very similar to the ones that have been negotiated by those engaged in historical memory work in Colombia (as noted above): What are the implications of working on memory and producing a past that does not remain in the past but rather perpetuates itself in the logic that continues to prevail in the present? How can we produce a counternarrative to hegemonic official narratives that insist on closing the case and turning the page once the

<sup>121</sup> See Zornosa, "How We Remember."

<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Deligio, "Memory: More than Recall," in *A Critical Introduction to Psychology*, ed. Robert K. Beshara (New York: Nova Science, 2020), 10.

facts have been acknowledged? And if the production of a past that has been erased, crossed out, hidden, and denied, and the creation of a counter-archive are fundamental aspects of memory as a liberatory task, what form of memory work could also make it possible to obtain reparation for the communities and heal the wounds left behind by violence, while also insisting on the need to dismantle the structures that perpetuate that violence in the present? What kind of work with memory can both commit to historical reparation and concurrently venture to imagine worlds that are radically different from the present?

It is mainly in response to all of these questions that the survivors describe—and conceive—their work at and with the support of the CTJC as one of “politicized healing.”<sup>123</sup> There is no need to sacrifice either of the two sides of this position—or to keep them separate, as if the first were a matter of individual therapy and the second a concern limited to the field of activism and political community work. The process of healing from a violence that is so deeply connected to an enduring system of oppression and racialization is already a political process, because it can only be carried out if the kind of exclusions that such violence enables and that continue to actualize it are explicitly denounced. But in addition to this, denunciations like these can only become audible if they are accompanied by a radical critique of the very criteria that define what becomes (or fails to become) audible, what is perceived or not as legible in the field of the political. As Deligio puts it:

What does it really mean to have entire communities that, in both a contemporary and historical way, have to consistently prove that they’re human in order to have that audibility. . . , to be recognized and to be heard? They do the work and tell their experiences of harm to the systems that are there to protect their life only to find their experience is not recognized. They live in this split screen where all of the language is reduced to this liberal, Western-dominated world (whether you’re in Colombia or in Chicago), this human rights framework, and yet the rights-bearing language is somehow not applicable to your life, the way in which you are harmed.<sup>124</sup>

It is thus necessary to change, interrupt, and dismantle prevalent frames of legibility, to imagine and produce radically different grammars, so that healing may allow us to make audible what otherwise remains systematically silenced and is also thereby reproduced repeatedly and perpetrated methodically against

<sup>123</sup> See the entry “Politicized Healing,” Chicago Torture Justice Center, <https://chicagotorturejustice.org/politicized-healing>.

<sup>124</sup> Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused,” 10.

entire communities. According to Deligio and Troy Harden—both members of the CTJC’s board and actively engaged in the center’s work with the communities that have access to its services—this is necessarily linked to the practice of historical memory:

Treating state violence and racialized violence will require looking at historical legacies, methods for individuals and communities, a critical examination of assumptions in Western liberal societies of a rights-bearing ontology, and re-imagining of the “past” to protect against erasure for survivors.<sup>125</sup>

What is at stake, then, is the production of something that Drake has described—paraphrasing Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire—as an “archive of the oppressed,”<sup>126</sup> a task that he interprets in light of the idea of “liberatory memory.” For Drake, creating a counter-archive capable of rendering the context of racial police violence in the United States requires more than a judicious collection of archives or the visibilization of narratives that are otherwise condemned to being forgotten. We also need to examine to what extent by producing memory or historical knowledge we may still be complicit in the forceful silencing that archives are capable of. What is required is thus a deeply creative task that, according to Drake, has already been undertaken by African American communities in the United States in ways that have allowed them to resist, in spite of everything, the kind of epistemic violence that comes with the systematic erasure that archives enact. On the other hand, we must regard these violences as interconnected and be aware of the articulatedness of all forms of oppression, for otherwise we run the risk of reproducing what we are seeking to interrupt. As Drake states, the task is

to really envision liberatory futures that are not predicated on emphasizing one particular form of oppression over another. Oppression is so deeply woven into the world that we live in . . . it’s almost like trying to take up one root of a tree. You can do that, but you still got a whole forest there, like, it’s just going to grow back.<sup>127</sup>

At this point we may argue with Zornosa that the encounter and dialogue that allowed us to bring the Colombian experience of historical memory work

<sup>125</sup> Elizabeth Deligio and Troy Harden, “Politicized Healing: Addressing the Impact of State-Sponsored Violence,” *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* 12, no. 2 (2021): 5.

<sup>126</sup> See Jarrett M. Drake, “Diversity’s Discontents: In Search of an Archive of the Oppressed,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 47, no. 2 (2019): 270–79.

<sup>127</sup> Drake, “The Beauty of Liberatory Memory Work,” 7.

to Chicago must now travel back, for in Colombia there is still much to be done in order to bring a truly intersectional perspective to historical memory work, whether that of the CNMH or the one currently being produced by the CEV. This fact came into view during the workshop at the CTJC, many of whose participants rightly perceived that the way in which experiences of violence in the context of Colombia's armed conflict were narrated tended to exclude and silence racialized populations. The challenges in this regard are extremely difficult, but they must be addressed by those government and academic discourses that consistently fail to acknowledge that racism is a structural problem in the Colombian case.

It is not enough to record memories among racialized populations, to create a space for listening to the frames of meaning and interpretation of Indigenous populations in Colombia or the histories of deterritorialization and radical exclusion of Black and Afrodescendent communities. It is necessary to transform the very languages that are used to narrate these histories of violence and to subvert the narratives that describe the history of the conflict in Colombia exclusively in terms of political differences and social inequalities. We need to stop talking about "marginalized" populations and stress the fact that in Colombia we are dealing with the racialization of entire communities and a deep structural racism that, as Colombian human rights activist, and currently vice president of Colombia, Francia Márquez has emphatically argued, systematically converges in a "politics of death" that has prevailed not only at the level of the state and its economic policies but also at the level of discourse, of the languages and frames of meaning that narrate the history of the "nation." In that sense, the learning process should continue to go back and forth between Colombia and Chicago, so that the work of memory in both places can do justice to the urgent task of "politicized healing" and be responsive to a powerful idea voiced by African American communities: that only in a radically new world that has been transformed down to the very roots can there be reparation for a debt that, historically, we must continue to conceive as unpayable.

#### 4. "There Was a Light at the End of the Tunnel": Memory as the Opening of Futures

We came from a world excluded from the larger context, outside of reality. We didn't even know where we were coming from, who we were, where we were going. . . . I think that my hope comes from encountering . . . a different approach. There is hope when I can say: "I can still be myself, yes, but I can

change and modify aspects of my life.” . . . There was a light at the end of the tunnel that helped me be myself and show my true potential. . . . Research is crucial to being able to ask everything: Who are we? Where do we come from and where are we going? Research helps us rid ourselves of prejudice.  
—Yan Carlos Guerra, in “Humanities That Heal, Objects That Remember”

The interviews constituting this volume are an effort to answer a group of questions that cannot be thought of separately. In the first place, and in response to the invitation from the World Humanities Report, it examines the relation between the humanities (broadly understood) and ongoing efforts in Colombia—and partly also in the United States, through the case of the Chicago Torture Justice Center—to develop historical memory as a tool for healing and historical reparation. In that sense, each of the interviews that make up this volume motivates us to think about the possible role of the humanities in political contexts of transition and symbolic reparation but also about the challenges that the humanities and social sciences encounter, both within and outside the academy, when they are confronted by the responsibilities, difficulties, and dilemmas that arise in this kind of work.

As Drake points out, when we ask about memory specifically, we come across the pressing need to “be fugitive in one’s approach to disciplining, because disciplining imposes its own form of silence, its own form of erasure.”<sup>128</sup> An “undisciplined” approach to the humanities, then, as Castillejo-Cuéllar describes it in his interview, allows us to imagine how we might engage in a multi- and interdisciplinary work that ventures beyond the frontiers set by a traditional understanding of what it is to “work in and with the humanities.” It may allow us to continue creating new languages and open perspectives that we may not have considered otherwise.

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The work of memory . . . calls for imagination and resistance. Although these . . . concepts . . . might not immediately come to mind in discussions of “historical memory” (which perhaps remains a conservative idea), their . . . necessity come[s] clearly to the fore . . . in practice.

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I have wanted to call attention to the critical commitment entailed by this task and to the fact that if we are to take on the work of memory responsibly, we must examine the frames of meaning that structure it and make it possible—that

<sup>128</sup> Drake, “The Beauty of Liberatory Memory Work,” 11.

is, the hegemonic grammars that predetermine what is made audible or not, what presents itself as legible or not, what is likely to be recognized and what is likely to be erased from historical knowledge and indexing. With that in mind I found it important to register what is unique about historical memory work in Colombia, which was developed in a particular historical and political situation—a transitional stage—and articulated in very original terms by the Historical Memory Group. In these circumstances historical memory was interpreted as based on an experience that was committed to critique as an essential aspect of the task of producing and visibilizing memories. What we have inherited from the GMH, as later relayed by the National Historical Memory Center, is an effort to institutionalize, as I have attempted to show, a true *culture of memory* in Colombia. This has all been connected, as well, to a critical spirit that is deeply aware of the power of memory to rejoin, construct, and reconfigure worlds that have been demolished by violence, but also of its power to silence these worlds and, in so doing, to reinforce the kind of isolation and destruction of meaning that comes with, perpetuates, and reactualizes violence.

This critical undertaking must then also work toward something that violence is incapable of: creating and inaugurating unprecedented possibilities, in a wholly unexpected way and against all predictions. This is a point that Arendt phrased with the utmost certainty: if it seems that reality can only present us with the destruction of meaning and the insufficiency of all our categories to explain the horror, “imagination” comes into play through the creative capacity to *understand*.<sup>129</sup> A “fearful imagination”<sup>130</sup> that is nonetheless capable of listening to what we would typically seek to run away from, of staying in and with the pain of others; an imagination that thereby opens other world possibilities, other possible worlds, other futures and introduces a definitive break with the present: not through forgetting but precisely through the promise of producing an erased past and of dismantling in the present the continuity of those structural forms of violence that have caused, or at the very least perpetuated, that erasure.

In this way, as Deligio states in her interview, the responsibility for those who choose to engage in memory work and the production of historical knowledge is not (only) to produce

an accurate chronology; [their] responsibility is to open a space for people to make meaning in the present and envision the future. . . . And that really brought to

<sup>129</sup> Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 321.

<sup>130</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973), 441.



mind for me a thread between a kind of imagination and a kind of resistance. The imaginations that go with different forms of resistance and creating justice are always woven through memory.<sup>131</sup>

The work of memory, then, calls for imagination and resistance. Although these are concepts that might not immediately come to mind in discussions of “historical memory” (which perhaps remains a conservative idea), their evidence and necessity come clearly to the fore for those who put this framework in practice. We see this clearly in all the projects discussed in the interviews collected in the second and third parts of this volume, where memory is understood as a practice of denunciation, resistance, and liberation. To take on this practice, we need all the strength that comes from creativity, a kind of creativity that stems from—and simultaneously shapes—very singular modalities of resilience. Forms of creativity that can also critically confront institutional memory policies that read their task only in terms of “reparation” and “restoration.” In this context, an anecdote shared by Cagüañas Rozo in his interview says a lot about the limitations that typically surround (or even constrict) official initiatives:

I remember that in the discussion about reparations and recommendations to the state in this regard, the community was demanding a hospital as a form of reparation. The community’s access to healthcare is rather precarious: they have to travel to Quibdó, which is three hours away by motorboat, to seek medical attention. So one of the people from the victim attention group (who was probably just doing their job) said to the community: “We can’t give you a hospital. All I can offer you is to restore the health clinic.” Evidently, this is due to the fact that reparation in this context is conceived literally as the restoration of what was there before the massacre. A woman from the community, however, got angry and told them: “OK, if this is how you conceive of reparation . . . people used to be alive; you might as well bring them back to life.”<sup>132</sup>

This, of course, is a particular incapacity to hear, one enacted by the law, as well as by institutional languages and the categories that determine what is included and what is left out by using the notion of reparation. One to which communities must reply with robust forms of audibility like those that we find in the *alabaos* sung by the *cantaoras* from Pogue, Bojayá, and in the compelling hip-hop verses performed by former inhabitants of El Bronx in Bogotá. Indeed, each of the memory projects collected in this volume enacts new, unique ways

<sup>131</sup> Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused,” 7.

<sup>132</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, “Giving a Place to the Dead,” 14–15.

of understanding what it means to resist through imagination and to produce forms of inhabiting the past that no longer reproduce but rather interrupt the harmful effects of violence on the present.

Each of these projects is also an example of how the modalities of memory work that the humanities put forward are grounded in a critical awareness of the limitations that hinder governmental discourses about the restitution of rights and assistentialist policies that support the “medical” treatment of “trauma.” Such work instills the communities’ acts of resistance with a perspective that contributes further elements that are fundamental to healing, denunciation, and resilience:

I think sometimes the humanities are presented as a flourish or a cherry on top, a luxury. . . . And I’m thinking: No! This is going to be as necessary as pen and paper, as gas in the car. The humanities are going to be, should always be, in a position to infuse us with enough light, to cast into the unknown, and to lure us forward.<sup>133</sup>

In all of these cases—as I have sought to present it through a series of interviews with those who approach this task from the humanities—memory is, effectively, an opening of futures. Or at least, as Guerra phrases it in the epigraph to this last section, it is a “different approach” through which one begins to glimpse a “light at the end of the tunnel,” perhaps the glimmering possibility of being heard in one’s own words and of finding, in so being heard, grammars by which to name the pain while also doing justice to its incommunicability. At the end, it is perhaps the possibility of tying the past to the present without the latter being condemned to repeat a violence that should no longer have the power to define those who survive it.

And the thing is that, as Stern insists in his interview for this volume, the humanities are essential to remind us—in the words of the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero—that our life appears before our eyes only when it has been heard, received, acknowledged by others, and returned to us in the form of stories.<sup>134</sup> In her book *Relating Narratives*, whose Italian title can be translated as “You, looking at me, you, my narrator,” Cavarero argues for a commitment to listening that I find fundamental. It is not that we cannot exist or appear without others who listen to us and tell our stories. There is indeed no denying

<sup>133</sup> Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused,” 15.

<sup>134</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione* [You, looking at me, you, my narrator: Philosophy of narrative] (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997); in English, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000).

that to appear through another entails a deeply harmful and perverse risk: that of being narrated only in the other's voice, ventriloquized and reduced to the frames of meaning of a listener who must inevitably translate by listening.<sup>135</sup> And yet, as Cavarero describes it, there is a profound—ontological—desire to be heard. This is something that we all live with and, for that reason, constitutes not only the background for any possibility of being in common—and, therefore, of any chance to repair meanings unwoven by violence—but also the ultimate responsibility of those who listen: there is no history, properly speaking, if it is not a history that is the product of a true act of listening. There can be no past and no memory other than those that are constructed on the basis of an urgent commitment to the unheard-of, that is, to what cannot not be left unheard, even if it were never to become entirely audible. Only by acknowledging this dilemma—by acknowledging the difficulties to which it exposes us and the commitments to which it binds us—is it possible to carry out a work of historical memory that is responsible, liberatory, and truly political and transformative of the political.

*Translated from the Spanish by Tupac Cruz*

<sup>135</sup> See María del Rosario Acosta López, “Perder la voz propia: De una fenomenología feminista de la voz a una aproximación a la violencia política desde la escucha” [Losing your own voice: From a feminist phenomenology of the voice to an approach to political violence through listening], in *Fuera de sí mismas: Motivos para dislocarse* [Outside of one self: Motives for dislocation], ed. Luciana Cadahia and Ana Carrasco-Conde (Madrid: Herder, 2020), 121–56; in English, “Being Robbed of One’s Voice: On Listening and Political Violence in Adriana Cavarero,” in *Political Bodies: Writings on Adriana Cavarero’s Political Thought*, ed. Paula Landerreche Cardillo and Rachel Silverbloom (New York: SUNY, forthcoming).

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