

The World Humanities Report

How We Remember: Memory Work in Chicago and Colombia

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How We Remember: Memory Work in Chicago and Colombia

Laura Zornosa *Time Magazine*

How the Chicago Torture Justice Center and the National Historical Memory Center Came About

Anthony Holmes sighed. “When the electricity went through, first I just jumped and hollered and screamed,” he said. “I passed out. He brought me back. I passed out again. He brought me back. About three, maybe four times. The last time, very last time, when I thought I was dead, I came to, I saw all black. It felt like I was dying. It felt like I was burning on the inside.”¹ Holmes sat in an olive green T-shirt and a gold chain, testifying in front of a video camera at a deposition on June 28, 2006.

Holmes is the first documented victim of Jon Burge, the Chicago Police Department commander who tortured over 120 men, mostly African American, into giving false confessions between 1972 and 1991.² One of those men, Holmes confessed to a murder he did not commit in 1973—after being subjected to the electric shock box, suffocation by plastic bag, racial slurs, and threats—and served a full thirty-year sentence in Stateville Correctional Center.³ Jon Burge, on the other hand, has only ever served four and a half years in federal prison—but never on the charge of torture. Rather, in June 2010 he was convicted on one count of perjury and two counts of obstruction of justice for falsely denying that he and detectives under his command—the so-called Midnight Crew—had engaged in torture and abuse. Holmes testified at Burge’s sentencing hearing in January 2011.

Four years later, on May 6, 2015, Chicago City Council made history by passing Resolution SR2015-256, the first time that African Americans who suffered from state violence in the United States won the right to reparations—\$5.5 million. That money went toward financial compensation for the survivors and

¹ “Anthony Holmes Testimony,” Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://chicagotorture.org/project/survivor-2/>.

² “History of Chicago’s Reparations Movement,” Chicago Torture Justice Center, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://chicagotorturejustice.org/history>.

³ Ted Cox, “Reparations Sought for Burge Torture Victims as Disgraced Ex-Cop Released,” DNAInfo, October 2, 2014, <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20141002/downtown/reparations-sought-for-burge-torture-victims-as-disgraced-ex-cop-released/>; “Burge Trial: Enter Anthony ‘Satan’ Holmes,” WBEZ Chicago, May 26, 2010, <https://www.wbez.org/stories/burge-trial-enter-anthony-satan-holmes/8125a6e0-7ba2-4164-bc85-60e2474d23d9>.

their family members: free tuition at the City Colleges of Chicago, specialized counseling services, job placement in city programs, and prioritized access to support services, as well as the construction of a permanent memorial to the Burge victims that would be built by Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, an advocacy organization that largely spearheaded activism toward the reparations ordinance. Also in 2015, the Chicago Torture Justice Center (CTJC) made history as the first official trauma center for the victims of police.⁴ Today CTJC defines its mission as seeking to “address the traumas of police violence and institutionalized racism through access to healing and wellness services, trauma-informed resources, and community connection,”⁵ and it does so largely through the use of memory work.

“We don’t know how many people they threw into the river, and that’s why we say, ‘those who live in the river,’” a survivor of the 1999 massacre in El Tigre, Colombia, told the Historical Memory Group. “It is impossible [*incontable*] to know how many people live in that river. That makes us very sad. We found this bridge full of blood, and some things from the dead, like sandals and clothing, were thrown on the bridge.”⁶

About 150 paramilitaries from the 500-men-strong Southern Putumayo Bloc (Bloque Sur Putumayo) burned motorcycles, vehicles, and houses, and assassinated 28 people in El Tigre on the night of January 9, 1999.⁷ The Southern Putumayo Bloc was assigned to the Central Bolívar Bloc (Bloque Central Bolívar) of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, AUC), a far-right paramilitary group. The AUC represents one of a few major actors in the fifty-six-year Colombian conflict (the duration of the conflict is based on the National Historical Memory Center’s final report, which takes as its end the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed

⁴ Natalie Y. Moore, “Payback: Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and His Crew Tortured False Confessions out of Hundreds of Black Men. Decades Later, the Survivors Fought for Reparations,” The Marshall Project, October 30, 2018, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/10/30/payback>.

⁵ “Mission & Values,” Chicago Torture Justice Center, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://chicagotorturejustice.org/mission-values/>.

⁶ Gonzalo Sánchez G. et al., *La masacre de El Tigre, Putumayo: Un silencio que encontró su voz* [The massacre at El Tigre, Putumayo: A silence that found its voice] (Bogotá: Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2011), 55.

⁷ Sánchez et al., *La masacre*, 41.

Forces of Colombia [FARC]). The collective itself formed in 1997,⁸ when the heads of nine paramilitary groups from across the nation gathered in the Urabá subregion of Antioquia, a department (state) in the northwest of the country, to found what they would call a political-military movement of an anti-subversive nature acting on the legitimate right to self-defense. Brothers Fidel, Carlos, and Vicente Castaño founded the AUC for the ostensible purpose of combating left-wing guerrilla forces,⁹ but the United States regarded it as a terrorist organization for thirteen years.

Thus began the spread of paramilitarism throughout the country, from Urabá to the seven departments on the Atlantic coast. Paramilitary groups became the third actor, in addition to the state and the guerrilla groups, in the prolonged Colombian armed conflict and constituted a second chapter of the fight. “The war took on a new face: the occupation of the territory by blood and fire; the massive linkage of drug-traffickers with the paramilitary enterprise; and a strategy for capturing control at a local level and influencing politics at a national one,” reports the Historical Memory Group.¹⁰ Paramilitary groups like the AUC did not act alone. Rather, they were funded first by landowners and wealthy businessmen and later by drug traffickers, and they were, in multiple ways, linked to the government. The government, however, was already involved in this fight: the 1980s had been dominated by conflict between the government and left-wing guerrilla groups like the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

In fact, the longest-running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere began with a May 27, 1964, attack by Colombian soldiers on communist guerrillas in the northwestern town of Marquetalia. From there sprung both the FARC and the beginnings of the Colombian conflict: guerrillas organized, formed a communist insurgency, and ostensibly fought to represent the interests of the rural people.¹¹ Of course, both the FARC and the ELN were included in the US State Department’s list of designated foreign terrorist organizations as well. All three sides of the conflict—leftist guerrilla groups, right-wing paramilitaries,

⁸ “Paramilitares se habrían unido” [Paramilitaries would have joined], *El Tiempo*, April 20, 1997, <https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-513963>.

⁹ “AUC,” Colombia Reports, December 5, 2016, <https://colombiareports.com/auc/>.

¹⁰ Historical Memory Group, *BASTA YA! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity* (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016), 167.

¹¹ *An Overview of Conflict in Colombia* (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2009), <https://web.archive.org/web/20220810005709/https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Colombia-Conflict-Facts-2009-English.pdf>; James Bargent, “The FARC 1964–2002: From Ragged Rebellion to Military Machine,” *InSight Crime*, May 26, 2014, <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/the-farc-1964-2002-from-ragged-rebellion-to-military-machine/>.

and the Colombian military—have been responsible for death and destruction. It is because of this death and destruction, because of the 177,307 civilians killed in the conflict between 1958 and 2012,¹² that Law 975, the Justice and Peace Law, was signed on July 22, 2005.¹³ Among many other reparations, the Justice and Peace Law mandated the compilation of a “public account of the origin and evolution of the illegal armed groups,”¹⁴ which brought about the Historical Memory Group—and eventually the National Historical Memory Center (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, or CNMH).

This essay will examine the work of the CNMH in Colombia and the CTJC by first discussing how each organization uses memory to resist and rebuild communities in their respective contexts. Then, it will explore the similarities and differences between the work of the two organizations and how societal factors complicate their efforts. Last, the essay will offer ideas for how organizations centered

Memory work and the humanities are inextricably entangled: memory work fuses language, history, philosophy, and art to teach, to heal, and to break cycles of violence.

around memory work can dialogue across the globe, learn, and engage with one another. The humanities—those branches of study that revolve around human beings and their cultures—play a vital role in memory work as a whole. The two

fields are inextricably entangled, in fact: memory work fuses language, history, philosophy, and art to teach, to heal, and to break cycles of violence.

¹² “Estadísticas del conflicto armado en Colombia,” Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/informeGeneral/estadisticas.html>.

¹³ “Colombia: The Justice and Peace Law,” Center for Justice and Accountability, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160802130843/http://cja.org/where-we-work/colombia/related-resources/colombia-the-justice-and-peace-law>.

¹⁴ Colombia, Fiscalía General de la Nación, Relatoría Unidad de Justicia y Paz [Office of the Attorney General of the Nation, Rapporteurship of the Justice and Peace Unit], Ley 975 de 2005, Diario Oficial No. 45.980 el 25 de julio de 2005, 52.2 [Law 975 of 2005, Official Gazette 45,980, July 25, 2005, 52.2], <https://www.fiscalia.gov.co/colombia/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Ley-975-del-25-de-julio-de-2005-concordada-con-decretos-y-sentencias-de-constitucionalidad.pdf>.

A Liberatory Memory Tradition in Chicago

Inside the concrete and brick Chicago Torture Justice Center hangs a map of the South and West Sides of Chicago, covered in markings. These are the neighborhoods that workshop participants grew up in, the places they loved, the places they enjoyed. Rather than the typical depiction of shootings or violence on the South and West Sides, this map marks places of collective resilience (figure 1). The intention behind the project was that what you pay attention to—like sources of resilience and joy—grows.



Figure 1. Map of Chicago annotated by workshop participants, Historical Memory Workshop, Chicago Torture Justice Center, April 2019. Photo by Amelia Hruby.

In Chicago, liberatory memory grew—although those engaging in these practices might not have called it by that name at first. For decades before either the CTJC or its predecessor and sister organization, the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM), came into existence, torture survivors and their families, activists, and community members organized and campaigned for accountability. When the reparations ordinance finally came to fruition in 2015, the fact that part of its funding was dedicated to the construction of a permanent

memorial to the Burge victims¹⁵ signaled to Jarrett Drake, a PhD student in social anthropology at Harvard University, that US communities like Chicago had already been conducting “liberatory memory work” well before anyone in the field was using the term. Drake first came across the term in South Africa, where in 2016 he attended a second iteration of the Nelson Mandela International Dialogues. He read about the concept of liberatory memory in Verne Harris and Chandre Gould’s *Memory for Justice* provocation, which defines its purpose as “a preventing of the recurrence of injustice.”¹⁶ Drake then brought the concept to Chicago in a workshop held at the CTJC in August 2018.¹⁷ He explained the idea to those present as “using the past to build a better future and recognizing that we will not be able to collectively move forward for a just future unless we address the past injustices.”¹⁸

Cindy Eigler, CTJC’s co-executive director, witnessed liberatory memory work taking place in Chicago even before it was known by that name there. The liberatory memory workshop in August 2018 simply gave the community a name for what it had been doing—and shifted the collective understanding from “historical” to “liberatory” memory. Eigler explained: “It seems more accessible to folks here, [for] understanding the radical nature of it, that we’re not just talking about history for the sake of history; that there’s actually a liberatory piece.”¹⁹ Chicago—and cities throughout the US—are primed for liberatory memory work: it springs from the tradition of Black communities organizing for social and political change. When human rights advocate Elizabeth Deligio joined the original planning group for the CTJM, she found that the survivors and their families had already been engaging with many of the practices of

¹⁵ Chicago City Council, “Resolution SR2015-256: Establishing 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.

¹⁶ Chandre Gould and Verne Harris, *Memory for Justice* (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2014), 4, https://www.nelsonmandela.org/uploads/files/MEMORY_FOR_JUSTICE_2014v2.pdf.

¹⁷ This series of workshops was made possible by funding that Acosta López obtained from DePaul University; she designed them with the Wicklander Fellowship, then invited Drake with funding from the Vincentian Fund and the Steans Center.

¹⁸ Jarrett Drake (PhD candidate in social anthropology, Harvard University), phone interview with the author, Evanston, IL, May 2020. Subsequent citations to Drake that do not indicate a different source refer to this interview. See also 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).

¹⁹ Cindy Eigler (co-executive director, Chicago Torture Justice Center), phone interview with the author, Evanston, IL, May 2020. Subsequent citations to Eigler that do not indicate a different source refer to this interview.

historical memory. “They had . . . maintained the stories of their loved ones, despite a narrative that said that they were all criminals,” she said. “They had used that space of understanding what had happened to their family to do their own social and political analysis and to create their own vision. So they were really doing historical memory, it’s just not the name they had for it.”²⁰ But when Drake offered up the term of “liberatory memory,” it struck a deeper chord.

Storytelling acknowledges the power of narrative and becomes a channel through which this liberatory future can be imagined—it is a critical tool within memory work. And it was this process of telling and expressing, Eigler believes, that allowed for the eventual reparations ordinance. The voices of survivors and their families de-

Chicago—and cities throughout the US—are primed for liberatory memory work: it springs from the tradition of Black communities organizing for social and political change.

manded to be heard: “There’s something about the harm that most of the survivors underwent at the hands of the police trying to erase their humanity and their power and their agency that telling their story—it was a way of regaining some of that,” she explained. But at first, when Anthony Holmes and survivors like him told their stories to judges and courts, the institutions failed to hear them, and activists persisted, taking their accounts to the United Nations. The Chicago organization We Charge Genocide flew to Geneva, Switzerland, to ask the United Nations Committee against Torture to identify the Chicago Police Department’s actions as torture.²¹ The way Eigler sees it, memory is “very fluid, kind of like water. And water takes the shape of its container.” If Chicago would not listen to its own story, the community would take it somewhere else.

Eventually, all of this action led to Burge’s prosecution in 2010 and the reparations ordinance five years later. But for many of the survivors, the prosecution itself did not result in the feeling of connection or feeling of being whole or

²⁰ Elizabeth Deligio (human rights activist and member of the Chicago Torture Justice Center), phone interview with the author, Evanston, IL, May 2020. Subsequent citations to Deligio that do not indicate a different source refer to this interview. See also 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).

²¹ Noah Berlatsky, “At the United Nations, Chicago Activists Protest Police Brutality,” *The Atlantic*, November 17, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/11/we-charge-genocide-movement-chicago-un/382843/>.

healed, which they had hoped for. Rather, they began to connect individual memory to collective memory. Eigler said: “Some of the survivors actually were in the same cell . . . and didn’t know that they were both tortured by the same person for decades and decades, because it wasn’t something that they talked about with each other.” On one hand, when they finally did begin to talk and recognize their shared experience, these survivors realized that they were not alone. On the other, survivors of violence can begin to identify with that trauma, as is the case in Colombia too. “And what we have seen is that they’re opening it up to understanding that the collective can often feel like some threat to their individual identity,” Eigler stated. The CTJC has played a key role in working with these survivors to learn how to hold both individual pain and a larger, collective understanding of the systemic structures behind what has happened.

Yet a critical difference remains between telling one’s story and having it believed. The story that many survivors had rehearsed and memorized for court testimonies often graphically recounted pain and suffering. Much of the CTJC’s work, then, has been focused on returning agency to the survivors: “A lot of the work that we had to do, that we did with folks, is to think about, ‘What is the story that you actually want to tell?’ That’s your story,” Eigler said. The CTJC’s Survivor and Family Member Speakers Bureau allows survivors to tell their stories—in the manner they choose—within Chicago public schools. Having a space in which one can tell their story and be believed has proved incredibly healing. Building trust also allows for the reclaiming of stories. Eigler, for example, has cultivated a deep relationship with Gregory Banks, a torture survivor and a learning fellow with the center. A couple of years ago, she asked him why he always starts his story with the clarifying statement that he went to prison for a crime he didn’t commit. “And we were able to have a really good conversation where, you know; he was like, ‘I guess I’m saying that other people who are guilty maybe deserve what happened.’ I’m like, ‘Do you think that that’s true?’ And he said, ‘No!’” In this way, Banks’s style of storytelling has evolved, paving the way toward a liberatory future.

A Need for Historical Memory in Colombia

At dawn on the morning of November 22, 2000, more than fifty paramilitaries invaded the villages of Nueva Venecia and Bella Vista in the marshes of Santa Marta. The AUC assassinated thirty-seven people there and provoked the displacement or “disappearing” of hundreds of other inhabitants. This may sound like a common story in Colombia, but María del Rosario Acosta López,

a memory worker who has worked with both the CNMH and the CTJC, saw something different. These two small towns are *palafíticos*, or settlements in which most of the houses are built on stilts above the water. The vast majority of the displaced people in Colombia stay wherever they go, never to return home. But in this case, 98 percent of the population returned very quickly. They were attached to their way of life on the water, and when Acosta López worked along with the team from the University of Magdalena in the city of Santa Marta that reconstructed the case, they wanted to preserve the singularity of that story. (These decisions were, of course, always made in collaboration: by the team and, more importantly, by the local community.)²²

The Nueva Venecia and Bella Vista case was one of the first times that Acosta López had worked with historical memory, and it taught her that the concept meant more than just telling the story of an event that had happened. Rather, it was about the process through which the survivors began to understand what had happened to them. “Not because we helped them,” Acosta López clarified, “but because they realized it themselves in working through the events and among themselves, understanding that each one of their narratives is equally valid but different.”²³ Instead of the more radical “liberatory memory,” Colombia tends to use the term “historical memory,” due largely to the different structural causes behind its conflict and the degree to which the violence affected the entire country. The idea of recognizing each narrative as “valid but different” seeks to preserve sometimes opposing memories: different people may remember events in different ways or lights, but each memory retains its validity. At the same time, historical memory goes beyond the testimonies themselves, seeking out the structural causes and continuities that ideally can be used to reconstruct a historical picture of what actually occurred during an instance of conflict or massacre—and who is truly responsible. “When a community does historical work, they also realize, therefore, that as victims and survivors, they are not guilty of what happened to them,” Acosta López said.

The historical context of the conflict and its aftermath—and the official reason behind collecting narratives—largely impacts the focus on historical memory as well. The fight is a complex, deeply nuanced one, but no armed party is

²² See the documentary produced by the Research Group on Oralities, Audiovisual Narratives and Popular Culture in the Colombian Caribbean *Los hijos del pueblo del agua* [Sons and daughters of the water town], video, 27:47, December 16, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuuUQ3gQHN8>.

²³ María del Rosario Acosta López (professor of Hispanic studies, University of California, Riverside), telephone interview with the author, Evanston, IL, May 2020. Subsequent citations to Acosta López that do not indicate a different source refer to this interview.

innocent. María Emma Wills, the former advisor to the director of the National Historical Memory Center, found this in her work with gender-based violence and affected women: “What happened to the women under paramilitary control, under guerrilla control, and under state military sectors is different,” she explained. “And so you have to give an account of why it’s different.”²⁴ In the case of Colombia, which by law requires the state to preserve historical memory in archives, the seemingly subtle differences between how and why each party acted become important to record and maintain. The conflict itself was rife with political differences—as still is the country itself. Álvaro Uribe, the conservative president of Colombia between 2002 and 2010, made clear that honoring victims of state or paramilitary violence would not be his first priority. Thus, an ethics commission was formed by an independent, international coalition as a way to ensure that the stories of survivors of this strain of violence would not be lost. As a part of that commission, representing the School of the Americas Watch movement, human rights advocate Elizabeth Deligio “met with different communities who had been impacted, and we’d hear the collective story of the community, and then we’d hear from individual people who had been impacted, and then we would do a process with them, depending on the community, to talk about what they wanted, what they needed, and larger visions about what they saw as necessary for Colombia to be able to exit the civil conflict.” A common thread that emerged, she said, was the call for historical memory.

Survivors of the conflict wanted to ensure that their stories and the stories of their loved ones were neither lost nor erased by a dominant nation-state narrative that sought to minimize the documentation of paramilitary wrongdoing. The historical memory space also held the potential to conduct an analysis of underlying social and political problems—and address traditionally marginalized, often rural, Black, or Indigenous communities. For instance, Deligio explained, a given community might not have been “impacted because they were full of guerrilla fighters; their community was impacted because they’re at the waterhead of a river that’s being used for a mining company.” In the same way that the official narrative may obscure the interests of those most heavily affected, the official documentation may fail to record local and individual perspectives. Acosta López, in coordination with Wills, decided to go further

²⁴ María Emma Wills (visiting professor, Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies), phone interview with the author, Evanston, IL, May 2020. Subsequent citations to Wills that do not indicate a different source refer to this interview. See also 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).

than what the CNMH was doing from the centralized seat of Bogotá. “We wanted to rather let the regions tell their own story, from their own perspective, and following their own criteria,” Acosta López said. Thus they could work to ensure that the official reports included a diverse set of narratives from the field itself. That way, too, regional groups would carry on their work with memory regardless of whether the CNMH continued functioning as such—which has proven prescient under the current directorship of Rubén Darío Acevedo.

Working to make sure that all sides of the story were fully told was a first step, but it was through the historical memory work itself that people began to heal. By turning neighbors against one another and making them doubt who among them might be an informant, paramilitary groups would sow seeds of distrust among communities during the conflict. Historical memory workshops break down that distrust and reveal that all of the community members have been experiencing the same sense of pervasive doubt. By doing so “and by telling each other how each one was living under the same kind of pressures and under the same kind of mistrust,” Acosta López explains, “they start rebuilding links between them, bonds between them, that had been destroyed by the kind of violence that was exercised over them.” Instituting workshops like these can begin to reconstruct the communal bonds that violence had destroyed.

In order to mend those bonds, however, memory workers must pay close attention to the ways in which they dialogue with survivors. Sometimes survivors had already gone before a judge or court to recount their experience. Almost always that story could be a painful one to tell. “When they spoke about their experience, the major state of mind and heart was that of validating their voice and their experience. We didn’t interrupt them. We didn’t ask for information,” Wills told me. Instead, the memory workers made sure to listen to what the survivors were actually saying and to validate their voices. Yet historical complexities are always at play behind individual voices, and it can be nearly impossible to separate the two. Much of Wills’s work focuses specifically on women, gender, and war, and when she spoke to women affected by gender-based or sexual violence, she had to keep in mind that their day-to-day lives were embedded in a context of violence that went beyond the armed conflict. Sexual violence was committed by partners, neighbors, and family members long before the war began, and “you do not want to miss that violence and that democratic deficit because, to a certain extent, it shows how authoritarian personalities or identities . . . were already in place,” Wills said.

How Do the Two Case Studies Compare?

On the overcast evening of April 5, 2019, the attendees of the Training on Liberatory Memory Work workshop at the CTJC stood in a circle. Community members, students, and experts alike introduced themselves, then proceeded to throw a ball of yarn across the room. They kept hold of their end of the yarn, and little by little the group became tied into a web. This exercise, known as a “spiderweb,” acted as a metaphor for how diverse members of a given group weave together their own memories (figure 2). That night, both Chicagoans and Colombians participated in the spiderweb. The activity comes from the CNMH²⁵ and is included in the center’s guidebook of resources.

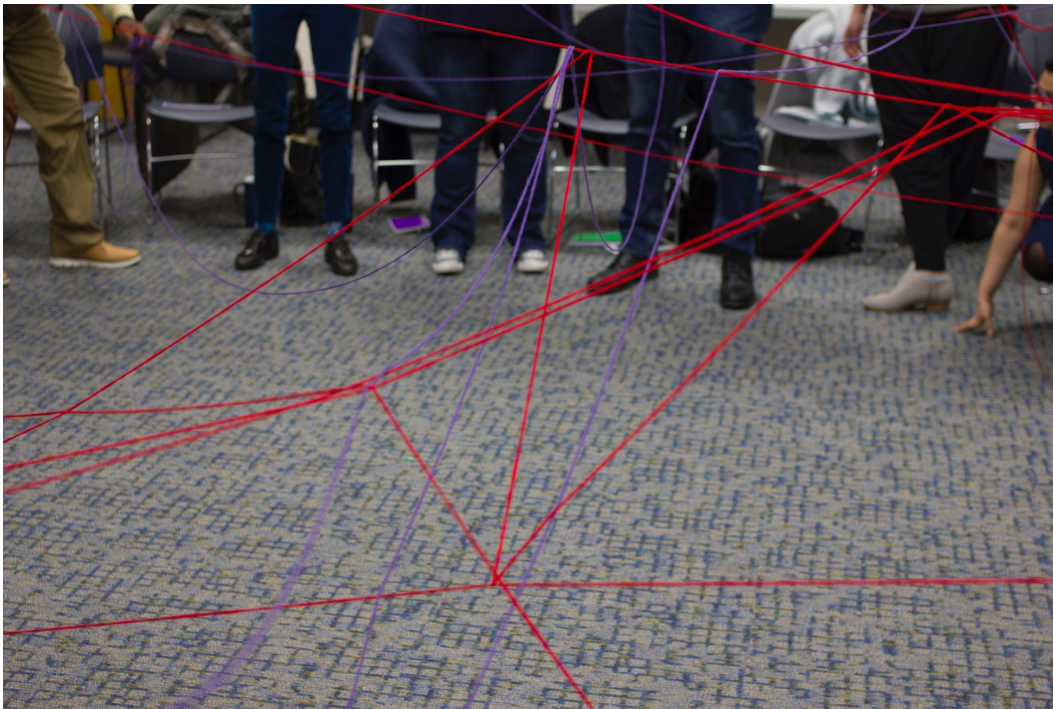


Figure 2. “Spiderweb,” Historical Memory Workshop, Chicago Torture Justice Center, April 2019. Photo by Amelia Hruby.

The tools that the CTJC and the CNMH use are at times quite similar, especially when they share resources. To a degree, the underlying structural causes for their existence share similarities too. Neither paramilitary violence

²⁵ Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Remembering and Narrating Conflict: Resources for Doing Historical Memory Work* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional de Colombia, 2013), 150–51, <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2009/remembering-narrating-conflict.pdf>.

nor police torture are accidental. “It’s not just events that were contingent given a historical situation,” Acosta López emphasized. “They are events that are related to structural causes.” These structural forms of violence manifest themselves in actions, both undertaken in part by state or quasi-state forces. In Chicago, however, the underlying causes for police torture stem from the racism ingrained in American society and the police as an institution. From the 1969 murder of Fred Hampton, the former chairman of the Black Panther Party in Illinois, by the Chicago police—“the first truly high-profile case of police brutality in American history”²⁶—to the 2014 shooting of unarmed Black teenager Laquan McDonald,²⁷ Chicago has a long legacy of systemic racism and police brutality. The armed conflict in Colombia, on the other hand, is rooted in extreme social inequality and injustice that, combined with the arrival of drug trafficking, have led to symbolic acts of cruelty and violence as a means to exercise control over territories. Throughout her work, Deligio has found that Colombia’s civil conflict allows for a more collective conversation about wrongdoing because it is a national (rather than local) rupture. Conversely, inside of the United States, she thinks that “if you get outside of impacted communities and a little bit of a parallel community of White allies, and you’re inside of more generalized White spaces, [people] don’t understand the need” for memory work.

Colombia’s civil conflict allows for a more collective conversation about wrongdoing because it is a national (rather than local) rupture. Conversely, inside of the United States . . . [few] understand the need for memory work.

The terminology that these two organizations use to describe their work is likewise related but different. As mentioned earlier, Chicago prefers the term “liberatory memory,” and Colombia tends to employ the term “historical memory.” This disparity may be due, in part, to the difference in meaning between *history* in English and *historia* in Spanish. Deligio has found that *historia* holds a distinct richness in Spanish (or at least, in Colombia) that it may not have in English. “One of the reasons

²⁶ David Alms, “‘The Murder of Fred Hampton’ Still Has Much to Teach,” *Forbes*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidalm/2020/06/03/the-murder-of-fred-hampton-still-has-much-to-teach-watch-it-here/#78ad895c12f4>.

²⁷ Nicole Austin-Hillery, “The Lessons We Have to Learn from the Laquan McDonald Verdict,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-lessons-we-have-to-learn-from-the-laquan-mcdonald-verdict/2018/10/06/a8966896-c990-11e8-b1ed-1d2d65b86d0c_story.html.

‘liberatory’ works in the United States is because, I think, our language for change and healing and repair requires a more on-the-nose name,” she said. The South American country as a whole has lived through more than half a century of civil war, which challenged both concepts of history and memory. “It’s not that historical memory takes away agency or disempowers; quite on the contrary. It gives back agency; it empowers people to become, themselves, memory workers,” Acosta López clarified. “And as we call them in Chicago, *liberatory* memory workers, because memory workers emancipate.” Although resistance traditions in the Windy City—and around the United States—lay the groundwork for an understanding of remembrance as an act of liberation, not as much cultural space may exist to push back against the dominant narrative, and the accepted, collective record at times discusses history in a more singular way. “Let’s say you wrote a piece for the *Chicago Tribune* on liberatory memory. What would you have to do to explain the term?” Deligio asked. “I don’t think you’d have as much work [to do] in Colombia.” Historical memory is a much older tradition in the South American nation, going back generations, although perhaps known by different names. In the face of such difficulty, liberatory memory work is pressing to make more space to tell multiple stories. Both CTJC and CNMH are working to reestablish room for multiple narratives to be true at the same time. And on both continents a rich understanding of memory and a complex approach to history continue to evolve.

In both spheres, memory heals; it is simply the tools and methods applied to that healing that differ. No matter where it takes place, memory work conveys to survivors that they bear no responsibility or guilt for what took place. Memory “allows you to understand that what happened was part of a larger logic, a historical logic that has deep structural causes, and that you were caught in that logic, rather than being an actor that would have had a way of escaping what happened to you,” Acosta López said. If deep (though distinct) structural causes govern violence in both cases, then memory work helps to emancipate and heal in both cases as well. Whether that looks like building a shared sense of community among survivors of police torture or traveling to talk to and document the stories of survivors of an armed conflict, it creates a space for those affected to be listened to and believed. When Anthony Holmes, Darrell Cannon, and other torture survivors first told their stories at court trials, they were not believed. Likewise, the conservative government of Colombia sought to discredit the stories of survivors of paramilitary violence. But as one of the survivors put it to Acosta López at a Chicago workshop, “This was a space, since the beginning, where I felt that whatever I would say was going to be believed.”

Moreover, both the CTJC and the CNMH allow survivors to share their experiences as they want to. These are spaces for healing, not courtrooms or official testimonies that demand information in a way that may trigger trauma.

In order to create space for healing, memory workers at both organizations simply bring the tools to the table; the voices of survivors come first. When Acosta López arrived in Chicago, survivors were already leading the work, largely because they and their families had been at the center of the activism that led to the reparations ordinance in the first place. When the Chicago center first opened, there was originally a survivor on staff. That did not go as well as expected, because, as Eigler put it, “we’re often . . . putting people in positions that they’re not actually prepared to succeed in, in a way that actually doesn’t support their leadership or their learning or their growth, or a commitment. And that’s not how we wanted to operate as a center.” Rather, the center created two learning fellow positions for survivors, who divide their time between supporting the center’s work and learning skills tailored to their interests. The model, looking forward, focuses on building the leadership skills of survivors so that they can eventually run the center. The CNMH has also doubled down on keeping survivors at the center of things by not allowing the perpetrators of violence in Colombia to become the protagonists. Memory workers there have insisted since the beginning that they wanted to go beyond merely collecting information and writing a report to allow individual communities to make their voices heard. Furthermore, facilitators of memory work in Colombia are also trying to reconstruct a historical context. While survivors’ stories are brought to the forefront, “we treat those as hypotheses,” Wills explained. “And we can contrast it then with other sources, that could come either from the voices of perpetrators, from journalists, from local intellectuals, from historians of the region, and we try to build also an explanatory context to make sense of what had happened.” In this way, memory workers begin to understand the conditions behind the violence. At the same time, though, workers do not interrupt survivors. They do not attempt to pry information out of them. “We were there listening to what they had to go through and validating their voices,” Wills said.

Potential for Global Dialogue

In comparing the work done by the CTJC and the CNMH—as well as the unique relationship between them—a potential for global dialogue materializes. Although the two centers have opened a dialogue between themselves, each one stands to learn much from the approach of the other. Deligio, who worked

for the founding movements behind both organizations, thinks that Colombia “could learn from the more nuanced narrative that the liberatory memory work in the US has generated around spaces of race or sexual identity,” especially given the role that the Catholic Church has played in the Colombian peace process. “I think the US could provide some ways to consider how you can begin to place a wide variety of identities into a narrative and still have it feel collective,” she said. The US (including Chicago), on the other hand, could learn from Colombia’s efforts to allow community collective memory to come in shades of gray—that is, liberatory work can be viewed as a positive step, rather than addressing a negative past.

Colombia, too, can gain a tangible implementation of memory work from Chicago: a school curriculum. During the 2017/18 school year, as mandated by the reparations package, Chicago public schools began teaching all eighth and tenth graders a curriculum entitled “Reparations Won: A Case Study in Police Torture, Racism, and the Movement for Justice in Chicago.” One of the “Enduring Understandings” listed in its “Part 6: Reparations and Reflections” teaches that “because difficult historic episodes often represent enduring issues or conflicts, studying and discussing them can help us understand contemporary controversies.”²⁸ This curriculum, in essence, represents memory work engaging in a school setting. Acosta López and Wills are working toward teaching about the Colombian conflict in Colombian high schools. They began with the pedagogical branch of the CNMH—largely coordinated by Wills—which develops tools aimed toward teaching and discussing the Colombian conflict with students. “This is one of the ways in which returning to Colombia from the experience in Chicago has helped me look at the larger picture and see what’s missing in Colombia,” Acosta López told me. “And what we could implement given the positive experience this has had in the Chicago case.”

Acosta López’s experience in Colombia had also prepared her for her work in Chicago. Her work with the CNMH (alongside Wills) guided her toward an understanding of what historical memory work truly meant. “It helped me to understand that historical memory is not about telling a story but about the process and helping communities repair themselves, giving them tools that help them understand the significance of their own story,” she said. At the same time, CNMH projects imparted on her the significance of how multiple stories can tie into the same narrative. Her time there also trained her in the resources that she would later apply in Chicago. “The kind of tools that the National Historical

²⁸ *Reparations Won: A Case Study in Police Torture, Racism, and the Movement for Justice in Chicago*, (Chicago Public Schools, 2017), 2, <https://www.chicagotorturejustice.org/curriculum>.

Memory Center in Colombia had developed in order to do community historical memory work were very useful for building memory also in the context of Chicago with the survivors,” Acosta López said. She worked with the CTJC and CTJM for several years, between 2015 and 2019, along with Eigler, Deligio, and many others. Together, they had also organized two prior workshops: one with Pilar Riaño, one of the authors behind the CNMH’s toolbox for memory workshops in Colombia (figure 3), and one with Drake, which brought the term “liberatory memory” into use. Acosta López applied some of the tools she learned in Colombia to the trainings and memory workshops in Chicago.

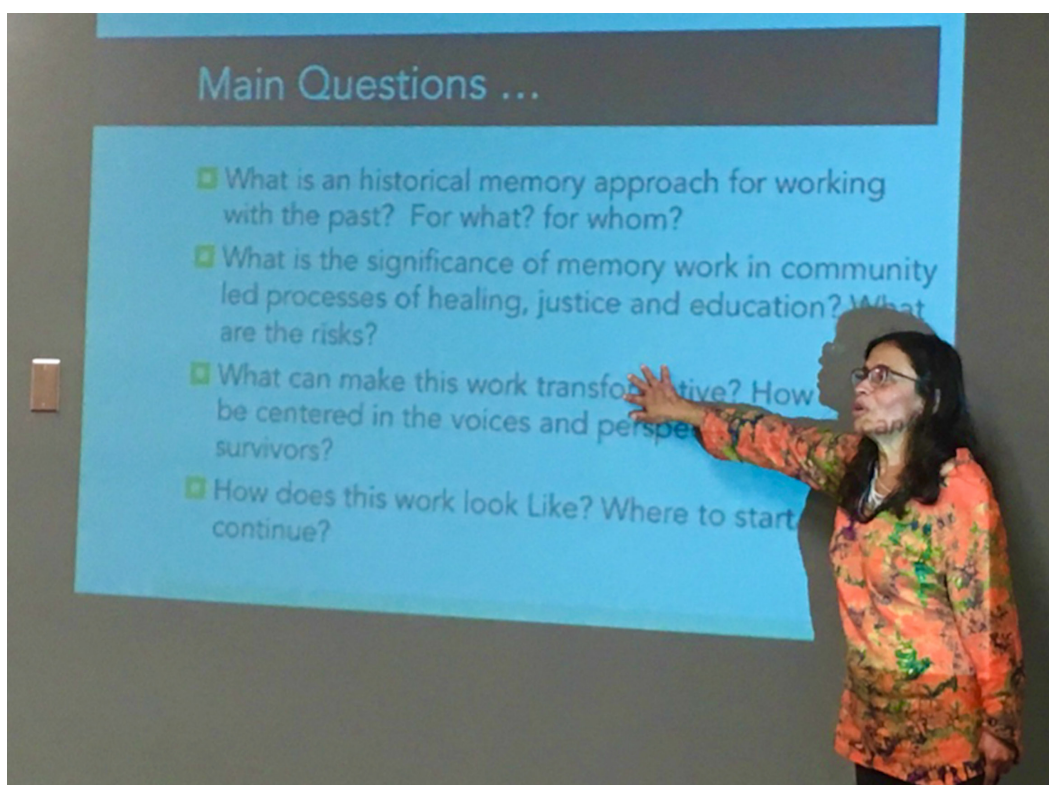


Figure 3. Pilar Riaño at a historical memory workshop, Chicago Torture Justice Center (sponsored by DePaul University), January 2018. Photo by María del Rosario Acosta López.

One of these workshops was organized in April 2019. Bringing together Drake, Acosta López, and Wills, the two-day workshop aimed to teach attendees how to engage memory as a tool to honor the past and create change for the future (figure 4). As it gathered US (Drake had formerly worked with A People’s Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland) and Colombian perspectives to work toward a common goal in Chicago, criticism arose among participants over the lack of emphasis the workshop placed on the Afro-Colombian

movement and population. (For context, according to the Historical Memory Group, the conflict's actors, including guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the state, "have intentionally sought to undermine and attack the existence of [Afro-Colombian and Indigenous] communities, and the harms have been aggravated by the systematic social exclusion, economic exploitation, and discrimination that they have traditionally suffered from"²⁹). Afterward, Drake reflected: "I think that there was some translation [misunderstandings] around the ways that anti-Black racism has festered in Colombia and some notions about who counts as a Colombian, which [is] very similar to the US [where] it's who counts as an American. . . . There were moments where that had to be unpacked." This tension may have been uncomfortable, but it made room for growth. Wills recognized that although the war in Colombia has a racist component, fundamentally it was driven by another logic, whereas the major drive behind the violence in Chicago lies in structural racism. "What I learned from Chicago is that you . . .

Training on Liberatory Memory Work

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Figure 4. Poster for Liberatory Memory Work Training by María Emma Wills and Jarrett Drake, Chicago, April 2019. Design by Amelia Hruby.

²⁹ Historical Memory Group, *BASTA YA!*, 284.

cannot take a participatory process from one place to the other without having the context, a very profound knowledge of the context,” she said. The strain in communication arose from building and understanding the context for individual stories. Multiple lessons emerged from the workshop: the importance of where emphasis is placed in telling a story, as well as the deep need to research and learn about historical context in specific places before delving into memory work. Overall though, Drake found that the event was “productive and useful and healing, and it gave everybody who participated a chance to see how their stories are directly connected.” Growth is rarely easy or comfortable, but the meeting between these two groups from two different countries paved the way for a more profound understanding of their pasts—and how to work toward an emancipatory future.

Tension also surfaced on a broader, more global scale: within the two series of the Nelson Mandela International Dialogues held in 2013–14 and 2016. The first series “brought together 26 participants from ten countries to engage in a three-part dialogue series on memory work in contexts where oppression, violent conflict or systemic human rights abuses have taken place.”³⁰ The second series consisted of two six-day dialogues with memory workers from nine countries, building on the first series to discuss intergenerational memory work and creating spaces safe enough for former enemies to enter and dialogue.³¹ Although the concept of a global conversation about how to best conduct memory work seemed very appealing at first glance, Verne Harris, the head of leadership and knowledge development at the Nelson Mandela Foundation and an organizer of the dialogues, did not come away with an optimistic outlook. “To be honest with you, we couldn’t find common ground,” he conceded. “There was no sense of a set of principles or insights, shared views. The views were so diverse, and people were pulling in such diametrically opposite directions.”³² Perhaps at an international, nineteen-country scale, this sense of divergence may hold true. But for Drake, the Mandela Dialogues presented a perfect example of a way in which transnational conversation can take place.

Drake was first exposed to the concept of “liberatory memory” at the second series. Afterward, he coauthored an article detailing how a liberation theology

³⁰ Gould and Harris, *Memory for Justice*, 1.

³¹ Doria D. Johnson, Jarrett M. Drake, and Michelle Caswell, “From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and Back Again: Towards a Liberation Theology for Memory Work,” “Reflections from the 2016 Mandela Dialogues,” Nelson Mandela Foundation, February 27, 2017, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues>.

³² Verne Harris (archive and dialogue director, Nelson Mandela Foundation), phone interview with the author, Evanston, IL, May 2020.

for memory work could begin to take shape in the US, where he wrote that the lesson he and his coauthors took away from the Mandela Dialogues “was to continually strive towards strategically leveraging our commonalities, while at the same time resisting being seduced by easy metanarratives of the success of post-conflict dialogue and healing.”³³ In this way, putting memory work into an international context can simultaneously acknowledge shared global histories and emphasize context and specificity. For Wills—who Drake also met at the Dialogues—the event opened up her curiosity toward contexts she had not been particularly focused on. The Dialogues did not resolve differences, she said: “It’s the starting of a journey. And just meeting people who come from those countries and who show you just a window. I’m not saying the total picture, but just a window of that country, through personal stories, but also through their take on their history, opens up your mind. It shows you how singular each conflict is.” By engaging in a global dialogue, memory workers begin to recognize the significance of context and understand how much more remains to be learned. Resonances in the conversation exist between South Africa and Colombia, and Colombia and Chicago. An international conversation allows specific communities to learn from each other and to borrow and implement one another’s techniques. “Liberatory memory” as a term, after all, began in South Africa.

Twin Expressions of Transitional Justice?

In Chicago and Colombia, a clear need existed for some form of memory work. In Chicago some of that work was already underway. As early as 2011, artists, activists, and scholars had been meeting to discuss a potential memorial project; liberatory memory work was taking place as an organic community conversation.³⁴ When former Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel expressed a desire to “move on,” Chicago activists turned to the United Nations and Amnesty International, making manifest Eigler’s sentiment that memory is “like water, and water takes the shape of its container.” Memory is fluid, and it will work to emancipate however it can. The CTJC channeled that memory into growth, working alongside—often led by—survivors to learn how to rectify individual trauma with a collective consciousness of police violence. In doing so the CTJC has ensured that survivors maintain their agency, and it constantly strives to elevate these voices to leadership. The CNMH in Colombia, on the other hand,

³³ Johnson, Drake, and Caswell, “From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo.”

³⁴ “History of the Campaign,” Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://chicagotorture.org/reparations/organizational-history/>.

tends to utilize historical techniques because of nationwide socioeconomic contexts and a state mandate to preserve historical memory in archives. When researchers began to sit down and speak with survivors of the armed conflict, a pressing demand for historical memory emerged there too. Affected communities wanted to tell their own, unique stories that did not always fall in line with the dominant state narrative. “Different but valid” memories surfaced and shed light on the motivations and damage done by each actor. The heterogeneity of answers also allowed for some centering of traditionally marginalized, often rural, Black, or Indigenous communities. In the course of conducting memory work, the CNMH and others held space for survivors to speak and share what they were comfortable with, without interruptions. This centered the voices of survivors and created trust—both between workers and survivors and among community members. Historical memory workshops further dissolved misgivings and led community members to the understanding that they shared a common experience.

Beyond the concrete institutions of the CTJC and Colombia’s CNMH, the concepts of historical memory and liberatory memory interact and influence one another. In an interview, Acosta López clarifies that historical memory breaks down into its two components: history and memory.³⁵ The historical component shows how systemic structures operate behind violence, while the memory component gives survivors the main voice and asks them to tell their story in the way they see fit. I would argue that at least in the context of these two cases, historical memory came first. It acted as a cornerstone upon which memory work in Colombia rests and memory work in Chicago began. Liberatory memory is a transformation of historical memory that best suits the Chicago community. At its core, it is about building a just future, which dovetails with the Black grassroots organizing tradition in the United States. Thus, historical and liberatory memory are twin expressions of transitional justice: both help their distinct contexts to emerge from periods of violence and address systemic human rights violations. The former emphasizes understanding the roots of the conflict. The latter highlights moving toward a fairer future.

The idea that a global dialogue may not be productive or possible was perhaps the most surprising takeaway from my research. When I first learned of the existence of the Mandela Dialogues, I thought that the question of dialogue had been answered. Here was an example of nineteen countries working together toward a richer understanding of memory work. What I failed to take into consider-

³⁵ IBPE DePaul, “Maria Acosta Interview,” video, 9:33, June 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxBRKd2fank&feature=youtu.be>.

ation, though, was the same factor that would cause tension at the Chicago workshop: a lack of context. Profound knowledge of each place is necessary before methods from one place can be applied to another. We see this in the case of the techniques and resources that Acosta López, Wills, and Deligio brought from Colombia to Chicago—those that succeeded were rooted in an understanding of Chicago’s police torture and pervasive racism. By the same token, the Mandela Dialogues may have attempted to accomplish too much without first asking participants to fully educate themselves on the specific contexts of each country involved. If a memory worker conducts thorough background research, however, and immerses themselves in the underlying racial, economic, political, and social frameworks of a new place, global dialogue becomes quite promising. Chicago has used Colombia’s resource toolbox, Colombia has learned pedagogical skills from Chicago, and the two centers now exchange ideas and opinions regularly. We may remember in different ways, but the end goal remains the same: the pursuit of peace and justice for all.

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