

The World Humanities Report

# Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit of Invisibilizing Others

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Steve Stern in conversation with  
María del Rosario Acosta López



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# Memory Breaks the Everyday Habit of Invisibilizing Others

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**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Steve, before we begin, I would like to thank you for taking the time to talk to me. It’s a real privilege for me, because you have such a deep acquaintance with the Colombian experience and you have also studied similar experiences in other locations. Part of your work has focused precisely on showing the importance of memory work on many levels: its significance for the victims when we are talking about *reparation*; the level that we could describe as *historico-political*, which has to do with building a democracy, the institutionalization of memory, and efforts to pluralize and bring together a variety of narratives; and the task of *clarification*, which as you have noted also requires a reconstruction of the “meaning of painful violent events as *present lived experiences*.”<sup>1</sup> I think that this is a very important way of phrasing it, especially when we think of the work on historical memory that is being done in Colombia.

In the report *La memoria nos abre camino* (Memory opens a path for us), where you were asked to retell the story of both the Historical Memory Group and the National Historical Memory Center, in order to provide a final assessments of their achievements, you say that the idea of historical memory work in the context of the Colombian conflict (and post-conflict for some) was ultimately, and continues to be, to forge a country where “there is room for all of us.” So I would like us to discuss how, in general terms, memory can be a force that promotes the possibility of peace and a practice of reparative democracy, that contributes, as you say, to creating a “narrative capable of replacing revenge,”<sup>2</sup> that interrupts the cycle of violence that is characteristic of Colombia’s history—and that of other countries as well. First, and keeping in mind this broad

\* All interviews included in this project took place in June–July 2021. To keep their original nature and tone, they were not significantly updated and therefore might contain information, references, or comments that have become outdated by the time of publication.

<sup>1</sup> Steve Stern (rapporteur), *La memoria nos abre camino: Balance metodológico del CNHM para el esclarecimiento histórico* [Memory opens a path for us: National Historical Memory Center, methodological balance] (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018), 16 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>2</sup> Stern, *La memoria*, 16.

conceptual framework, I would like us to talk about the concrete experience of the work done in Colombia by the National Historical Memory Group, and later by the Historical Memory Center. I would like to begin by asking you, in general terms, how you relate your strong belief in the importance of memory construction in post-conflict contexts to what happened in Colombia, in a context that presented so many difficulties—a context that is both transitional and non-transitional at once—and which you know so well?

**Steve Stern:** Right. I am not a wise person, and I don't have a great formula, but I could say that in fragmented societies and, more so, in today's world, now that social media have allowed us to become even more fragmented—because we can limit ourselves to talking only with those people who see the world exactly as we do, and to infinitely echo each other—memory, when it works well, or when it is a point of entry for new audiences, is a way of breaking the temptation, or the everyday habit, of invisibilizing everyone we dislike. Now in a context of war, of violence and atrocities, this is an even greater worry, because in addition to the fragmentation that invisibilizes so many people and their experiences, there is also a gap between different ways of narrating what has happened. So I believe that the work of memory, which has to do not only with the events that took place but also with their meaning and legacies, is something like a fundamental point of departure toward greater inclusivity. That would be a general point. I think that the hard part is getting that memory to reach those who do not want to hear.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** As I see it, you are calling attention here to a fundamental feature of this kind of work, which has to do with creating a culture and a sensibility that are specifically tied to memory. But before we get

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there, I would like to discuss your work assembling an extremely valuable historical reconstruction of the work done by the National Historical Memory Center.

In the report you evaluate everything that happened during each of the key steps in the process, including the creation of the Historical Memory Group and the National Historical Memory Center, how these institutions resolved to deal with their daunting task, and how they chose to interpret their mandate. I would like you to tell

us briefly—of course, in the report you do it in great detail—how you view that history today, that is, what you make of it in retrospect, considering the Colombian experience and its current developments, but also in light of your knowledgeable understanding of how the experience of memory construction has played out elsewhere in Latin America.

**Steve Stern:** Before I say anything else I would like to acknowledge, and to have it go on the record, that my sense, my understanding of the Colombian experience is the result of a collaboration with many people, the people at the National Historical Memory Center, and above all María Emma Wills. They all played critical roles. In that sense, what I have been able to perceive or to contribute is the result of social relations and a lot of generosity from many people. It's important for me to say that beforehand.

As you know from what I have written in the report and elsewhere, I believe that in this particular case there were synergies between actors from civil society and from the state, and that these synergies played a crucial role—and here my concept of synergy is not one of harmony; it leaves room for tensions, conflicts, diverging visions as to the medium term, and so forth; but there are moments in which all these different sides enter into a kind of dance, maybe even without wanting to do so, but they do. In that sense, I think that the group and the center always had—and they often exercised—the capacity to become a different kind of authority, in a context in which there is so much mistrust of the state, as there is in Colombia, and for good reason. The history of the center allows us to show, precisely, that the state is not just a homogeneous thing, that it has many actors, and that 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. Colombia is a very special case because, 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. But I think that what happened in Colombia—also what failed to happen and the precarious conditions under which the center had to proceed—has to do with that specific context: that conflictive synergy makes it possible to go forward, but it is always a very fragile equilibrium that is also vulnerable to betrayals, deadlocks, and great difficulties. I think maybe that's where we find the knot of the matter.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** It's interesting that you would put it like that, and the point is very clear in your report, because when I ask myself how to tell the story of what happened at the National Historical Memory Center, my intuition is that, to some extent, it has been a truly unprecedented experience in a country like Colombia, where there is such a deep mistrust of institutions and of anything that might have something to do with the state, a mistrust embodied in each of us. I often say that we Colombians feel that we live not *with the help* of our institutions but rather *in spite* of them. The center managed to be an institution within the state that was nonetheless able to generate legitimacy and trust, even among those who were most suspicious of the state. Of course, there are criticisms here, including some raised by individuals who worked with the center at some point in time, but it really took a very important step in that direction. The center fought very hard to uphold its autonomy, and I think that it managed to do so, in part, thanks to its very unique alliance with academia. But in addition to that, it really was able to institutionalize, not an official discourse about what happened, but the discourse that tells us that we will not know what happened unless we engage responsibly in the task of memory construction and in a plural, deep, and broad practice of listening.

In connection to this, I would also like to ask you: from a comparative perspective, how would you reconstruct the story of the center's interactions with the difficult context in which it had to proceed? You have noted that there was something special about the experience of the group and the center in Colombia, but were there also unique challenges that were specific to the task of memory work in the Colombian case? You reconstruct those challenges quite clearly in the report, the difficulties, but I would like us to talk a little about them here as well.

**Steve Stern:** Yes, in any case there were quite a few other challenges in addition to those mentioned in the report. It's a little like the myth of Sisyphus, I think, where you push the rock uphill, and then it comes back downhill. Something like that happened in Colombia, and at many levels. At the macro level we are now seeing the more cosmic version of the problem during the final stages of the project and after the election of Iván Duque as president in 2018. At the smaller level, there were all manner of issues with the system of operators and the way in which the institution was managed, the constant uncertainty that came with trying to secure resources for the project that theoretically should have come from the state, but then no one knew, until the last moment, when and how they were coming or whether they would actually arrive. So I think that, at the



micro level, there was this lack of transparency on the part of those government institutions that were responsible for keeping the center running; and at the more macro level, there is the fact that we have not had a clear post-transition context to push the process forward with a renewed energy; I think that those are the fundamental challenges at the micro and macro levels.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Your way of phrasing it is very useful, I think, because we get a very clear sense of what the people who were trying to carry out the work had to deal with, from small bureaucratic nuisances (like not knowing if people would get paid the next day) to the fact that the state is not fully committed to supporting the project, although there are people within the state who do stand by the idea that the work is important. I think that this is a very clear description of what it means to do this kind of work in a country like Colombia and in a context that, as you say, is not yet culturally or institutionally 100 percent behind the idea of a post-conflict.

**Steve Stern:** From a certain point of view—to add a footnote to what you have just said—Colombia had two particularities: 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 never was a transitional government; it didn't exist. So the transitional project, at least on the side of the state, was truncated.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Right, and retrospectively it is very tough to look back at the process knowing that. The temporalities are there, the historical temporalities, but also the emotional temporalities of those who were involved in that process feeling that they were going somewhere and then realizing that the project was cut short. But in that sense, part of what I had in mind when I thought about telling the story from this perspective was also to show that, although officially there was indeed a break, there are also many things that continue to happen as a result of what was previously done and accomplished. A lot of work was put into tilling a fertile soil, and once it begins to yield fruit it's not that easy to stop it, even if you have to engage in confrontations, and very hard ones at that.

**Steve Stern:** Exactly. And that is what is interesting here, or one of the crucial and interesting things about the Colombian case. As I see it, this is something that happened on two levels. On one level, although the process was truncated in the sense that there is no transitional government that identifies with the project of a real transition, some institutional agencies were created and they do try, somehow, to work on the basis of what was agreed upon and institutionalized in spite of everything: the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), the Truth Commission, et cetera. So there are a few state agencies that are indeed agencies but that lack the support that you would expect—and that is required—for them to accomplish their task as they should. And on the other hand, there is now an effervescence in Colombia’s civil society, which is not to say that it is all thanks to the center’s work. We should acknowledge, above all, the work that has 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 that the work that the center did together with the victims, and without saying that it is all due to the center, is part of this mobilizing energy. I think that in a way it has helped to nourish a culture that is saying repeatedly, in all caps, louder and louder each time: “ENOUGH.” And I think that here there is a legacy that is still alive.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** I agree. And I also agree with you that it is not all due to the center’s work, but that this work was undoubtedly significant in calling attention to the importance of memory construction, the central

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role of the victims in the process, and creating a culture that is willing to listen to the testimonies. This is something that I don’t think really existed in Colombia before, and it was achieved, among other

things, through the work of the National Historical Memory Center.

**Steve Stern:** Exactly, and this is why I thought that it would be important not to just write a bureaucratic document with an assessment but to find a way



of showing that this is a valid interpretative framework and to say something about this experience of living with “the dynamics of loneliness, dignity, and solidarity,” as I put it in the report. It’s a little like recognizing that there was something very lively and creative going on. When there are atrocities, extreme victimization, and the loneliness imposed by violence, people also begin to come up with strategies for reclaiming dignity, strategies for insisting and resisting, and they develop a capacity to listen, to begin to build solidarities; memory is very important in articulating all of these paths. In that sense, the center does leave an extremely valuable legacy.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes, of course. This resonates a lot with something that I have tried to emphasize in my own work about the experience of historical memory: I talk about “grammars of listening” to denote something that I think plays a critical role in the work of memory, in general, but which I began to reflect on when I was working with communities that survived paramilitary violence in Colombia. The point I try to make is that the task of memory does not simply require a willingness to listen but also an acknowledgment—ethical but also epistemological, if you will—that listening is only possible if we challenge the criteria that typically predetermine what becomes audible and what does not.<sup>3</sup> And I do think that the center was able to produce these “grammars of listening,” that is, to allow discourses that would have been discarded at any other moment in Colombian history, and in established reconstructions of that history, to become legitimate, to become audible, and to find a space of their own where they can be acknowledged and even institutionally validated. In your work you also discuss the importance of acknowledgment for clarification and of clarification for acknowledgment. I think that, in this sense, the center was not only able to “make memory,” but also to expand the criteria that define *what deserves* to be heard. And I think that this is one of its most important achievements.

**Steve Stern:** Yes, exactly.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** At this point, Steve, I would like to discuss in more detail something that you have worked on and that I find extreme-

<sup>3</sup> See María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de la escucha: aproximaciones filosóficas a la construcción de memoria histórica” [Grammars of listening: Philosophical approaches to historical memory], *Ideas y Valores* 68, no. 5 (2019): 59–79. See also 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 (2021): 139–56.

ly interesting. I am thinking, for example, of the wonderful text that you wrote as a postface to Cynthia Milton's book, "The Artist's Truth: The Post-Auschwitz Predicament after Latin America's Age of Dirty Wars."<sup>4</sup> This idea of a "post-Auschwitz predicament" describes quite accurately what it is like to think through the dilemmas of memory construction in Latin America, which is what you argue in that text, very compellingly in my opinion.

You argue in that text that it is necessary to strike a very difficult balance between, on the one hand, analytical work—which of course provides a rigorous account, but that can also become too insensitive at some point, too cold, too distant—and, on the other, what you call the artist's truth, which is a truth that seeks to encourage a redistribution of our sensibility and to promote a sensibility and a culture of memory. You also claim that in these contexts our concern should be to produce a *new common sense*. Of course, art fulfills a crucial role here, but I think that your point is not limited to art; the idea is rather that every effort at memory construction should be concerned with reaching this balance between rigorous analysis and the production of a common sense and of a sensibility and a culture that favor memory. Bearing that in mind, what do you make of the work that has been done and continues to be done in Colombia in these terms? Would you say that the center was able to reach a balance between these two perspectives?

**Steve Stern:** Yes, this is an interesting point. The testimonials that you find in documentaries, in music, in artworks broadly understood, can have interesting and moving effects, but not always. I don't know how to evaluate the audiences that connect with these experiences. This is also a classic problem with art, no? I think that this is what is tragic about the way in which the process was truncated by Colombia's government and institutions. Because, for instance, with the project for a memory museum that was already well underway, the center was precisely trying to create spaces, whether digital, physical, or both, that would invite more and more people to engage with a world of facts, of sensibilities, and also of art, that might allow us to see what was at stake and the distance that we still have to traverse before we get there. And I think that the center did manage to open that space, to a degree, although it was unable to consolidate it. This part of the task was outlined but remains unfinished; it was delayed in a sense, with one exception, perhaps, in the case of photography. The photographs that accompany the center's reports, especially *¡BASTA YA!*,<sup>5</sup> have

<sup>4</sup> In *Art from a Fractured Past: Memory and Truth-Telling in Post-Shining Path Peru*, ed. Cynthia Milton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 255–76.

<sup>5</sup> Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* [ENOUGH! Colombia: Memories of war and dignity] (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013).

been very moving, and they have had such an impact, and I think that they did reach many, many people.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Of course, and a clear example of that is the exhibition of photographs by Jesús Abad Colorado, *El testigo*, which was a great success.<sup>6</sup> As you say, we needed to engage with what happened in Colombia from a point of view that those photographs are really able to embody, and this is something that the reports alone cannot produce in terms of sensibility.

**Steve Stern:** Right.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** And I think that the Truth Commission is also now addressing this need. Paradoxically, in my conversation with María Victoria Uribe she said that she thinks that members of the Truth Commission now understand their task as one of rehumanization, rather than one of clarification in the strict sense—this, of course, because the center devoted a lot of work to clarification. I think that this fits very well with what you have said: that the project remains open and that we still need to carry out a process that is more in line with this idea of what you call “the artist’s truth,” which are truths that cannot be communicated in other ways and that do require an aesthetic pedagogy that is possible through art. And, well, I think that the commission has taken that side of the issue very seriously. As you also mentioned, there are some legacies, some institutions that, regardless of who is in office and in spite of all efforts to undermine them, are already there at work.

**Steve Stern:** Right.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Since the report deals with the importance of work in the social sciences, the humanities, and art (which we were just discussing), for the work of memory, I would like to close by asking you to say something about the role that the humanities play in the kind of interdisciplinary work that you are engaged in. I would say that the Colombian case clearly and paradigmatically shows that they do play a crucial role, but why is that? What is the task that the humanities can accomplish and that could not be achieved through other perspectives or through a strictly legal approach?

<sup>6</sup> The exhibition, curated by María Belén Sáez de Ibarra for the National University of Colombia, was initially put on display at the Claustro de San Agustín’s museum (see <http://patrimoniocultural.bogota.unal.edu.co/internas-claustro/2018/el-testigo.html>). In response to its success, the exhibition had an extended run in Bogotá and later traveled to the La Tertulia Museum in Cali.

**Steve Stern:** I think I have a double answer to that. Maybe the thing—it seems obvious to say it, but it is not so obvious to live it and do it—is that human beings think through narratives; that is, we need something that is recorded in our

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Human beings think through narratives; that is, we need something that is recorded in our minds and allows us to take a perspective; we need a story, and I think that the humanities . . . help us to understand how important that is, and that if we cannot record an experience as a story that can be told, then, in a way, that experience disappears.

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minds and allows us to take a perspective; we need a story, and I think that the humanities—whether history, philosophy, or literature—help us to understand how important that is, and 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. So the humanities remind us

and push us to ask ourselves: What are we doing this for? If we want to make an impact, we need to consider how we can do that.

I think that the humanities are fundamental from that point of view, and also in a sense that is perhaps more nuanced, more subtle: someone who has a complete education, which includes the humanities, will develop an understanding of the various possible ways of telling a story, and they will know that it is important to communicate stories in different ways so that more and more people will feel drawn to apprehend what they are about. This is something that I experienced frequently while I was working as an expert witness in the Víctor Jara trial, to give an example.<sup>7</sup> As someone who was trained in the humanities but also in the social sciences, I asked myself: What are the ways to persuade? Because there was a jury. Not all members of the jury have the same baggage or come from the same background. How do you talk to all of them and to each of them individually? So this led me to reflect, and I think that someone who comes from the humanities has better skills for this kind of reflection. To some people the numbers tell a story, and it is important to have a statistical analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Víctor Jara (1932–1973) was a Chilean folk singer and political activist. The trial was held in Orlando, Florida, and the aim was to investigate and rule on the torture and extrajudicial killing of Jara by officers of the Chilean army during the early days of the military dictatorship, under the provisions of the US Torture Victims Protection Act. The trial was requested by Jara's family, who won the case on June 27, 2016. The jury found Pedro Pablo Barrientos Núñez, a former officer in the Chilean army, guilty on all charges.

But if we are trying to understand what kind of stories can take a hold on the human brain, the key lies in knowing how to communicate, how to create an understanding, how to appeal to the sensibilities of each of the listeners. For some it will be an image, maybe a photograph or an artwork; for others it will be the drama, say, a conflict playing out in the courtroom. I had to take this into account, not with the intention of manipulating them but of understanding what is the best way to give each person access to a story that is not necessarily easy to hear. And in that sense, you have to think like an actor in a drama, not in a fictional drama but rather in the drama that unfolds within each story, and the story that lies behind every way of telling and dramatizing (or staging, even on a legal stage). So I think that, yes, the fact that I was trained in the humanities allowed me to be sensitive not only to the importance of telling a story but also to the four, five, or six possible ways of doing that, because some brains will connect more easily with a statistical story and others will feel a stronger connection to other things.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** That is very beautiful, thank you. Before we finish, to really wrap it up now, there is a question that I have been asking everyone who I interviewed: Are there any bedside authors who have kept you company during this work, and have they opened up different perspectives for you on the problem and the question of memory?

**Steve Stern:** Well, in addition to those individuals at the center whom I mentioned at the start, Primo Levi has always been important for me. How can I explain it? On the one hand, I come from a family of Holocaust survivors, so, in a way, my mother is by my side through all these things, because we shared a lot when I was little. But beyond that, when I began to study Chile, before I structured the project that I would be working on there, I took a break to read a lot of literature on the Holocaust, as a way of delving in and beginning to think about Chile's very singular reality through somewhere else and through questions that I would be bringing with me. And the connection with Primo Levi comes from that. Because I do think that his experience creates a context—or a referent—for thinking without reducing one experience to the other, without denying that each experience has its own unique aspects, its idiosyncrasies, et cetera. This has been with me throughout all of my work on these issues. And, well, my other companions are the people that I have come to know along the way. It has been a great privilege to get to know people who have lived through extremely tough things, so tough that they seem unreal, but they are very real.

And I have learned a lot from them. For the most part they have been women, but not only women. And they have taught me many things. Yes, I think that they keep me company in the sense that I always feel that I have a responsibility to their experience. They really are with me—constantly.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Thank you so much, Steve. I love your perspective. I find it extremely human and profound.

**Steve Stern:** Well, thanks for developing this project, I would love to read the results.

*Translated from the Spanish by Tupac Cruz*



**Steve J. Stern** is the Alberto Flores Galindo and Hilldale Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Some of his books include an award-winning trilogy on Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship in Chile (collectively known as *The Memory Box of Pinochet’s Chile* [2004, 2006, and 2010]), *The Human Rights Paradox: Universality and Its Discontents* (2014), coedited with Scott Straus; *No hay mañana sin ayer: Batallas por la memoria histórica en el Cono Sur* (2013), coauthored with Federico Lorenz, Aldo Marchesi, and Peter Winn; and *Shining and Other Paths: War and Society in Peru, 1980–1995* (1998).

**María del Rosario Acosta López** is a professor in the Department of Hispanic Studies at UC Riverside. Her main research interests are aesthetics, modern and contemporary political philosophy, German idealism, and, more recently, philosophical approaches to trauma and memory, with an emphasis on Latin America and a decolonial perspective. She has written books and edited volumes on Schiller, Hegel, art and memory in Colombia, philosophy and violence, contemporary political philosophy and philosophy in and from Colombia. Her current research project and work in progress is titled *Gramáticas de lo inaudito: Pensar la memoria después del trauma* (*Grammars of the Unheard-Of: Thinking Memory after Trauma*) (expected in Spanish in 2023 and in English in 2024). Her most recently published work is a coedited volume on transitional justice in Colombia, *Justicia transicional en Colombia: Una mirada retrospectiva* (2023).