

The World Humanities Report

To Hear the Other's Pain without Being Shipwrecked in Horror

María Emma Wills in conversation with
María del Rosario Acosta López



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To Hear the Other's Pain without Being Shipwrecked in Horror

María Emma Wills

María del Rosario Acosta López [University of California, Riverside](#)

María del Rosario Acosta López: María Emma, as always, I am grateful for your time and generosity. It's also an honor to have a chance to discuss these things with you, because you have been a mentor and a very important reference for me in this work that we are both committed to, which is the work of memory construction in Colombia. To begin, I'm wondering if you could walk us briefly through everything that led you to eventually become involved with the question of historical memory.

María Emma Wills: OK. Well, the story of how I ended up at the Historical Memory Group has changed over time because, as you know, each time you tell a story you reassemble the small fragments and give them different emphases. So I will only mention a few key moments.

I say that the story changes because, for example, a short while ago I reread a thesis about the student movement for which I was the advisor in the 1990s, when I was teaching at the University of the Andes, and I realized that there was already a focus on the question of memory there. At the time I was working on social movements and collective action, and we were discussing whether collective action is strategic and instrumental or expressive and identitarian, and to what extent. But the field was already moving toward integrating these two alternatives through a slightly more complex understanding of historical agency. For me, it was already clear that identity had something to do with memory, that I could not have a sense of who I am without having a sense of where I come from—the two are mixed together. The thesis I mention is truly fantastic; it was written by a woman, Milena Espinal Acevedo, whom I met again recently (she lives in France) and whose work combines art and historical thought. In her thesis, which unfortunately was not published, she was trying to retrace the steps of the student movement by looking at her own collective action in terms of memory. She focused specifically on the University of the Andes to show that in spite of the stereotype, which has it that students there are oblivious to Colombia's social realities, there is also a memory of political mobilization there

* 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.

(although it's very hidden, unacknowledged by the university's more neat and neutral history, let's say).¹ But well, I realized, when I reread her thesis recently, that back then the question of memory was already very important to me. It's also true of other theses for which I was an advisor, for example, a very good thesis about Gabriel García Márquez's novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* that looked at literature, power, and memory, all together. So memory was on my radar.

Also recently I was asked to work on a new edition of my book on women and politics,² and I reread the introduction, where I argue quite clearly that in order to go forward, the feminist movement and the women's movement have to acknowledge where they come from; they need to construct a memory. So for me, it was already very clear back then that to act politically in the present, we should have a memory of where we come from and acknowledge the struggles that have made us who we are.

Now, when Gonzalo Sánchez, the director, invited me to join the Historical Memory Group in 2007, I was coming to the end of my work on women and

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feminisms in Colombia during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and he basically told me: "I need a person who can bring the question of gender to the group." So there was a twist now, because I had

been looking at memory and social movements by analyzing struggles led by unarmed civilians in the public sphere, not in the context of the war. I had distanced myself from the subject of war because years earlier, when I was a researcher at CINEP³—sorry, I am not being very organized, but well, that's how memory works!—I had to deal with a very dramatic time for the country.

On the one hand, there were peace negotiations and efforts by some combatants to reenter civil society, to deactivate political violence and find other ways of negotiating conflict. And while at CINEP I was swept by this wave of hope

¹ Milena Espinal Acevedo, *Ensamblajes de memoria: Comunidades estudiantiles de la Universidad de los Andes* [Memory ensembles: Student communities at the University of the Andes] (Bogotá: Catálogo Público Uniandes, 1999).

² María Emma Wills, *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).

³ Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (Center for Popular Research and Education); Wills was a research associate there from 1985 to 1988.

around the peace process and the negotiations when Belisario Betancur was in office (1982–86). There was also a process of local democratization; mayors could now be elected rather than appointed; there were the administrative boards. I mean, there was a new interest in participatory democracy in the country, not just representative democracy, and I became deeply involved with that.

But well, there is another side that I don't bring up often, but maybe it's important to mention it here. I was working with regional political movements, as they were known at the time. There was one in Córdoba, another one in Meta, another in the Magdalena Medio region led by a former member of the National Liberation Army (ELN) who was shifting toward nonviolent political action and was later murdered by the ELN. I worked on a small publication, which was not academic, it was more like an account of the first popular mayoral election in Barranca, and I think that it was because of it that I began to receive threats. Honestly, I had no party affiliation, although I did stand for democratic values. But when these threats came, I felt extremely alone; I didn't tell anyone—I have no idea why, although it might have to do with my gender and class. In any case, this caused a somewhat traumatic rupture in my life, and it put a halt to my work with local communities. So I decided to leave the country. I also wanted to have a child! So I decided to leave and have my child abroad. At that point I distanced myself from any project having to do with political violence in Colombia. I hit "pause." I was extremely upset by the threats, but also by much of what I had seen when I was working in the regional rural areas. I mean, I know that this often goes unsaid, but in the regions you become keenly aware of the internal disputes within the guerrillas, in the ranks, among other things. This country suffers from a huge deficit when it comes to accepting dissidence. I was already fed up with this quasi-naturalized turn to violence as a way of resolving differences, and I wanted a pause.

When I returned to Colombia, I had a daughter and a divorce behind me, and at that point I decided to focus my interest on collective action and social movements, rather than war and the armed conflict.

So when Gonzalo called me, I answered "Yes, I accept," because I thought that historical memory work was very important at that point in time, but I added: "I haven't been part of the debate about Colombia's armed conflict for quite a while." And Gonzalo said: "It doesn't matter. In any case, because of your training and background, you can navigate these discussions." So I accepted, and I did it not just because of the topic and the historical moment, but because of the people involved; I mean, I think that academic friendships do matter here. It's not simply a matter of calculated professional decisions; there is an affective dimension at play.

Of course, Gonzalo also had a very clear comparative perspective on his radar. You could say that he had spent his whole life preparing for the position of director of the National Historical Memory Center. And the thing is, if you do an overview of what was being done by truth commissions and by people working on the question of memory in Latin America—and in other countries—if you compare these processes of memory construction and historical clarification, you realize that they were becoming progressively more complex, because newcomers to the field would have to review what others had already done. And Peru's Truth Commission, which had just finished its work and was the most recent antecedent in Latin America, had a gender perspective, although it was introduced late in their work, near the end, because they realized that they had failed to examine the problem of sexual violence in the framework of Peru's ethnic armed struggle.

María del Rosario Acosta López: An issue that Kimberly Theidon has addressed in her work, for example.

María Emma Wills: Yes, and Julissa Mantilla, who is a lawyer and who worked very hard to get the Truth Commission to devote at least one chapter to the question of gender and violence in the framework of the Peruvian conflict. It was clear to Gonzalo that this was a crucial issue, and he also came from a pluralist tradition from way back. He had a very clear awareness that our work was not confined to the Colombian context, but that it would also be a contribution to the global field of memory construction. He also knew from the start that this could not be achieved without taking into account the plurality of Indigenous memories, the memories of Afro-descendent populations, and the memories of women.

This is how, after quite a few detours, I became involved with the conflict again. Until then, as I was saying, I had kept a distance from anything related to it, partly in order to protect my daughter. But by then she was already seventeen or eighteen years old, and I thought that, finally, I was not putting her at risk, and that she already had the skills to navigate life without her mom's constant presence (a big mistake, as you will come to discover yourself!). And this is how I came to the Memory Group.

María del Rosario Acosta López: This is quite interesting because it is clear, then, that from the start you were invited to join the group as a person who could bring a gender perspective to their work. But now, as I hear you recon-

structuring the whole story, what I perceive is that your work with the group, and later with the center, was actually not only about this gender perspective, because you also brought with you a methodological restlessness—a transdisciplinary approach, let's say—that considers not only data, statistics, things related to what you call “strict academic rationality,” but also other elements having to do with the emotions, with sensibility, with the significance of corporeality, and with care. And your approach regards these as integral components of the work of memory.

I say this because one of the first things that I learned from you when we began working together was that self-care is extremely important to you. And I think that, of course, this has very much to do with the fact that you are a woman who works on memory and violence, and therefore you are not reinforcing an academic tradition that retains a very masculine understanding of what it means to do that kind of work. As I heard the story you just told me, and after having the privilege of working with you, this makes a lot of sense now. I also realize now that when you approached me and my work, and when you invited me to work with you at the center, it was precisely because of your interest in potential frameworks that could be used to consider the aesthetic-sensible-corporeal together with the kind of material that the tradition would label as “rational.”

María Emma Wills: Yes, of course, that is exactly right. Something that I should have mentioned earlier is that, when I agreed to be the advisor for those theses about literature and social movements, I had a project, but I didn't have the tools that would have allowed me to reconcile the expressive, artistic, emotional aspects of human action with its rational, calculating, and strategic aspects. I didn't have a background in philosophy, so I was unable to say: “Look, I have these ideas, and this is a framework that allows me to articulate them.” I was being led by my intuitions or, rather, by the discomfort that I felt when I perceived the extreme rationalism of my peers in academia. This made me think that there are historical passions that do not fit within this “rationalist” framework.

There are historical passions that do not fit within [the academy's] “rationalist” framework.

And this ties up, of course, with my interest in the construction of participatory knowledge. I don't think Gonzalo was aware of my work in this direction—which, as you mentioned, eventually played a crucial role in my contributions

to the group and the center. He didn't know the participatory dimension of my work at CINEP, where I organized workshops on memory and wrote a small pamphlet on plural pedagogy.⁴ It was all about questioning the kind of left-wing dogmatism that claims that there is a historical truth embodied by a party. I had been in England, where there was a very strong discussion, led above all by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who were challenging that dogmatic view. Their call was: either the left becomes pluralistic, or it will not survive. And participation was a condition for pluralism, because what Laclau and Mouffe argue, which I discuss in the pamphlet, is that there is not a universal subject who is the bearer of the revolution. That means that the working class is not *the* subject. There are different subaltern subjects, and these subaltern subjects must have the capacity to build their own dream of justice from their own perspective. So they were extremely critical of communist parties and the hierarchical version of a truth contained in the party.

María del Rosario Acosta López: So you brought all of that with you, and then you put it back into practice again at the center, now in connection to memory.

María Emma Wills: Right. At first my interest in participation was latent, and it became stronger when I said to Pilar Riaño, one of my fellow researchers at the Historical Memory Group: “Pilar, you are extremely knowledgeable about the issue of memory. You can teach us how to work on memory from a participatory perspective.” And it was then that we came up with the workshop, and we made a presentation to the group about participatory work on memory. Not everyone agreed, and I think that some people did not use the activities that we compiled in *Recordar y narrar el conflicto*⁵ or the “toolbox” that we developed with Marta Nubia Bello (who, by the way, is another important name in this history of how historical memory came to be in Colombia), which was meant to plant a seed so that the communities could make their own memories without

⁴ María Emma Wills, *Militancia política y educación popular: Reflexiones sobre algunos problemas en la educación popular* [Political militancy and popular education: Reflections on problems in popular education] (Bogotá: CINEP, 1989).

⁵ Pilar Riaño and María Emma Wills, *Recordar y narrar el conflicto: Herramientas para reconstruir memoria histórica* [Remembering and narrating the conflict: Tools for rebuilding historical memory] (Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2009), <https://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2009/cajadeherramientas/presentacionbaja.pdf>.

guidance from the Historical Memory Group.⁶ This was also connected to the Regional Memory Groups project, in which you were also involved. Because the point of participatory work is that it can go on without you, right? And that a process can take on its own momentum.

But well, in any case, we were very interested in participation, from different angles, as you know, and Gonzalo (I will grant him that) was willing to let each of us rely on our own creativity. I mean, I myself am much more directorial. I speak a lot about participation, but I often find myself being very stubborn. Not so Gonzalo: he has a much more democratic temperament. He let us make our own calls, and we did.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I see now how the pieces begin to fit together, which is very interesting because, of course, I am well acquainted with your pedagogical work at the center, the toolbox, the book that you worked on with Pilar, *Relatar y narrar el conflicto*, and how all of that led to the Regional Memory Groups project, in which I was involved, as you mentioned (during the pilot stage, at least).⁷ On the other hand, I was aware of your work on women and war (*Mujeres y guerra*),⁸ but I am now seeing how these pieces fit together and why you eventually came to lead the center's pedagogical work. It all makes much more sense now.

Before we talk more about this pedagogical work—I do have a couple of questions about it—I would like you to tell us about your experiences working on the report *Mujeres y guerra*. I am assuming that the idea came from you as part of this effort to bring a gender perspective to the group, and that it was also an effort to put into practice the kind of work on memory that you, Pilar, and Marta Nubia were trying to develop. But tell us a little about what that experience was like.

⁶ *Un viaje por la memoria histórica: Aprender la paz, desaprender la guerra* [A trip through historical memory: Learning peace and unlearning war] (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018), <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/un-viaje-por-la-memoria-historica/>.

⁷ The Regional Historical Memory Groups were developed in collaboration with local universities, the first of which were the University of Córdoba, the Pontifical Bolivarian University in Bucaramanga, the University of Magdalena, the University of Cesar, and the Technological University of Bolívar. Among other things, the groups produced reports on historical memory, documentaries, and chronicles that can be found at the National Historical Memory Center website, <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/>. A brief early presentation of the objectives and results of these five groups can be found in this 2015 presentation by the NHMC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIF-wb001KA>.

⁸ *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://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/mujeres-y-guerra-victimas-y-resistentes-en-el-caribe-colombiano/>.

María Emma Wills: I don't remember the sequence exactly, but the thing is that I was invited to the United States by a foundation called the Swanee Hunt Family Foundation, which is run by a group of women in Texas who were born in an oilfield. They organize meetings to empower women, and they bring in academics, women in politics, et cetera. They are not in the field of transitional justice; I don't know if they invited me because of the book on women and politics in Colombia; I don't recall. But the point is that I went and took part in one of their meetings, and one of the people who heard me was Virginia Bouvier, who was director of programs for Latin America at the United States Institute of Peace. And Virginia said to me: "Look, the institute has some funding available for projects about Colombia. You should submit the project *Mujeres y guerra*." And that's what we did. I got together with Pilar and Marta Nubia, and we sent them a project. They gave us some critique and feedback, but eventually they gave us their approval, thanks to Virginia's backing. If you notice, this time there were also coincidences that made things happen, but there were allies as well, and in the absence of an ally, well, I don't know, you might be at the mercy of the evaluators ("you didn't read this," "you didn't quote me," et cetera), and things might not work out. You know how academia is. Instead, Virginia said: "No, this project goes."

The guidelines of the project were already clearly outlined: it was to be done with participation by the women involved, and it was about collecting, to the degree that this was possible, the diversity of their experiences. The women who coordinated the project did not want the experiences of surviving women to be homogenized. And this is where, for me, theorists like Mouffe are central, because she has consistently argued—in the tradition of French feminism, coming from Simone de Beauvoir—that woman is not an essence. Mouffe has always made a mark on my academic work, although she used to be very difficult to read. Her recent writing is easier to follow, fortunately; at first it was very Hegelian, so much that I would have needed your help to really get it. But little by little she has settled for a way of writing that is closer to ordinary language, and what is quite clearly argued there is that to essentialize the feminine is absolutely antidemocratic and prevents thought from perceiving the diversity of experiences and the hierarchies that exist among women themselves. So we wanted the project to register these variations. We didn't want to say: "All women have experienced this."

Participation was woven into the project from the start. We began by presenting it to women's organizations, both academics and women from other walks of life, and we asked them for their assessments and input. Now I do have to

say something that I think must be acknowledged: this kind of participatory work does not release you from the kind of theoretical work that you have to contribute as an academic. That is, suppose after a participatory process the people involved decide: "Let's consider all of this as a single case study." At that point the academic would have the responsibility of saying: "No!" And that is why we started out with four case studies. One in Guajira, the massacre at Bahía Portete, which we selected because it was unique in that most of the victims (not all of them, but most) were women. Then, we wanted to work on the case of Hernán Giraldo in Magdalena, because it was already known that he had put into practice an updated version of what is known as *derecho de pernada*.⁹ Then, in Montes de María; at first, we thought that this region could become a kind of laboratory of forms of resistance, although it didn't work out that way. In Córdoba we also focused on resistance and women's organizations. So we started out like this: there were participatory processes, but there was also an academic effort to deal with a variety of cases.

María del Rosario Acosta López: And what was it like for you to work on that report? I mean, did the experience inform the work that you did later for the Historical Memory Group?

María Emma Wills: There are different aspects to it. The fact that we worked as a team: a photographer, Jesús Abad Colorado; an anthropologist, Pilar Riaño; Marta Nubia Bello, who is a psychologist and social worker; and me, a political scientist; there were also talented young women like María Luisa Moreno, Viviana Quintero, Camila Medina, and Jaime Landinez. As a result, it was wonderful work, because there was also a very important affective quality, a sweetness of affection, if you will, which allowed us to cope with very hard stories, very tough memories. But I also feel, and this is something that I can say more clearly now, that when we are working on memory, we have to work in different registers. Collective memory, the local memory of the communities, calls for something that is closer to ethnography, some very specific methods that are proper to that discipline. You can address the local in narrative form, if you are a good chronicler, a good journalist, or a good anthropologist. But if

⁹ This refers, mainly in Latin America, to a practice of sexual abuse and servitude that, although illegal, was enforced as an informal right of employers and landowners (continuing with a practice that was inherited and translated from the tradition of European feudal law: the right of a lord to sleep with the bride on her wedding night). The practice was reinterpreted and expanded in even more arbitrary ways by paramilitary groups in Colombia's northern region, as is shown in the report on historical memory to which Wills refers in her response.

you ask a political scientist to “describe the everyday life of a locality,” it’s difficult. I mean, I didn’t have the disciplinary tools, because as a political scientist I was never taught any ethnographic methods. My scale of analysis functions at the level of social movements and the state. I mean, it’s a different scale, whether regional or national. So 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.

What I am trying to say is that there were difficulties. Some of those difficulties are intrinsic to the way of doing things within a particular discipline.

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In some cases these ways of doing things can complement one another; in others they create wider distances between a discipline and what the work requires in practice. And then there are other difficulties—although very closely related to the former—that have to do with the human dimension of listening to narratives of

horror. More so if you consider that we did not have psychosocial counseling in the group. Marta Nubia was part of our team, but of course her attention was focused above all on the victims. So I did go through a kind of breakdown and through traumas that I, as a political scientist, had no tools to handle. Well, there are different temperaments, no? Me, I let myself be absorbed, so I couldn’t really maintain a distance that would have allowed me to keep my bearings. 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. I think that this also had effects on my body, in my affective relations with my daughter and my partner. There is no way to go through that unscathed.

As a professional, I also yearned for the skill that anthropologists have, which is to sit down and compose a narrative, without explaining, because a narrative contains explanations, but when an anthropologist narrates, they do it with a cadence that comes from the experience that stays with them and to which they are also responding as they write. A political scientist, not so. I still perceive it as a very rational discipline; you are always asking yourself: Why? How could this be possible? What was the role of the state? But when it comes to the victims and their narratives, you have to deal with other questions that have to do with the everyday world.

In any case, the report is the result of all these perspectives; at points they complement each other, and then at points it still feels a little disjointed. I see it, for example, in the different emphases that you find in each of the chapters of *Mujeres y guerra*. The chapter on everyday violence in Montes de María, written by Camila Medina and Viviana Quintero, is an anthropology of everyday life. Then, in the chapter about the Magdalena region, which deals with sexual assault, you hear the voice of the political scientist: Where did it happen? How did it happen? Why is there variation between Ciénaga and Santa Marta? Why are there so many rapes in Ciénaga? The narrative of the victims is certainly there, but within an explanatory schema. Of course, when people in the group read it, they told me they weren't sure it was about memory, to which I replied: "In that case, I don't know how to make work about memory." It was stressful because, obviously, you want to do the work well. There is an imperative to do things well. There is also an immense responsibility to the victims.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Of course, but I also think that what you are saying, from my perspective, which is somewhat external and retrospective, accurately describes what the center did and what it accomplished. In my conversation with Steve Stern,¹⁰ we talk about this interesting aspect of the center (which of course he studies in his own report¹¹), namely, that it did not aim to define stable methodological and pedagogical parameters and instead emphasized the need for a plurality of methodologies in order to comprehend the complexity of something like memory work—anywhere but especially in a

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ 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).

place like Colombia, in the middle of an ongoing conflict, with all the political tensions that additionally surround the work. So when you describe these multiple voices, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks that eventually fed into *Mujeres y guerra*, among others, my sense is that this is actually one of its virtues. I would say that this is the kind of work done by the group to which we can now refer to in order to figure out how to proceed in the work that is yet to be done in Colombia—and elsewhere. The thing is: there is no single way of making memory, no single way of telling these stories. This was very clear to those working in the group and later in the center. In fact, they both placed revision, critique, and openness to multiple methodologies at the heart of their work.

María Emma Wills: I certainly agree, you need to have some plurality. But then again, and this is where I find myself to be somewhat inflexible, I agree that my chapter is not about memory. I can't deceive myself. The core of my chapter is not memory, because memory requires you to displace your gaze and to construct something out of what the stories and testimonies reveal, with some questions in mind, obviously, but on the basis of testimonies. I work very differently. In fact, I feel that I am more of a political sociologist than a political scientist. My questions tend toward the conditions that made rape possible rather than how the women experienced it. This doesn't mean that I didn't listen to them: I listened to the point of becoming ill. But the guiding thread of the chapter about Magdalena, which I wrote with María Luisa Moreno, is that I want to understand how this horror was possible.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I understand, of course. And yet—maybe this is a discussion for a different occasion—I'm not sure I agree with you when you say that your work is not about memory. The work done by the Historical Memory Group, the very notion of “historical memory,” and the implementation of a theory and a practice that are committed to that notion as a tool for dignifying the victims, are precious precisely because they show us that it is not only relevant but also *necessary* to have a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives. It's the only way to take on such an ambitious project and to do it as outstandingly as the group and the center did, under Gonzalo's direction.

But I do understand your point in light of the kind of examples that you have in mind when you talk about memory, since there is a way of dealing with this subject that hinges predominantly on the stories themselves. As you say, this is a kind of memory work that is capable of delivering stories that others can read,

without first having to establish the meaning, the interpretation, the causes that made it possible for those stories to happen in the first place.

María Emma Wills: Yes, this is what is complex and difficult about historical memory, because it brings together two things: everyday experience and the memories and testimonies of the victims, as well as some thoughts on the context that made that horror possible. I would say that Pilar is able to do that, because she has a background in ethnography and she also comes from a decolonial interpretative matrix. It's a different emphasis. I bring this up to give you a sense of the kind of tensions that surfaced during our work and that informed my own contribution.

As I mentioned, these tensions are also present in the book—in the way it was ultimately put together, in the differences between the final result and the initial proposal, for example. Initially, I had a little diagram where you had the case to be analyzed and the struggles of women at the national level, the gender situation within armed organizations, and then what happened to women. There was a continuum of violences. It was conceived that way, but that is not how it was structured at the end, in part due to internal discussions within the team. My standpoint, for instance, was more feminist than that of my colleagues, in the sense that I wanted the workshops to ask questions about everyday violence *before* the armed conflict, and I stressed that repeatedly because, as a feminist academic, I was interested in showing that this is a country where gender violence and sexual violence are an epidemic, where machos and patriarchs rape women, children, and young women every single day. So I wanted there to be a chapter devoted to everyday violence before the armed conflict, because the stories of everyday sexual violence were truly upsetting to me. My thread is that these forms of violence are present in everyday life, then you have the people involved in the armed conflict who establish certain ways of enacting that violence, and as a result we have the forms of violence that are specific to the armed conflict. What I mean by this is that everyday forms of gender violence underlie and precede particular forms of gender violence proper to the context of the armed conflict, and they often remain once the conflict is over; one needs to be very aware of this underlying structure. But in the book there is no chapter devoted to that continuum. After our discussions, and also because we were under pressure to finish the book (we were already running against the clock), it was eventually confined to a very small section, placed at the end rather than at the beginning.¹² But in the sequence as I had conceived it, everyday violence came first—violence based on gender and sexual violence exerted by

¹² *Mujeres y guerra*, chapter 5, section 1.

relatives, neighbors, and friends. Because they are the source of the other forms of violence. There is a causal logic.

María del Rosario Acosta López: As I recall, the book does argue that.

María Emma Wills: Yes, but not as I would have liked. In any case, what I am getting at is that even when you are working in an environment based on affection and care, there will always be tensions.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Of course, for sure. Each of you tells a similar story when describing your work on the reports, and everyone mentions the intense discussions that went on within the group.

María Emma Wills: Oh, yes. And there were also deadlines! *Mujeres y guerra* had already been postponed for one year. We couldn't postpone it any longer; it had to be published, and there was no way around it. Of course, I have tried to make the argument as I wanted to make it in some articles that I wrote later, and an entire chapter of the book that I am writing now about historical memory will be devoted to that.¹³ It's a way to make good on my original intent, because I do think that our work on these reports is about pinching society and saying: "Look, we are a cesspit [*una cloaca*]. Let's not kid ourselves: this is a cesspit." I've always said "cesspit," and I've said it with conviction, even before the armed conflict.

I also now have a clear sense of something that was not so clear before, because the discussions and conversations that you have with colleagues—and in your own head—they keep going. There are several problems connected to these everyday forms of violence, with that continuum of violence that feminism talks about. One is to reduce political violence to the scale of everyday violence. Of course, these everyday forms of violence are there, but the armed conflict also has sources that lead beyond everyday violence, to the formation of political power and the state. We cannot reduce what happens during an armed confrontation to a sum of everyday forms of violence, because the state is also violent in very particular ways. This is more obvious than ever today, with the police and everything that is going on. So if you argue that the armed conflict is nothing but an amplified patriarchy, I say: "Well, yes, but here there are at least two levels, there are two logics that overlap and interconnect, and we cannot reduce

¹³ María Emma Wills, *Memorias para la paz, memorias para la guerra: Las batallas por la historia que nos contaremos* [Memories for peace, memories for war: The battles around the history we will tell] (Bogotá: Planeta, forthcoming).

one to the other. There is everyday violence, which is horrible and a sewer, and there is political violence between political actors and the state. And obviously there are connections between the two, and our research has to show how these connections come about, without reducing the political level of the state and political actors to that of everyday violence.” I mean, you are a philosopher, and what I am saying is that we need more philosophical discussions in the social sciences. I would have loved to take a philosophy class with you.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Certainly, here the work of conceptual clarification, which at any rate you do carry out as a political scientist, is crucial. Maybe the focus should be on these connections that you mention, because they remind us that we also cannot just look at political violence and its spectacles, we cannot overlook the fact that there is an underlying everyday violence, which is there before and remains after the conflict. This violence does not fully explain the conflict, and it also cannot be reduced to the conflict. The conflict cannot be understood as a spectacular magnification of those everyday forms of violence that must be included in a judicious and rigorous account of violence in Colombia.

María Emma Wills: Right, because the connections between these two levels hinge on the repertoires of gender violence that are used by the armed actors. These repertoires absorb what is already in place, but in each case they connect it and manifest it in different ways when they are enacted in contexts of war. That is, I claim that the guerrillas’ repertoires are not the same as those of the paramilitaries, the police, or the military. But they all absorb things from a gender violence that is already in place and that has been normalized in everyday life. And this is a point of contention that I have with feminism, because feminism tends to flatten the differences in these contexts.

María del Rosario Acosta López: So we have to attend to what is unique in each of these manifestations. It’s not enough to see them all as the result of the patriarchy.

María Emma Wills: Exactly. And in each case we have to examine how the figure of the combatant is constructed, this person who can function as a war professional and who always does so in a particular way.

María del Rosario Acosta López: This is very interesting, and it is leading me in directions that I didn’t anticipate when I prepared for our conversation,

so I think I will ask you a question now that I had actually planned to ask at the very end. How did your experiences while working on the question of memory transform your understanding of disciplines—of your own discipline, political science, of course, but also in general, of the meaning of disciplines as the framework for your work? What does it mean to accomplish an interdisciplinary project? And beyond that, at what point do we need a bit of indiscipline in order to take on a task that cannot be accomplished otherwise?

María Emma Wills: Let's see. The thing is that I rebel against accounts of human action as something exclusively calculating and rational. I mean, against the whole paradigm of rational action that continues to play a central role in the social sciences and economics. I know that it has been modified and that there is a lot of discussion now around emotions understood as forces that gradually shape rationality—I haven't read any of this literature yet, but at least I think: "Ah, OK, this is going somewhere now!" In any case, there are constant shifts in academia, and thoughtful people who are really open to questioning do make progress.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Of course, and things are constantly revised. The same can surely be said about your own work with the Historical Memory Group and later with the National Historical Memory Center's working groups, since you are all outstanding academics.

María Emma Wills: It's true, you have revision upon revision, and as I see it, this is how the extremely narrow margins of what used to be called rational choice theory have shifted; we have caught on to the idea that in order to understand human action, we need something broader and more complex. When I am up against pure rationalists, well then yes, of course, I rebel. But there are also people who think, for example, that participatory work is enough to understand the complexity of the past—and I also rebel against them. So I find myself on a very uncomfortable middle ground, because in these contexts where we are working with and about memory, I speak on behalf of academia. I like academia. Don't take it away from me! I think that it is crucial to have a place that allows us to examine reality through different traditions. And I don't get that from participatory work. I can't stop reading theorists, because through my readings I discover that there are very complex views that I am still not aware of and that I would like to explore. This urge to keep on absorbing, I get it from academia and academia continues to nourish it, and I find it wonderful and exciting.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Your point, then, is that work on memory should not be just about participation, as important as it might be, or about the singularity of the stories. These continue to be the fundamental axes of the work, but if we limit ourselves to working within that space, we may end up blocking our capacity to interpret.

María Emma Wills: During one of the workshops organized by the Regional Groups on Historical Memory, there was a victim called Nelly, from Puerto Gaviotas, Guaviare, who brought this fresh outlook to the conversation, and she summarized it by saying: “The cobbler should keep to their last.” I know how to tell a story. I know what happened to me, for example, but I need the expertise of a communicator. To transform my experience into a documentary I need a great chronicle journalist who will invest what I say with some kind of intensity, or I need a historian to understand the context and the struggle within which the bombing in Guaviare took place. In any case, I do feel this need to engage in difficult discussions and conversations with academics that might allow me to learn, say, that the guerrillas’ actions in Guaviare added further tension to the region, that maybe they even put the communities themselves at risk. That is a conversation that you cannot have if we all already think the same way, and for that we need academics who are working with different emphases and in different academic traditions. Obviously, it should be a conversation among peers and not “I have a PhD, so I know more than you.” But we need to have this kind of conversation and plurality to make way in a complex understanding of the past, as long as they are among peers.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Yes, wonderful. It’s a wonderful response, I think, to a question that could easily lead us to a very dry way of thinking, but your take on it gives it a different ring, María E., thank you for that. I also now have a much better sense of the way of working with memory that you all developed at the center. It’s an experience that will be very important to the work that still remains to be done in Colombia on the subject of memory, where connections are being made between all of these levels.

María Emma Wills: I should say that we also had very strong discussions at the center. There were people who preferred participatory work, with no academic mediation. There were people who were more inclined toward academic work, and there were some in the middle. This is why it is so difficult to analyze what the center produced, because there were different logics working in tandem, coexisting, and sometimes colliding.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Of course, of course. It's not easy to get a clear picture of everything that fed into the center's work, but at the same time, it is extremely important for us to reconstruct that story and to compile a memory of its achievements, which would have to include the tensions and discussions that took place and were left unresolved. I think that this will allow us to set guidelines for the work on memory that remains to be done in Colombia.

What are your thoughts on this, María Emma? What would you say should be the way to go ahead now, considering the current situation? We are now going through a truncated transition, and memory projects are being dismantled at the institutional or official level, but at the same time we have the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Truth Commission, which continue to uphold some of the commitments that were made as a result of the peace agreements between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Would you say that the center, with all of its pluralism and differences and tensions, was able to set the ground for something to come? If you had to sum it up very briefly, what would be your diagnosis of its contribution? Is there a positive sense in which the center managed to establish itself as an institution?

María Emma Wills: Well, I think that 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 very 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 organiza-

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tions 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 platform. Gonzalo used to call it a “platform.” I would call it a “lever,” like a strength, like something that those other memory-related initiatives can lean on. Because we cannot deny

that now this is coming from the state, those initiatives are gaining, let's say, a degree of validity.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Right, there is now a legitimacy.

María Emma Wills: There is a validation, which makes it impossible to say: "You know, there weren't actually that many massacres." Wrong, there certainly were. Or: "They were all guerrilla fighters." Well, no. So I think that what the center did was to validate processes that were already underway and to create some initiatives and give encouragement to others that were getting started. And it was able in certain cases, not in all of them, to act as an ally. Now it's a difficult alliance; it's contradictory and complex because in civil society and social movements we are used to standing against the state. It's quite strange: social movements demand the state to do something, but when it does, they say: "Oof! I'm not sure I believe you."

María del Rosario Acosta López: It's true. Here in Colombia we say "in spite of the state," not "thanks to the state." That's how we relate to it.

María Emma Wills: This means that there is always a tension when the state comes; there is suspicion. And 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. A relationship based on the utmost respect and solidarity. And that, in a way, opened the door.

María del Rosario Acosta López: And that was an unprecedented experience. Steve Stern describes the center as a kind of NGO within the state, and he claims that this hybrid nature allowed it to establish links with the communities that could not have been established through other state institutions.

María Emma Wills: Of course, this doesn't mean that our relationship to the victims will be entirely free of the tension that was caused by this experience of the state as something suspect. As an example, if we consider the case of the Patriotic Union (UP), it was extremely difficult to put together the report *Todo*

*pasó frente a nuestros ojos.*¹⁴ And when it did come out, the Reiniciar Corporation, which represents some of the victims and their families, attacked it without having read it—partly because there were intermediaries shuttling messages back and forth, and some of them created confusion and misinformation about the text. When they actually read it, they had to retract.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Right, because in their experience and tradition everything that is coming from the state is an attack, not an act of support or an alliance.

María Emma Wills: But also because Reiniciar wanted the case to have a single guiding thread, structured around the idea that it was a planned genocide, a systematic policy aimed at exterminating the party. The report, however, is more complex. It goes from the national level to the regional level and examines how different actors were involved in that genocidal plot. So instead of there being a dictatorial military apparatus (as in a Southern Cone dictatorship, say), in Colombia you had, indeed, an anticommunist sector of the military that wanted to annihilate the UP, but at the regional level you also had different actors, including landowners, narcos, politicians. And these actors were getting connected and deciding to get rid of a local politician, for example, and that way they were involved in the erasure of the other. I will put it this way: a security policy designed to do away with the UP does not explain the complexity of what happened at the regional and local levels, and it does not explain the complicity of so many actors who factored into this logic of obliteration.

The report is truly devastating, and the person who compiled it (and who also fell ill while working on it) wanted to have an account of how that genocidal policy was carried out at the local level. Sometimes it was the politicians and not just the military; sometimes it was the landowners. To conduct a fine-grained and responsible investigation, you have to ask in each individual case who it was that enforced that will to obliterate in each region. And what we have gradually

¹⁴ *Todo pasó frente a nuestros ojos: Genocidio de la Unión Patriótica 1984–2002* (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). The Patriotic Union, or UP (Unión Patriótica), is a leftist Colombian political party. It was founded in 1985 as part of the peace negotiations that the guerrillas held with President Belisario Betancur's administration. Its members were the subject of targeted extermination operations perpetrated by various mercenary groups, paramilitaries, and state agents over the course of several years. Their case has been presented before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, CIDH) as an example of a state-sponsored genocide. The Colombian state has recognized its responsibility in their extermination, but the specific terms of this responsibility are yet to be decided by the CIDH.

come to see, obviously, is that this will was moving across the country and that it would strike in different ways. So it becomes clear that a sector of the military was one among many actors in that genocidal alliance, and they were involved in it for different reasons. And this is why the genocide went on for such a long time. It was not a single attack or a year-long campaign. It went on for decades! It was horrible, of course, and the duration is part of what makes it so dramatic. And the reason for that duration is precisely these alliances, these genocidal blocs that would come together at the regional level and who had connections at the national level.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I see your point that a report by the National Historical Memory Center must provide a complex account; it can't just follow the strategic version of the story. That strategic version has a value in the context of local courts and above all, later on, of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, where the state must be compelled to acknowledge its responsibility. But the report has to allow other voices into the reconstruction, as you always say. We have to listen to other voices, and those other voices are not always going to say what we want to hear, what the victims and survivors want to hear. Although they are at the center of the work and of the narrative, the work must also look beyond these versions if we are to engage in the production of historical memory.

María Emma Wills: Yes, and obviously the victims are fully entitled to want the state to be held accountable. And the state is responsible. But it is not the sole responsible party.

María del Rosario Acosta López: And what does this responsibility mean? In what context can it be assigned? It's really important. I understand your point, which is also a very good example of the kind of tensions that you mentioned earlier.

María Emma Wills: I do have something to add in response to your question about the center's legacy. I would say that there is a legacy in the sense that if we are to understand memory as a right, we need a state policy. If it were not a right, well, then there would be no need for a policy: it would be an everyday practice, a social practice, and that would be all. But once it becomes a right, you have to go through the state to establish a policy that guarantees that right. And I believe that, even with all the ongoing commotion around the center, the

director appointed by President Iván Duque, and the new policies embraced by the center, it is nonetheless very clear that there is a right to memory.

María del Rosario Acosta López: It's true, and it is also clear that it is a right that the state must guarantee. That battle has been won.

María Emma Wills: Right, and this means that power asymmetries cannot be allowed to prevail. The fight with the current director, Rubén Darío Acevedo, is about why he is placing the right to memory of those who are in power at the heart of this entire public policy. If memory is to be reparative, it must challenge the power asymmetries that are in place in Colombia, not reinforce them!

María del Rosario Acosta López: We could say that the current director actually embodies the fears of those who were always uncomfortable with the center's connection to the state, because he is trying to shape memory through the discourse of power.

María Emma Wills: He is certainly constructing an "official memory," as I see it. Just for this reason we academics, activists, and social leaders who are involved in memory, we should all reexamine this notion of an "official memory." Because an official memory is not equivalent to a state-approved memory. The qualities or characteristics that make it official are elsewhere; in my view, an official memory is a memory that shuts down discussion. It is official because it says: "This is it. The investigation has been closed, and this is what happened, period." Official memory empowers the voices of those who are already in power. It places sacralized voices at the center of the narrative, and this can happen in different contexts. This is why I get into so many arguments, because, sure, it can happen at the national level and through the intervention of the state, but it can also happen at the local level, within the community itself, when a man gets up and says: "We don't talk about these things here." So at that point we need to have a discussion, and I believe that it is a very difficult one, because the victims in the communities want their memory to be uncontested, and that makes sense, because the validity of their story has been consistently undermined, so what they want is validation. But that validation should not lead them to produce yet another "official memory."

María del Rosario Acosta López: It cannot become dogmatic because in doing so it also loses its value as a memory. Listening, if it is true listening, must remain

open, and not only open to new versions of the story—which is very important to prevent against the archivization that, as you point out, is typical of “official” memory—but open even to reviewing the criteria that determine what becomes audible and what does not, what is regarded as worthy of being heard and written into the historical narrative. I think the center was also able to formulate these questions as an axis of the work, and that is also a crucial part of its legacy.

Now as they say in the United States, being mindful of the time, although we have already been talking for quite a while, maybe we can conclude the interview with one more question: Where is your work headed today, after having worked for the center? I know that you are writing a book, but I presume that your experience at the center has also left you with very valuable intuitions regarding the work that is to be done now; so what I would like to know is if you are involved in a project that responds to that, or if you are choosing to leave that work to others. What relation would there be between what remains to be done, what should be done, and what you are going to do?

María Emma Wills: Well, to begin with, I am not leaving the field of historical memory. It’s a field that allows me to experience a sense of completeness, and I also know now that it is a field where I can bring the language of art, a language of expression, into conversation with the explanatory language of the social sciences. So I remain convinced that this is where we find thought at its best, and that it is the best possible context for our contributions to the country. So, I am staying there.

And I am staying there by engaging in two different kinds of work. On the one hand, I cannot refrain from taking part in the debates that arise, every

once in a while, about the center. So I write pieces for *Razón pública*.¹⁵ I give interviews. I take an active role in the public debate about what is going on and about the dangers of falling into an “official” memory, as I said before. In that

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¹⁵ A digital Spanish-language journal, published online by the foundation of the same name, “aiming to establish a bridge between academia and journalism,” <https://razonpublica.com/quienes-somos/>.

sense, I play the role of a public figure, and I plan to keep it up, although I am no longer connected to the center—and when I say “public figure,” I mean it in the sense of the “public intellectual.” I’m still doing that. And on the other hand, there is the book I want to write. I have already written three chapters, and the plan is to write three more. One will be about the center, which focuses on challenging that antistate perspective that is prevalent in debates about the work of memory. I discuss the experience of the National Historical Memory Center and explain why it was so unique within the Colombian state. Then, there will be a chapter on gender, because, as I already mentioned, I want to make good on my understanding of gender violence as rooted in the everyday. And finally, there will be a chapter on pedagogy, because I do feel driven to reflect on how to teach history in the classroom, and I find that I have many issues with how history is taught, so I would like to try and articulate them.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Right, teaching is certainly a critical issue and a continuation of the important work on pedagogy that you did for the center, which is also a very significant component of its legacy. It is something very valuable that calls for continuation, and there are also the toolboxes and all of your experiences, which are extremely valuable.

María Emma Wills: I agree. And, well, many of my colleagues are now contributing to or advising the Truth Commission and the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. Somewhat randomly I ended up becoming a part of a project that actually is also connected to pedagogy. It’s a TV series for young people, and the idea is to promote discussions about truth and historical clarification within the educational community. It’s been wonderful because we have been working alongside creatives who work on soap operas, and I have found their methodologies fascinating, how they create a character, how they build a plot, how they create a universe.

María del Rosario Acosta López: That sounds wonderful, and it also sounds like an opportunity for you to approach your idea that stories require an aesthetic aspect that allows them to be communicated in order to generate empathy. As you often say, this is crucial because it’s a way for us to hear those voices that we would not hear otherwise.

María Emma Wills: Yes, and I will finish with this, because I think that it is very important to say: I think that memory or projects about the past have

a resonance in the present when they manage to work their way into family discussions, when family histories connect with national history. And the series does that: it connects family and everyday histories with the framework of the conflict. It makes the connections that we were talking about earlier. You see the pieces fit together, and you can access national history through family histories. This is something that is often missing from history as it is taught.

María del Rosario Acosta López: That sounds great, María E. Thank you so much for your time and for your generosity in sharing your experiences, from the most personal to your thoughts on the big questions that came out of your work in that unprecedented institution that was the National Historical Memory Center, where you played such a crucial role.

María Emma Wills: Thank you.

Translated from the Spanish by Tupac Cruz

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