

The World Humanities Report

# Rehumanization Must Be Memory's Task

---

María Victoria Uribe  
in conversation with  
María del Rosario Acosta López



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for funding this project.

© 2023 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

This work carries a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. This license permits you to copy, distribute, and display this work as long as you mention and link back to the World Humanities Report, attribute the work appropriately (including both author and title), and do not adapt the content or use it commercially. For details, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.

This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Uribe, María Victoria. "Rehumanization Must Be Memory's Task." Interview by María del Rosario Acosta López. In *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, edited by María del Rosario Acosta López. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the authors can be found at the [end of this document](#).

# Rehumanization Must Be Memory's Task

María Victoria Uribe Del Rosario University

María del Rosario Acosta López University of California, Riverside

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Toya, first of all, thank you for your time and availability. Not only is it an honor to have the opportunity to talk with you about your work in historical memory—a conversation that, as a matter of fact, we have not had yet. It is also very important to hear your own version because, in my opinion, your work on violence in Colombia is today one of the fundamental references in the studies of the Colombian armed conflict and the relation between violence in the present and its historical antecedents in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> I would like you to start by telling us how you see the trajectory that led you from being a historian and working on violence in Colombia to working in the concrete context of “historical memory” with the Historical Memory Group that later became the National Historical Memory Center.

**María Victoria Uribe:** I think that being part of the Historical Memory Group was, most importantly, the opportunity for me to work with a team. There were twelve of us, coordinated by Gonzalo Sánchez, and there really was teamwork. I had never worked like that, so it was a very positive experience for me in that sense. My experience working with the Historical Memory Group has many positive aspects, though there were some problems about which we have talked

\* 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> See especially the recently republished work, María Victoria Uribe, *Antropología de la inhumanidad: Un ensayo interpretativo sobre el terror en Colombia* [Anthropology of inhumanity: An interpretative essay on terror in Colombia] (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, 2018). This second edition also includes central sections from her other work of reference about La Violencia in Colombia. See María Victoria Uribe, *Matar, rematar y contramatar: Las masacres de La Violencia en el Tolima 1948–1964* [To kill, finish off, and counter-kill: The massacres of La Violencia in Tolima 1948–1964] (Bogotá: CINEP, 1990). See more recently, her emphasis on approaching La Violencia with a gender perspective in María Victoria Uribe, *Hilando fino: Voces femeninas en La Violencia* [Fine spinning: Female voices from La Violencia] (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2015).

Throughout the translation I have chosen to leave the historical designation *La Violencia* in Spanish to distinguish it from general discussions on violence in Colombia. *La Violencia* [the violence] is the designation of a historical period of very acute political violence in Colombia roughly between 1948 and 1964 on which much of Uribe’s work focuses.—Trans.

before, María.<sup>2</sup> We talked about how difficult it is for a woman who works on violence to be heard in this country. This has been difficult throughout my career. I have the feeling that *violentología* is a masculine field or at least has always been essentially masculine.<sup>3</sup> I have, however, always been there in some way, though working on topics that masculine violentologists consider secondary. One day, for example, I had a conversation with Daniel Pécaut, who, as you know, is one of the big international experts on Colombian history and violence, and whom I admire a lot. But what he said to me confirmed that they consider the issues I deal with as secondary. Daniel has read and cited me, and his dialogue with my work is serious and consistent. Yet he still considers my interest in the symbolic aspects of violence and in the problem of representation as “ancillary” questions. He said it to me, like that, even lovingly, as if saying: “Your studies about the massacres and the cuts are admittedly necessary, but they are not the central studies on La Violencia.”<sup>4</sup> He thus confirmed in part the feeling that I have always had. This led me to look for external interlocutors, both outside the Historical Memory Group and outside the usual disciplines. I started exploring psychoanalysis (especially Jacques Lacan) and reading Walter Benjamin, among others. I especially started looking for women interlocutors (you introduced me to Adriana Cavarero, for example) since my feelings of being excluded were deepened while working with the Historical Memory Group. Although it certainly worked as a group, and we can’t say that it didn’t include women—we had Pilar Riaño, Pilar Gaitán, María Emma Wills, Marta Nubia Bello, and me—men’s voices always had priority. For example, León Valencia was in charge of elaborating the daily report of what was happening and what was being discussed, what they called the “conjunctural analysis.” Never were we women asked to make this report. Men always did it. There we had, we could say, a patriarchal regime. So, yes, the work there was difficult, very hard work, and this was a real problem, though there were also very interesting things.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes, Toya. And I think that this is very important because, in any case, the perspective that you brought to your work

<sup>2</sup> See the interview also conducted by María del Rosario Acosta López for REC Latinoamérica. María del Rosario Acosta López and María Victoria Uribe, “Muertos que hablan, espectros que insisten: Entrevista con María Victoria Uribe y María Acosta” [When the dead talk, when the specters return], video, 22:47, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKxg\\_qwrkkl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKxg_qwrkkl).

<sup>3</sup> *Violentología* (violentology) is a field in the Colombian social sciences that began emerging in the 1980s to study the prolonged Colombian armed conflict, its various stages, and actors throughout history.—Trans.

<sup>4</sup> Uribe focuses on the different ways in which violent actors use cuts in different areas of the human anatomy throughout the armed conflict. See Uribe, *Antropología de la inhumanidad*.

with the Historical Memory Group, and then the National Historical Memory Center, is a different and very important one. I think this is evident in the first report in which you worked, *Memorias en tiempos de guerra*.<sup>5</sup> The report is very valuable because it seeks to collect the communities' own experiences of construction of memory; experiences where the focus is not on discourse but on art broadly understood and on other cultural expressions and inherited traditions that play a central role. Because of this, some could think that the report has to do only with the symbolic, only with aspects necessary to create alternative memory, that it is related to secondary things that are not very important, even in the context of historical memory. What was your role in the development of this report? Why did you think it was so important to write it? How do you feel it was received by the group?

**María Victoria Uribe:** In terms of the fieldwork, it was extraordinary for me. I put together a team with research assistants to do fieldwork, because we were interested in tracing spontaneous manifestations of the conservation of historical memory. We distributed the work among ourselves according to the geographical regions, and it was fantastic. We went to eastern Antioquia and to the Montes de María, where we worked with communities at the grassroots level. It was fantastic. But precisely, as you mention, our report was considered “minor” in the context of the publications of the Historical Memory Group and Center. A clear indication of this was that none of the members of the group attended the launch event for the book in Medellín. However, many of the victims with whom we worked in eastern Antioquia did attend, and so in this sense the event was successful. The Historical Memory Group, however, was basically absent. I always had the feeling that *Memorias en tiempos de guerra* was considered a marginal publication. What is more, it didn't become part of the so-called official reports, like the reports about El Salado, Trujillo, Bojayá did. These reports were officially presented as such and were given much more visibility by the National Historical Memory Center. On the contrary *Memorias en tiempos de guerra* was treated as another “ancillary” thing.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** What do you think that *Memorias en tiempos de guerra* contributes in particular to historical memory, independently of the group's reception of this kind of work? How do you see the report? What

<sup>5</sup> See Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Memorias en tiempos de guerra: Repertorio de Iniciativas* [Memories in times of war: Repertoire of initiatives] (Bogotá: Punto Aparte Editores, 2009), <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Memorias-en-tiempo-de-Guerra.pdf>.

does it contribute to the work of historical memory in Colombia and in what context? I ask you this because, as you know, for me, this is certainly a fundamental report. First, it established an important standard from the beginning, which made clear that the work of historical memory is in fact already carried out by the communities in multiple ways, some of them profoundly creative. It also incorporates something central in your approach, that is, the importance of representation and of the symbolic not only for understanding violence but also for understanding multiple possibilities of resisting, dismantling, and memorializing it.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Yes, the contributions of that study have been very well received in Antioquia, for example, and especially by researchers from Antioquia. I am also very grateful to see that the report has been important for the Truth Commission, which is now, by the way, working with victims from eastern Antioquia. So, I have in fact seen the importance of the report because I have been approached by people, especially anthropologists who work with the communities of eastern Antioquia. I could not say the same about the Montes de María region, you know? I have not heard about the reception of the report there. There have not been a lot of interlocutors on that front at least.

But as I was saying, I love this report. It was difficult. The working conditions were very difficult. We were in Trujillo, for instance. At the time no one dared entering Trujillo because the Rastrojos<sup>6</sup> controlled the town. So this report is very dear to my heart. I think it was an interesting contribution. It has its problems, obviously, in the way in which we systematized, so to speak, those experiences of memory after the fieldwork. It was also demolished by the members of the Historical Memory Group. When the session in which we presented it to the group was over, I left crying inconsolably and thinking: “We wasted our time with this report.” Fortunately, Pilar Riaño came forward and helped me. She said to me: “Toya, don’t worry, the report is very valuable. It should be reformulated, but please don’t be in such despair!” Of course, I was in despair because, for example, Fernán González and even Iván Orozco, who I appreciate so much, saw the report and said: “What is this? It’s very disorganized. It can’t be made heads or tails of.” We later reformulated it, and we could only publish it with Pilar’s help, basically thanks to her.

<sup>6</sup> A criminal structure that emerged after the dissolution of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC; United Self-defenses of Colombia), a national confederation that grouped paramilitary structures from throughout the country between 1997 and 2005.—Trans.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes, it is a very valuable report because it shows the force and creativity of the initiatives at the community level. How do communities deal with pain? How do they produce alternative representations of a violence that, otherwise, is indigestible? From my knowledge of your work, it makes a lot of sense to me that you decided to do this report precisely because of your attention not just to the ways in which violence represents itself, but also to the force of the symbolic. How can we deal with everything that violence means in this country? I think your work has always moved between these two sides. On the one hand, you bring a very special attention and bravery to deal with the hardest topics, the most horrible ones, for example, working directly with perpetrators and the cruelest and harshest aspects of violence. But on the other hand, you also bring attention to voices that otherwise would not let themselves be heard, would not be registered in the space of the historical, so to speak, or historically indexed. I think this is what you also do in the book *Hilando fino*. There, you bring forward voices that otherwise are not historical protagonists because they do not fulfill the “masculine” criteria for how the history of a conflict must be told. In this way, on the one hand, it makes total sense to me that you produced that report. On the other hand, it makes sense that you also worked on the report on Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace)<sup>7</sup> with Iván Orozco. His work also attends to representation, albeit from a legal standpoint, and asks precisely about the limits of the law and the legal to represent the pain that remains otherwise unindexed. I think that in fact these two reports have great correspondence with each other. I would like you to also tell me a little about the experience of working on this other report that has such a different character.

**María Victoria Uribe:** That was very difficult work. Ivan and I worked very closely. Alejandro Castillejo was part of the group, but he never really integrated into the team's work. As you know, the idea was that all the historical memory work would be, in a way, anonymous. Nobody properly signed the reports; the reports of the Historical Memory Group have no authors. Castillejo, however, wanted to make his own report. So, in the end, we in fact took some things

<sup>7</sup> Justicia y Paz refers to Law 975 that resulted from the negotiations between paramilitary groups and the government in 2005. The law instituted, among others, a transitional justice system to investigate both judicially and historically the actions of the paramilitary groups confederated in the AUC.—Trans. See Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Justicia y paz: ¿Verdad judicial o verdad histórica?* [Justice or peace: Between juridical and historical truths] (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2012), <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Justicia-y-Paz-Verdad-judicial-o-verdad-historica.pdf>.

from what he had prepared, especially in relation to the idea that free versions<sup>8</sup> had something “kaleidoscopic” about them; this was an idea that Alejandro contributed, and he was in the end listed as a contributor.

Writing that report was quite difficult for me. I think it was because at that time I was not very familiar with legal studies. I didn’t have enough tools to question the focus and direction given to the report. Today I would question it in the strongest terms. In fact, what I wrote for the book that you are publishing is, without mentioning Ivan explicitly, a response to the theses that he held in that report and later in the context of the peace talks in Havana.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, the report is, I think, plagued with problems. It is a kind of palimpsest of the things Ivan wanted to keep, what Castillejo did, and my own contributions. My most important contribution to the report was especially on the extrajudicial level, all those extrajudicial searches. I was interested in the women who go around looking for their husbands and children. They have no support at all. How do they do it? The contribution I made to the report, however, was very small.

Now, the big contribution came from my assistants. What we did was focus on four paramilitary *bloques* (blocs): Bloque Norte, Bloque Calima, Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio, and Bloque Centauros of the eastern flatlands of Colombia.<sup>10</sup> The work of my assistants was very valuable because it allowed us to observe four paramilitary blocs and how the prosecutors functioned in each case, how they behaved in relation to each bloc (their behaviors were very divergent in the different cases). I learned very much from my research assistants doing this work, and really the strong contribution is theirs. Now, I am not sure really how much of an impact the volume had. We made sure that the prosecutors we worked with received a copy of it. We only got feedback from Daisy Jaramillo. We never heard from the others and never really knew if the report was useful or not to the Prosecutor’s Office or to the individual prosecutors. I really have no idea about this, María.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** This is part of the work that remains to be done, and it is in part the idea behind *Justicia Transicional en Colombia* [Tran-

<sup>8</sup> *Versiones libres* (free versions) are the kind of testimony provided by the demobilized paramilitary in the judicial context of Justicia y Paz.

<sup>9</sup> See Juana Inés Acosta-López and María del Rosario Acosta López, eds., *Justicia Transicional en Colombia: Una mirada retrospectiva a la experiencia de Justicia y Paz* [Transitional justice in Colombia: Learning from the Justice and Peace Law experience] (Bogotá: Editorial Planeta, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> *Bloques* (blocs) were the military/geographical subdivisions used both by the paramilitary confederation AUC and the leftist guerrilla FARC.—Trans.



sitional justice in Colombia], which we want to publish and to which you also contributed: that is, to ask the question about what really happened with Justicia y Paz. What possibilities did it open? What kind of terrain did it plow for what came after? And what type of elements from Justicia y Paz had to be radically revised in the context of the Havana agreement between Juan Manuel Santos's government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla group (FARC), especially and specifically the judicial and juridical aspects? Because, as you point out, even constructing the report was difficult at that time since it was not yet possible to have a retrospective view of what was happening.

**María Victoria Uribe:** This is one of the great problems of the historical memory reports: the lack of distance.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Of course.

**María Victoria Uribe:** We were riding the wave the whole time, and that made matters much more difficult because we had no distance. This is important, and it is what you are pointing out.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Toya, on the one hand, there was no distance, but on the other, it was a crucial moment. If the work had not begun when it did, what happened would have been forgotten, as you have often pointed out with a very realistic intuition; we do not know how to remember in this country. People don't care about what happened. Everything is forgotten: this is a country of forgetfulness, where things are erased, and what is erased is erased yet again. I think that, on the one hand, evidently, working without a retrospective view is very difficult, especially in a conflict situation where doing the work is still dangerous—Pilar Riaño and you explain this very well in the article that you wrote trying precisely to evaluate the pros and cons of the work with the National Historical Memory Center.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, however, at that moment it was crucial, but also brave and difficult, to believe in the possibility of memory. How do you see the possibility of memory in Colombia, both from the perspective of what was done with the Historical Memory Group and Center and from the perspective of the current moment, from the discourse on memory in the present?

<sup>11</sup> See Pilar Riaño Alcalá and María Victoria Uribe, "Constructing Memory amidst War: The Historical Memory Group of Colombia," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10, no. 1 (March 2016): 6–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijv036>.

**María Victoria Uribe:** I don't think historical memory solves the problem of not repeating the conflict, not at all! I do not see the connection between historical memory and no repetition, an aspect that is often overemphasized because the *garantía de no repetición del conflicto* [assurance of no repetition of

---

A seasoned commander from FARC stands in front of a victim who is weeping and demanding justice because her son was killed, her husband was killed, and she never found out what happened to their bodies; he stands there and listens.

---

the conflict] is fundamental in the discourse about transitional justice. Let me explain my point to you quickly through what I see happening with the Truth Commission. Not repeating the acts of the conflict applies particularly to those who suffered from

the war most directly, that is, in their own flesh. What I see is that the message of no repetition only reaches the victims and the perpetrators, those who had skin in the conflict. Why? Because they suffered the horrors of war. On the contrary, those who did not suffer the horrors of the war, at least not directly, hear the message and forget it immediately. I am not sure how the message of no repetition could be transmitted to people who have had nothing to do with the war—or those who think that they have had nothing to do with it; this is another side of the problem! So historical memory is absolutely very important. We must absolutely find out what happened. Now, what do we do with that? It is difficult to know. What to do when you actually know what happened and yet can do nothing with this knowledge? Well, there can be empathy; there are people who express solidarity and who understand that the conflict was a monstrous thing that should not be repeated. But there are other people who absolutely lack empathy, and so the message does not reach them at all. I don't think historical memory is able to communicate the message in a sufficiently powerful way; not powerfully enough to move indifferent people.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** I think it is interesting that you put it this way, Toya. Your perspective is critical in a very important way in my opinion. Much of what is said around memory work and policies is that it is all done with future generations especially in mind. Some people even speak, on the contrary, about a “lost generation” for whom the cycles of violence are already so incorporated that they will be repeated. They believe historical memory and historical production are not going to interrupt this violence to which people are already

so accustomed and which is already so normalized. Because of this, they say that memory is produced for future generations so that they don't repeat the violence, so that they know and don't make the same mistakes again. You are formulating, precisely, the opposite thesis. You are saying—and I would like you to expand a little more on this idea for us; I think I can intuit where you are coming from—that, in your experience with people who have lived the war in their own flesh, memory *does* interrupt repetition. We don't have to wait for future generations. But to future generations who have not lived the war in their own flesh, you are saying: "You have to do more than memory to guarantee that the conflict is not repeated." I am very interested in this. I would like you to explain a little more about where you get this conviction. I know this has to do with what you see in your work with both perpetrators and survivors and, currently, with what the Truth Commission is doing.

**María Victoria Uribe:** This idea comes partly from my readings about Northern Ireland and more recently also about Rwanda. At the moment, I am reading a lot about the encounters between victims and perpetrators in Rwanda. These encounters are sometimes mediated by the government and sometimes by religious organizations. They are encounters where the Tutsis and the Hutu look each other in the eye and ask for forgiveness or demand things from each other. I compare this with what is happening in Colombia currently with the encounters organized by the Truth Commission. These readings let me see that war, when it impacts you directly, stops being an abstraction and is no longer an idea; rather, it becomes incarnate, inside you. By incarnating inside you, the dynamic changes entirely. This is not only true for the victims. The perpetrators also live the war in a very brutal way. This can also be seen in those encounters, which are very moving. If these encounters can't move this society, I am not sure what can. A seasoned commander from FARC stands in front of a victim who is weeping and demanding justice because her son was killed, her husband was killed, and she never found out what happened to their bodies; he stands there and listens. I see mostly an impressive listening in that space, in which the perpetrators do not interrupt at all—they listen to everything the victims have to say to them, and, when they are done—only then—the perpetrators can appear and speak. Now, some of them, as can be expected, show up with a very political discourse, like Timochenko, who has constructed such a discourse.<sup>12</sup> Father de Roux has told him many times: "Timochenko, you are here as a person, as a human being,

<sup>12</sup> Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, a.k.a. Timoleón Jiménez or Timochenko, is former commander in chief of the leftist guerrilla FARC.—Trans.

not as the commander of FARC.”<sup>13</sup> He is not able to separate himself from the political discourse, but there are others that . . . wow! It is impressive. This is where you can see it: these people are never going to let all this happen again. Never. But all the rest of Colombians, apathetic, indifferent, blind, deaf, what do they care? They don’t care at all.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** This is very interesting, especially because it brings to light two elements that are perhaps fundamental in everything that refers to the work of historical memory. On the one hand, you remind us of the validity of the attention to the production of emotions in this context and also of how historical memory, the work of memory, must be able to produce these emotions. As you say, it should allow us to be moved by what is happening there. And, on the other hand, the importance of listening. Since you know that I am very interested in questions about listening, and as it seems the theme of listening is fundamental to the construction of memory, I would like you to tell us, from your experience and in the work that you do, how you see the role of listening in the context of historical memory.

**María Victoria Uribe:** It is fundamental. When you are in front of someone else and you want them to recount something about their life, you have to go blank. What I mean is that you must interrupt your own prejudice. You have to put yourself in parenthesis to be able to listen to the other. Otherwise, listen-

---

You have to put yourself in parenthesis to be able to listen to the other. Otherwise, listening is impossible.

---

ing is impossible because what you are listening to is immediately filtered through your prejudices and judgments. Only then will you be able to listen to

the other. Listen to them and not judge them; just listen to them. Only after you have listened can you decide what happens with everything that you heard.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Perhaps this is the combination implied in the idea of historical memory. On the one hand, there is the memory that requires this listening, this possibility of attending to all the voices that must become audible. But for this to happen, as you say, we must first create a scenar-

<sup>13</sup> Father Francisco de Roux is a Colombian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and economist who has served as president of the Truth Commission since it was established in 2017, after the signature of the peace agreement between the Colombian state and FARC.—Trans.

io in which they feel believed, where they can speak and share. On the other hand, there is the historical side that is also part of the work, a work that you have very rigorously carried out. This is the work of providing the elements that contextualize the testimonies, the histories. This is obviously what concerned the Historical Memory Group and informed the work that was done by the National Historical Memory Center. It is likewise a concern that traverses the entirety of your work. Indeed, your work does not stop at collecting testimonies. You worry about understanding the structures, in your case the structures of representation, that make it possible for certain events to take place in the way they do. How do you see this in the context of the Truth Commission today? Do you see that the commission is also preoccupied with this historical function in the wider context of the transitional moment in Colombia? Who contributes the historical aspect? Who contributes the structural aspect so that we can understand from the perspective of the forest, so to speak, and not only from the particular stories?

**María Victoria Uribe:** This is a very good question. I don't think that there is a place for the historical in the Truth Commission's work, though I understand that they are elaborating some reports based on interviews with experts who have worked on the theme of violence in Colombia. I imagine that at some point we will see these reports. I, however, can only speak about the truth encounters. In the truth encounters only the emotions, the feelings are present in a safe space where people can speak and listen. I don't think the historical is very important in this context. There are other things that matter more in my opinion. What really matters is listening to voices that we have never heard. For example, the voices of FARC commanders that executed actions; why were they the executioners of all these violent acts that hurt the communities so much? To listen to those commanders being a little confused and incapable of sustaining a justificatory discourse of their actions in front of those inconsolable women who search for their disappeared relatives . . . seeing that is wonderful. I, in fact, think that all these videos of the commission should be watched in schools and universities.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes, definitely. The pedagogical task is fundamental.

**María Victoria Uribe:** The problem is that people here are very deaf. It is very difficult, María, very difficult.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** We are also still too close to the conflict. There is still too much pain, too much resentment, too many assumptions rather than openness to the possibility of understanding other narratives of what happened.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Yes, totally.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Listening could slowly break through this. From an optimistic viewpoint, perhaps listening to other voices can slowly break through those already preestablished discourses and slowly create space for other ways of understanding what happened or at least other modes of narrating the conflict. The point isn't necessarily to vindicate the past but rather to open other possibilities for the future.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Of course. You asked me about the difference between what was done by the Historical Memory Group and what the Truth Commission is doing. Well, they are two very different approaches. The commission wants to rehumanize both victims and perpetrators. This was never an interest of the group. The group wanted to describe in detail what had happened while taking the voice of the protagonists, mostly victims and survivors, as the starting point. What the commission intends, and I think achieves in some way, is to rehumanize.

There is a very beautiful metaphor that people use in Rwanda. They say that perpetrators are at the Summit of Violence and that victims are in the Valley of

---

The Historical Memory Group wanted to describe in detail what had happened while taking the voice of the protagonists, mostly victims and survivors, as the starting point. The Truth Commission wants to rehumanize both victims and perpetrators.

---

Sorrows. We have to make the perpetrators descend and the victims ascend so that they can meet in a safe place and face each other there.<sup>14</sup> I think that the Truth Commission is promoting the existence of a safe place where victims and perpetrators, either

descending or ascending, can, on equal terms, talk. This has nothing to do with the work done by the Historical Memory Group.

<sup>14</sup> See Ángela Ordoñez Carabaño and María Prieto-Ursúa, "Forgiving a Genocide: Reconciliation Processes between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 52, no. 5 (June 2021): 427–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002202212111020438>.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Of course, these are two very distinct tasks and also two very different moments. All the work of the Historical Memory Group vindicated the very possibility of memory in a context where the main concern was to do justice, to penalize, but not necessarily to remember.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Indeed, the Historical Memory Group and the National Historical Memory Center truly prioritized the victims. Seriously, whatever the victims said mattered, counted, was taken into account. In the commission what I see is more like a silent chorus made up of the commissioners. They don't really come forward, they are in the shadows; rather, perpetrators and victims meet on equal terms and speak to each other. How could this possibly not move you? It is absolutely moving! It is striking. When I started watching these videos, I could not stop crying and thinking about Father de Roux and the work he is carrying out in this context . . . what he is accomplishing is incredible.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes, and it is an unprecedented moment as well. Having lived so much of the violence in Colombia and knowing so much about the violence that came before—because some of us, like you do in your work, have had to reproduce the history and the violence without experiencing them directly—one can see how everything one knows about history, about violence is repeated in one's own present (which is something that I have heard you say many times). I've often heard you speak about the feeling that violence constantly repeats, even in connection to your work on La Violencia. You have said that it feels as if we were stuck in a vicious circle, a cycle of violence that cannot find a way out. In this sense, however, you seem to see something truly unprecedented in these encounters organized by the Truth Commission. Without being too optimistic but rather realistic, what would you say about this? I feel like you see here a very particular force that we cannot find in other moments of the history of the conflict in Colombia.

**María Victoria Uribe:** I find a very particular force in these encounters, indeed. And it frustrates me a lot to know already that what is happening at a micro level—because it is in fact a very small scale, the encounters are very small—will not have the impact it should.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Of course, it will not transcend as it should.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Exactly. Why? Well, you can tell from how this society works. You can see what is left of paramilitary violence operating in the present. You can see the absolute cynicism of some characters in politics. So you think to yourself: “OK, these encounters are so emotive, they are so difficult and unsettling, but who is going to receive this?” Only people capable of feeling empathy can receive it. Only people capable of feeling empathy are going to be moved. People who cannot feel empathy will forget it as soon as they hear it. I am afraid this is the case. I hope I am wrong.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Most likely you are not. In this country we face a very difficult political context around these issues. But here I would like to ask you, from your perspective as a historian, from your perspective as someone who has done ethnography and anthropology of violence in Colombia: What do you think should be our task in the humanities and the social sciences? What should we focus on? What is your hope at this moment, and what has it been in the past? What do you think is pertinent action with an eye toward the future in this context? And in more general terms, what should the humanities and the social sciences hope to contribute so that, as you say, what is happening does not go unnoticed?

**María Victoria Uribe:** I believe that we have to make rehumanization our motto or task. I feel, and this gives me some hope, that the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has contributed to sensitizing people in this sense. Things that you didn’t see often are now happening. You see people greeting each other in the street, for instance. You see certain deferential gestures, certain gestures of consideration toward others that you didn’t see so often before. I am convinced that this has been produced by the pandemic. So, I think that perhaps, just like that, the disease that we have suffered, the disease of violence—and it is a pandemic that is, moreover, naturalized—could function as a pandemic that can sensitize us toward others. The problem is that, since it becomes part of the landscape, this does not happen. But I have the hope that, in some way, when the report from the Truth Commission is published, and as people hear and see more of these videos . . . It is very sad. I decided to find out how many views the commission’s videos have received. Some have 240 views, others 1,200. The viewership is very small. But I have the hope that at some point, possibly when the current government changes, the gates will open, and society will be sensitive again toward all of this.



It is very difficult. Now the young are taking action in the streets in the context of the national strike. What is happening there is very interesting. I do have great hope in the youth. They are not from the elite classes. They are young people from the middle and lower classes, and they are so sensitive to things that you say: "Wow! This is wonderful!" So I think that there can be changes in the future. Colombians can be sensitized and can realize that we either rehumanize it all or we are really going to repeat it. If we don't want to repeat the conflict and have another cycle of violence in ten years (because violence is totally cyclical) . . . If we don't want this to happen, we must rehumanize ourselves. This, I would say, is my conclusion.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** I think this is very important as a task and perhaps as a possibility. Memory and memory work should be resensitized and, in this way, hopefully rehumanized.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Yes. I think there are people for whom this isn't possible; they are impervious people. Yet there are others who can do it; when they find out how things are now and how they happened, they feel concerned.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Absolutely. I want to return to something you said at the beginning. I think it is very interesting, and I would like to emphasize it. Those who have experienced the war firsthand are the people who don't want it to be repeated. How can we make those who didn't experience the conflict feel *as if* they had?

**María Victoria Uribe:** Exactly. They need to feel as if they had experienced it. Exactly.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Before we finish, I want to ask you a question that I have asked everyone in these interviews: Who are the central authors in your work with historical memory in Colombia? Whose voices accompany you in this work?

**María Victoria Uribe:** Well-known voices from throughout the world accompany me, like Benjamin and Lacan, as I mentioned. They are my favorite authors. Veena Das also accompanies me; I love her work. Mary Douglas, a classical anthropologist, also accompanies me. María del Rosario Acosta López accompanies me as well. I am interested in some Colombian philosophers who want

to come in contact with people, listen to them. I think the conjunction between philosophy and the street is very important. In fact, we are already seeing the production of some philosophers, especially young women philosophers, who do this. It is really striking what happens when a woman philosopher sees, hears, listens. Wonderful work comes out of this. I also discover authors constantly. Right now, for example, since I am working on the issue of rehumanization, I am discovering new authors who have worked in Rwanda, in Sri Lanka, and in Northern Ireland. However, I have my central authors: Mary Douglas, Veena Das, María del Rosario Acosta López, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Lacan. These are my central authors.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** It's an honor to be in your list, Toya!

**María Victoria Uribe:** No, I am not trying to flatter you or anything. I have basically everything you have written. I have it and have read it. You are an exceptional person in the field of philosophy in Colombia. You really care about what is happening.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes, I am very interested. This is precisely why I wanted to do these interviews. I want to tell the story of the work that has been done in Colombia. I think this work is unprecedented and can serve as a precedent for memory work in other places. I believe it is very important to tell the story so it can be used elsewhere.

**María Victoria Uribe:** Definitely. People don't read Colombian authors very widely, especially Colombian women who work on these issues. It is very important that we are heard. Exactly.

*Translated from the Spanish by Julian Rios Acuña*

**María Victoria Uribe** is an anthropologist and historian born in Bogotá, Colombia. She has a PhD in history from the National University of Colombia. Uribe served as director of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (INCAH) from 1994 to 2005 and was an associate professor at the Institute for Social and Cultural Studies PENSAR at the Pontifical Javerian University in Bogotá in 2005–7. She was a member of the Historical Memory Group (2007–11) and held a residential fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin (2014–15). Since 2011 Uribe has been an associate professor in the Department of Jurisprudence at the Del Rosario University in Bogotá and emerita researcher in the National System of Researchers, Colciencias.

**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).