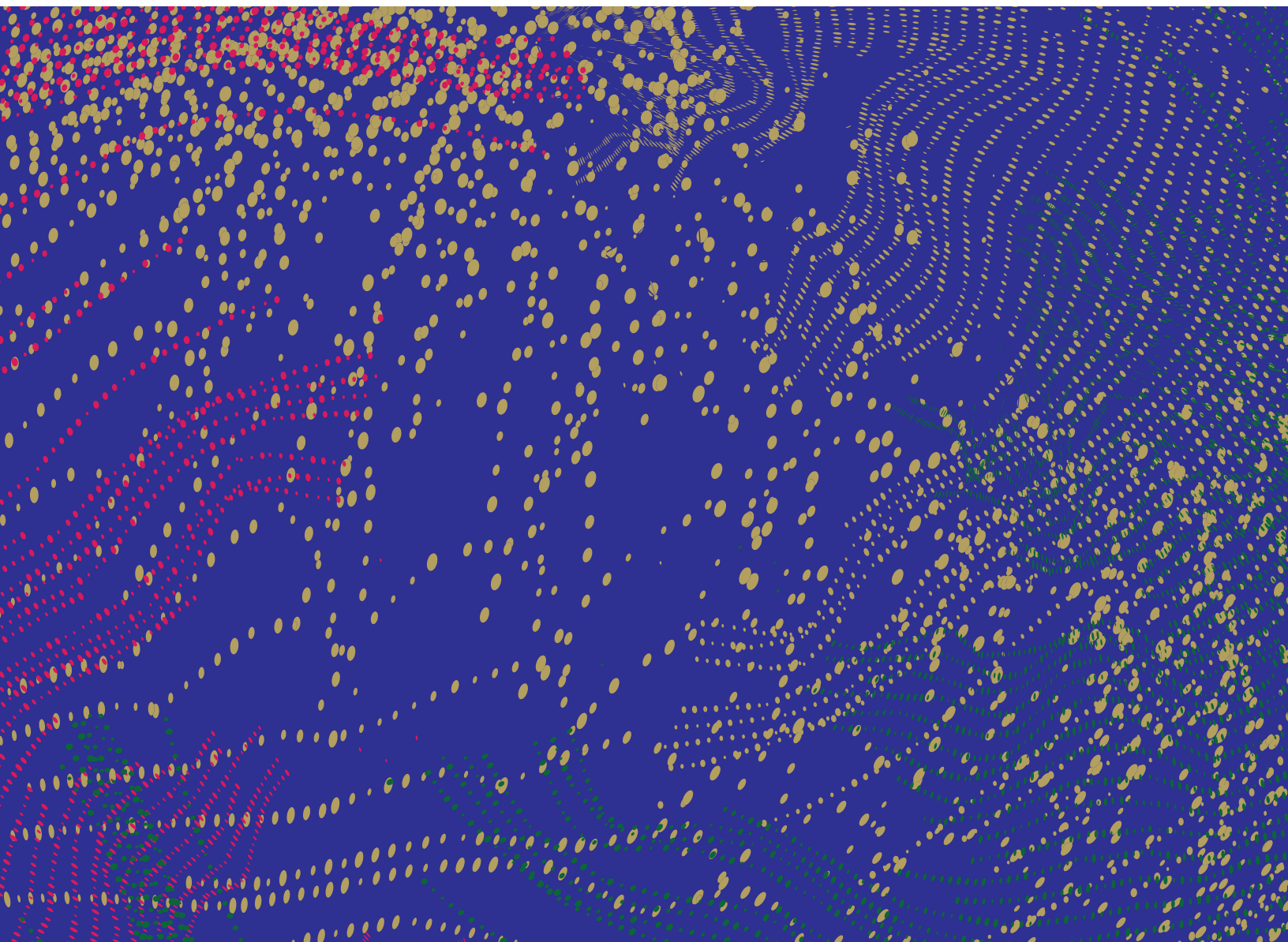


The World Humanities Report

# Giving a Place to the Dead and Reassembling the Present

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Diego Cagüeñas Roza in conversation  
with María del Rosario Acosta López



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

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

Suggested citation:

Cagüañas Roza, Diego. "Giving a Place to the Dead and Reassembling the Present." Interview by María del Rosario Acosta López. In *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, 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](#).

# Giving a Place to the Dead and Reassembling the Present

Diego Cagüañas Rozo *Icesi University*

María del Rosario Acosta López *University of California, Riverside*

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** We have been in conversation with each other from the beginning of our careers when we were college classmates. Life has brought us and our work together multiple times and at different moments. I believe this has always been very productive for both of us. For me, at least, it has always been a pleasure to read your work. In my opinion, your voice introduces something very particular to the world of the humanities in Colombia. Partly, this is because rather than staying within a single discipline and methodology, you have combined multiple disciplines and methodologies in very productive ways.

And it was a pleasure to revisit the texts that you sent for today's conversation (and which I will be referring to along the way). In them, I was able to observe a trajectory that starts with your anthropological studies at the University of the Andes and continues with your master's degree in the Netherlands with a focus on the concept of forgiveness from a philosophical perspective. I could also observe your path through the very challenging research for your PhD in anthropology, which led you to unexpected places in Colombia, especially to the Cauca and Valle del Cauca regions. It is a trajectory that has led you to your current work at Icesi University on what I would call, in general terms and without going into details yet, "historical memory." I want to qualify your current work in this way because I think that the project in Bojayá<sup>1</sup> is a wonderful example of the multiplicity of expressions of historical memory, as we call it in Colombia. Moreover, the project wonderfully exemplifies what historical memory has made possible in the last ten years in the country because of approaches as creative and committed as yours.

\* 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> Bojayá is a municipality whose urban center is the village of Bellavista. Bojayá is located in the department (Colombian administrative territorial unit) of Chocó on the country's Pacific coast. Bojayá, like most municipalities in the region, was largely ignored by mainstream Colombian media until the day of the massacre. For information on the Bojayá massacre, see note 4 below.—Trans.

Part of what I want to explore today in our conversation is the relationship between the project in Bojayá and the historical memory work that the National Historical Memory Center carried out there. I would like to learn how the project acquired its own direction, at least at the beginning, when you participated so actively, and how it resulted, among other things, in the production of the documentary film *Voces de resistencia: Cantaoras de Pogue* (Voices of resistance: Traditional women singers from Pogue).<sup>2</sup>

But before going into more detail about the project, the documentary, and the decision to engage with the work of the *cantaoras*, give us your own perspective on your trajectory. How did it lead you to decide to work in Bojayá with this community in particular? How did you understand your project in relation to the efforts of the National Historical Memory Center at the time to establish regional memory groups?

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** OK. I am going to try to simplify the story because it is a little messy. Perhaps it all started in 2015, María, when the first regional historical memory groups conference was organized to exchange and showcase the work each group was doing in their own region.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes. That is when we presented also the documentaries coming out of the three pilot projects (Ciénaga, Cartagena, and Santander).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Centro de Estudios Afrodiaspóricos (CEAF), Universidad Icesi, “Voces de Resistencia Cap. 1 / Cantadoras de Pogue” [Voices of resistance, chapter 1, Pogue singers], September 2, 2017, video, 25:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pKUJYzaWcQ>. The project “Voces de resistencia” [Voices of resistance] (<https://www.icesi.edu.co/vocesderesistencia/>) is a large team led by Aurora Vergara who initially was going to participate in this interview, but in the end could not due to scheduling conflicts and her moving to the United States for postdoctoral work. For an analysis of the project with the Cantaoras de Pogue from Vergara’s perspective, see Jerónimo Botero and Aurora Vergara-Figueroa, “Cantando el territorio” [Singing the territory], conference presentation, Latin American Studies Association Congress, Barcelona, May 23, 2018. For a detailed account of her work with the community from Bellavista, see Aurora Vergara-Figueroa, *Afrodescendant Resistance to Deracination in Colombia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the project of Regional Groups of Historical Memory, see María Emma Wills, “To Hear the Other’s Pain without Being Shipwrecked in Horror,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023). The project continues to be carried out by the Red de Grupos Regionales [Regional groups network] (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Nonprofit-Organization/Red-de-Grupos-Regionales-de-Memoria-Hist%C3%B3rica-107773807680158/>).

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** That's it! You invited me to the event in Bogotá because you thought that we could start a regional historical memory group at Icesi University in Cali. I was at the event—where I remember seeing Steve Stern—and I found the presentations very interesting. At that time, we had just created the Ethics and Democracy Center at the university. I was the director, and I thought: This is a great idea! We can open a line of work on memory at the center. I proposed this to Aurora Vergara, who created and still directs the CEAF (Centro de Estudios Afrodiaspóricos [Center for Afro-diasporic studies]) at the university, and she said: “Of course, let's do memory work in Bojayá.” She had already been working with the community there for some time, and the initiative would coincide with the fifteenth anniversary of the May 2, 2002, massacre.<sup>4</sup> So we decided to carry out the project “Bojayá, 15 años después: Políticas del perdón y el retorno” (Bojayá, 15 years later: Politics of forgiveness and return). Our goal was to establish what had happened with the return and repopulation of the new town that was built after the massacre, the “new Bellavista.” Only the church remains in the “old Bellavista,” which is now abandoned. The church is preserved because this is where the community holds memorials. The government, however—I believe it was during Álvaro Uribe's first administration<sup>5</sup>—built a new town where people could return after the massacre and the displacement it forced.

Since the plan was to work in conjunction with the National Historical Memory Center, we thought that, since the report *Bojayá: La guerra sin límites* (Bojayá: War without limits)<sup>6</sup> ends with a series of recommendations to assure that, among other things, what happened there never happens again, we could assess what came of these recommendations with the community. So a lawyer joined the group, then a psychologist (because there was an important question about psychological effects and reparations), and a physician . . . and the

<sup>4</sup> The Massacre of Bojayá, as it is known in Colombia, refers to the attack and capture of the village of Bellavista in the municipality of Bojayá, Chocó Department, by guerrilla combatants from the communist guerrilla FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] who were in combat with the paramilitary organization ACCU (Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá [Peasant self-defenses of Córdoba and Urabá]). In the middle of their combat, a gas tank was thrown by FARC combatants toward the San Pablo Apóstol church, where dozens of families had taken refuge. The explosion killed seventy-nine civilians, forty-eight of them children. The event caused a massive displacement of the population; the official estimate is that 5,771 people abandoned the area for Quibdó, the capital city of the department of Chocó.

<sup>5</sup> President Álvaro Uribe Vélez's first term was between 2002 and 2006.—Trans.

<sup>6</sup> Grupo de Memoria Histórica de la Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, *Bojayá: La guerra sin límites* (Bogotá: Ediciones Semana, 2010), <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bojay%C3%A1-La-guerra-sin-l%C3%ADmites.pdf>.

team grew.<sup>7</sup> The initial goal was to carry out a kind of assessment from different perspectives. During that same period, Aurora Vergara secured funding through the Ford Foundation for another project, “Voces de resistencia,” and, in some ways, the same people ended up working on both of these projects at the same time, and that made it a little difficult to reconstruct the development of the project. The mix of people in both projects was also due to practical limitations; it is a challenge to move so many people from Cali to Quibdó and then to Bellavista. Since transportation was so expensive, the whole team was never together at the field. We took turns carrying out the different tasks in different visits. I didn’t get to see very important things that took place during fieldwork, but at the same time I was there at times when other people weren’t. This made the project truly a group effort with a very interesting team that complemented each other’s work constantly. For that same reason, it was very difficult to coordinate our visits to the field with the people from the National Historical Memory Center. This, of course, ended up affecting their work in the long term.

So to make a long story short, we came to Quibdó to start the project. Initially, we had two meetings with representatives from the Committee for the Rights of Victims of Bojayá to ask for their input about what they wanted the project to be. We had in mind something more than just another report. We wanted to do something more integral with the community’s participation. Our goal was to use the opportunity to see what else we could do, how we could contribute to the community. And since Aurora had been working there for so many years and people knew her, trust was already built. Building trust with the community, which usually takes so much time and effort, was already well under way. As could be expected, many ideas emerged because the community lacked many things and they had many necessities to attend to. The project happened in 2016, but if you look today, well, not much has changed. They still face challenges because of the scarcity of teachers, the health clinic (they don’t even have a hospital!), public safety issues—in short, very well-known problems. From the conversations in these two meetings, it became evident that one of the main worries for people in the community was the progressive disappearance of the tradition of funerary chants called *alabaos*. They felt that young people were more interested in other rhythms: salsa-choque, reggaeton, et cetera, while

<sup>7</sup> At different points of the projects “Bojayá, 15 años después” and “Voces de resistencia,” the following people, then affiliated with Icesi University, were part of the team: Aurora Vergara, Diego Cagüañas Rozo, Lina Buchely, Ximena Castro, Jerónimo Botero, Marcelo Franco, Yoseth Ariza, María Paola Herrera, Lina Mosquera, Lina Jaramillo, Mario Hernández, Diana Manzano, Henry Arenas, and Natalia Arenas.

carrying little for sounds like the *alabaos*, which are so important for many others in the community. In this context, it dawned on us that with respect to the *alabaos* we could realistically offer something to the community. We couldn't offer the community a new health clinic, but with the resources that we did have and with the possibilities that we could construct through our expertise, we could support an effort to recover and register this tradition.

This is how the two projects that I mentioned—the fifteenth anniversary commemoration of the massacre and the project “Voces de resistencia”—ended up coming together in a research project about the tradition of *alabaos*. Moreover, the *alabaos* also make it possible to understand the problem of harm and, of course, the problem of memory. They are a very powerful means of expression that go beyond funerary rituals; they became a practice of denunciation, resistance, and revitalization of social bonds. They have all these facets. Funerary rituals in the Chocó region are moments when extended families reunite. In this sense, they are certainly moments of grief (with evident mourning), but they are also happy occasions because

people get to reunite after long periods of separation. There is always music, dancing, and drinking at funerals, and, of course, the novenas.<sup>8</sup> It is very powerful. With these funerary traditions as their starting point, the *cantaoras* slowly started reimagining their practice. Their chants stopped being directed only

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to Virgin Mary or to Christ and started becoming stories of denunciation or ways to record events that are important to remember such as the murder of Jorge Luis Mazo, a priest executed by the paramilitary in 1999. The *alabaos* thus became modes of expression for recording and denouncing things that are happening in the territory.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Novenas are a Catholic practice of faith consisting in sustained prayer sessions for nine days guided by different prayer books depending on the occasion. Novenas are a common practice in Colombia, especially during the nine days prior to Christmas Eve (*novena de aguinaldos*) and after funerary ceremonies.—Trans.

<sup>9</sup> For an account and analysis of the results of the fieldwork carried out by the team from Icesi University around the recovery of the *alabaos* and a study of the changes to them after the 2002 massacre, see Paola Marín and Gastón Alzate, “Ethical and Political Implications of ‘Performance’ in a Rural Cultural Practice: Afro-Colombian Women Singers from the Town of Pogue,” *Journal of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy* 32 (2021): 1–22.

This character of *alabaos* also explains why the project combines so many interesting facets. In the beginning, we were only going to produce a sound recording. The plan was to produce ten *alabaos*—an album—and two video clips. As we started recording, the project started growing, and we realized that the recorded material had more potential than we knew. This is how it ended up turning into a documentary film. The documentary is still missing some more narrative material; it is a little plain. But in any case, it is available.

We also registered the lyrics of the *alabaos* as part of the process. We not only recorded the chants, but we also transcribed the lyrics so that we could read them later with the *cantaoras*. This exercise was very interesting because, after hearing the recordings and paying special attention to the lyrics, many of them started asking themselves questions, correcting the lyrics, and even debating the original lyrics. To explain what happened here I'll use the example of the novena. In Colombia we recite it every December, and we know it by heart from repetition. However, if one actually pays attention to what we are saying, there are many things that one has always repeated and yet never understood. For example, *padre putativo* [reputed father] in reference to Joseph. Nobody knows what a *padre putativo* is, right? So if I remember correctly—there is no way of knowing for sure in this case—there is an *alabao* with a verse that says *leguas* [leagues]. Many in the community, however, believed it said *lenguas* [tongues]. It sparked a very interesting conversation because it was in itself a memory exercise. In the conversation, someone would ask: “How did I learn this song? Who taught it to me? What does it mean?” Someone, then, would explain that “a league” is a unit of measurement for distance. In response, another person would ask: “A league . . . how much is that?” And someone else would say: “Yes. I think it is this much.” Yet another person would insist: “The lyrics originally said ‘tongues.’”

In any case, the exercise was very interesting because it allowed people to reappropriate, as they say in the humanities, their tradition. Rather than *just* singing the *alabao* that their mother taught them and their grandmother taught their mother, the *cantaoras* started asking: What is the *alabao* really saying? Why do we sing it? And why do we sing *this* one? And even while singing, someone would stop and say: “I wrote this one.” And then she would explain why the lyrics said this or that, and the others would reply: “We see now” or “But why does it actually say this? Why did you sing it like that?”



Cira's story, which I have written about,<sup>10</sup> emerged in a context like that conversation. She said that she didn't write the *alabao* and that a spirit actually taught it to her in her dreams. The striking part is that others' reactions were not sarcastic, mockingly saying: "As if *that* could happen in dreams!" Quite the contrary, their immediate response was: "Yes, I see. What happened in your dream? And, after that, what else happened? Of course, and what did the spirit tell you? And could you really understand what the spirit was saying?" There emerged many different registers of memory in this situation, and not all of them were related to the massacre. Many other things emerged in all those gatherings and in the work with the community.

This is a very brief summary of what we did in the project. In the end, the "products," so to speak, were the documentary and the album together with a graphic design identifying the Pogue Cantaoras and the wardrobe they chose and designed to wear in their public presentations. Everything was done with the community. We discuss the experience in more detail in an article on methodologies in memory work.<sup>11</sup>

The relation with the National Historical Memory Center, finally, was established through the network of regional groups, especially with Laura Giraldo, Tatiana Rojas, and with María Emma Wills, who has always been especially generous. We had a meeting at the University of the Andes, another meeting in Barranquilla, and one in the Amazon region that I could not attend. María Emma commented on our work at these meetings. In addition to these meetings, the original plan was to produce a book with the National Historical Memory Center, but the project came to a stop after the center's change of orientation.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the most fruitful part of our relationship with the center was the work with other regional groups.

<sup>10</sup> See Diego Cagüañas Rozo, "Historia como fantología: Vida onírica, cantos mortuorios y el deber para con los espectros en Bojayá, Chocó" [History as phantology: Oneiric life, mortuary chants, and the duty toward the specters in Bojayá, Chocó], *Philosophical Readings* 11, no. 3 (2019): 140–46.

<sup>11</sup> See María Paola Herrera Valencia, Lina Marcela Mosquera Lemus, Diego Cagüañas Rozo, and Aurora Vergara-Figueroa, "El objeto-relato como dispositivo de memoria: El caso del Grupo de Alabao de Pogue, Bojayá, Chocó" [The object-story as a device of memory: The case of the *alabao* group from Pogue, Bojayá, Chocó], in *Lugares, sentidos y recorridos de la memoria histórica: Acercamientos metodológicos* [Places, meanings, and pathways of historical memory: Methodological approaches], ed. Laura Fonseca Durán et al. (Chía: Universidad de la Sabana, 2019), 27–47.

<sup>12</sup> Since the beginning of Ivan Duque's presidency in 2018, the new direction of the National Historical Memory Center has focused on denying the existence of an armed conflict in the country; instead, it has advanced a narrative in which the Colombian state fought criminal organizations without itself being an actor in the conflict. This directly contradicts the previous findings of the center.—Trans.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Yes. What you are describing was always the goal and the foundational idea of the network of regional groups. In the end, the objective was for the groups to build a network of support and collaboration among themselves. We wanted them to work and communicate with each other and, most importantly, to share experiences so that not everything was directly dependent on the National Historical Memory Center in Bogotá.

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** Exactly. And we are still doing it. We have consistently had yearly meetings. In 2020, given the pandemic, we met virtually. The meeting was supposed to be in Cartagena. We were all very disappointed because we didn't get to go to Cartagena. So the network of regional memory groups is still there. The network is still working. Like all networks of its kind, it has very active moments and other more dispersed periods; it also has some people who are more active than others, and so on. But the network still exists, and the spirit of collaboration is still there. In general, there are great and very hard-working people there, and multiple things have been produced. Well, this is the summary, a rather quick one.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** There are many things in what you told us that I would like to focus on. Perhaps the best way to proceed is to lay out some of them, and then to divide them into two or three questions. This way we will make sure nothing is left unasked. In the first place, I am interested in talking in more detail about the experience of working with the *cantaoras*. I would like you to tell us a little more about the fieldwork with them. This will allow me to then ask you more concrete questions about your thinking and writing on this experience. But first, it is necessary to give more materiality to the experience itself. For example, the *alabao*. Tell us more about its multiple facets, as you put it earlier. The *alabao* was not only a mode of expression that the community was interested in preserving, reviving, or revitalizing, but it also became an exercise of memory. Reviving traditions demands revising them, understanding their origin, reading the lyrics out loud.

Second, in your text about methodologies,<sup>13</sup> you suggest a comparison between the *alabao*s and the idea of narration in Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller."<sup>14</sup> Beyond your suggestion, in my own attempt to put "The Storyteller" in dialogue with your work with the *cantaoras*, I see the tradition of

<sup>13</sup> Herrera Valencia et al., "El objeto-relato como dispositivo de memoria."

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Tales Out of Loneliness*, trans. and ed. Sam Dolbear, Esther Leslie, and Sebastian Trukolaski (London: Verso, 2016).

*alabaos*, insofar as it is oral, to be fragmented because it goes from mouth to mouth and can never be fixed within a single narrative with a beginning and an end, like a book. Because of this, the tradition has a richness that demands different ways of working with and understanding memory. Tell us more about all of this in the context of the *alabaos* and how the *alabaos* end up becoming “shields of truth,” as the *cantaoras* describe them. This makes me think about Benjamin’s text again, about the way in which he talks about “narration” as a “place” where the narrative, or the experience around the narrative—the experience of telling and listening in order to transmit the narrative is Benjamin’s main concern in that text—is preserved like seeds are: ready to germinate again when they are sown, even if centuries later.

And so, finally, before we discuss the kind of harm that the massacre represented for this community, I would like us to focus on what, as you say, is not only an exercise of memory about the massacre but also an exercise of memory that fulfills the role that the National Historical Memory Center intended for memory work, namely, the production of a “restorative memory.” Historical memory should be an opportunity for the communities to rethink themselves, to recover, to restore the bonds that violence injured and, in some cases, even destroyed. I am very interested in your emphasis on the creative and resilient aspect that goes beyond remembering or denouncing the massacre by reconstructing and rehabilitating the communal bonds starting, precisely, with the experience of the *alabao* and everything it brings with it.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes, of course, I think that this was the most relevant aspect of what we accomplished there. I will tell you a story to illustrate this. As soon as we arrived as a group in Bellavista for the first time the people in the community called us the “memory people” [*los de memoria*]. What is strange about this? Well, we hadn’t been there for a whole three hours; we had just arrived. We were sitting around in the street, hanging out. Some of us even felt quite comfortable; we started talking with María Eugenia, with Mayito, with other people there, women from the community. Very soon into the conversation, they started talking to us about the massacre. We hadn’t even asked about it! They started telling us what happened that day, in detail. Pure horror. They talked for a long hour. Later on, at night, I was wondering: Why did they tell us the story? We didn’t ask them. This is when we realized it: Of course! We are the “memory people”! What do the memory people do? Well, they come to

hear the account of the massacre *ooooone more time*.<sup>15</sup> There are some automatic responses in place, like telling the account of the massacre to the “memory people.” The community is already used to people coming to get the story; they are used to people wanting to hear only this story.

This is all very problematic, of course, not only because we are not the “memory people,” but especially because the folks in the community think, and with good reason, that they only matter to other people because they were the victims of a massacre. If there hadn’t been a massacre, surely nobody would come around. The reasons why we do fieldwork have always made me uncomfortable; it is strange to go stick one’s nose in someone else’s community. At first, they called us *los paisas*<sup>16</sup> because most outsiders in the town come from the depart-

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The *alabaos* . . . led us to a much more productive relationship with the community because they allowed us to do something *with* them and not only to write *about* them.

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ment of Antioquia, just across the river. Later, when they started to get to know us, they called us, at least, *los caleños*.<sup>17</sup> To make a long story short, of course our initial impulse was to look for what was happening fifteen years

after the massacre, but fortunately, after the first few meetings with the victims’ committee, the community itself helped us redirect the project. The *alabaos*, as the articulating axis of the project, led us to a much more productive relationship with the community because they allowed us to do something *with* them and not only to write *about* them; *alabaos* allowed us to be there in and with the community.

The first time we visited the community coincided with the fourteenth anniversary of the massacre. We heard them sing, we recorded them, and we slowly became familiar with *alabaos*. Most of us had never heard one, and we didn’t know the territory: everything was very new. I think that this was the least intrusive way to enter the community. It was clear to everyone that we were going to work with the community on this project—and everything that that might mean. We brought, for example, a music teacher that could help them sing better as a group. This was controversial. Of course, they sing very beau-

<sup>15</sup> *Ooootra vez* in the original is used to emphasize the repetition of the story many times.—Trans.

<sup>16</sup> Common name to designate people from the regions of Antioquia, Quindio, and Risaralda within Colombia.—Trans.

<sup>17</sup> From the city of Cali, Colombia.—Trans.

tifully, but it was something else to record them as a group. Some people said to us: “What are you doing? Why are you teaching them to sing? They already know how to sing!” We would reply: “Yes, of course they know how to sing, but they could do it better, more in tune.” When we had the presentation event here in Cali, all of the women came. (It was a logistical nightmare because the small plane had to bring half of them and then return to Quibdó for the other half because they didn’t all fit in one trip.) The music teacher stood in front of the stage, conducting them. People kept saying to us: “What is this? Why is this person there? *Alabaos* are not meant to be conducted.” Likewise, people from the community addressed the *cantaoras* with concern, asking them: “Why do you sing *alabaos* if we are not at a funeral? You are invoking the dead after all!”

Anyhow, the *cantaoras* had to practice a lot. Their days were very long. They practiced in a wooden house in the town of Pogue. The women could be sweating profusely, given the hot weather. The music teacher held them to the highest standards. He would cut them off and say: “Stop! Let’s go back, from the top! You came in late!” It was hard work, and some of the older women would say: “Please, let’s take a break.” I think that in the end this work brought the group closer together. I think the women became more united; they felt more like they were part of something beyond occasionally coming together to sing because someone passed away and this is just what they do. Something else happened there, and it brought them closer together, at least from my perspective.

It was also very beautiful to witness the whole process. I will never forget the time when, after recording some *alabaos* in Pogue, we gave the *cantaoras* the headset and played the recording for them. The moment when they could hear themselves . . . it was extremely moving! Their faces immediately brightened! It was like they were wondering: Is this really what we do? Is this how people hear us? The recognition of people’s work is a very important part of what we do, even outside the context of historical memory. Most of them are women, so their traditional role in the community is often limited to cooking, child-care, housekeeping, and so forth. Of course, sometimes they receive recognition for their labor in the domestic sphere—recognition about being the best cook, making the best stew, things like that. In the context of the project, the recognition they received was about something else entirely: they were recognized for their singing and for their musical compositions. They realized they could travel with their songs because music lets people in faraway places know about the artists. Besides the event in Cali, the *cantaoras* traveled to Cartagena and to Villavicencio. Saulo Mosquera, who described *alabaos* as “shields of truth,” even went to Mexico. (Sadly, Saulo passed away a few months ago.) I think that this

is also a very important part of our work: recognizing people for something that is very important in their communities but that is not often valued or recognized outside of the community, and recognizing them for something other than being victims of a massacre, which is what so often happens with memory initiatives.

At the end of the project, they performed at the main auditorium of Icesi University; it was packed, and they received a standing ovation.<sup>18</sup> The whole event was very moving. The most beautiful part is that they not only sang but also explained the *alabaos*, all the work they had done with them. They explained to the audience the difference between an *alabao* and a *chigualo*<sup>19</sup> and that they sing them on different occasions. They explained what specific *alabaos* were about and told the audience who had composed them. So beyond just singing, the event allowed them to showcase their creations. This is very important, in my opinion. Showcasing their creations is part of a work of cultural reconstruction and memory, of course. It is especially important to show that their work is not only “folklore”—this reduction of culture to “folklore” is a very problematic aspect of the relation between the Valle del Cauca region, especially the city of Cali, with the Colombian Pacific region. The problem is that people understand folklore as something old or obsolete. Folklore pertains to previous generations—the songs that my grandmother taught me and that her grandmother taught her. On the contrary, the *alabaos* that the *cantaoras* sang that day were recent. Some of them were less than ten years old; some were just composed. *Alabaos* are not a tradition that exists outside of time, and urban people in Colombia need to be constantly reminded that there are people outside of the city who also have an active life of the imagination.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Of course, these imaginaries are not only offensive, but also deafening . . .

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes, and they don’t let you see people as people. All in all, this was the work we did. It had multiple stages, multiple trips, and we spent multiple seasons there. It involved recording the music, taking pictures of their apparel, interviewing them, and having workshops around the lyrics. Retrospectively, it was a very intense process. A large amount of work went into it.

<sup>18</sup> See Universidad Icesi, “Lanzamiento Proyecto Voces de Resistencia,” September 2, 2017, video, 1:31:47, <https://youtu.be/euvaPnlXs28>.

<sup>19</sup> Another form of traditional funerary chanting in Afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific coast of Colombia.—Trans.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Indeed! This is why I wanted to include this project in the interviews. Especially because, although there are the texts that the group produced, there isn't one text that collects the whole experience and that serves to memorialize the memory exercise that you carried out with the community. Except, of course, for Aurora Vergara's book, which is wonderful.<sup>20</sup> Even in the case of this book, however, what is collected is her own work, but not all the aspects of the project or the multiple facets that it acquired thanks to the interdisciplinary team. The closest thing we have to this is perhaps the methodological text that some of you coauthored,<sup>21</sup> about which we were just talking. This text, however, still contains only part of the project.

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** You are right. We haven't yet consolidated the memory of the group. We are missing the reflective moment when we ask ourselves and each other: OK, what was it that we actually did?

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Returning to what you were saying about how the question is not "just about folklore" and the deafness that this reduction of culture to folklore entails, I think that there is something in your work that has to do with a very particular kind of listening. If *alabaos* are "shields of truth," your work has attempted, among other things, to listen to the truth that is present here. The truth is not simply the story of the massacre. As you say in one of your texts, we must first start by listening to and understanding the *harm* that the massacre caused.<sup>22</sup> What is the negative legacy of profound rupture that the massacre left in this community and in these people's lives?

It would perhaps be good to look at this other side of your work, where you understand the *alabao* as a place where the specificity of the harm is expressed. You argue that we must listen to *alabaos* in these terms because to carry out responsible and adequate memory work in this context, we must first understand the harm that we are dealing with. I quote here a passage from your text on broken souls: "The all-encompassing figures of radical evil, the culture of violence, and unspeakable crimes are insufficient to measure what must be repaired."<sup>23</sup> Another grammar, another mode of listening is necessary to understand the kind of harm that is articulated and expressed and that inhabits the experience, in these new *alabaos* that recount and sing this harm.

<sup>20</sup> Vergara-Figueroa, *Afrodescendant Resistance to Deracination in Colombia*.

<sup>21</sup> Herrera Valencia et al., "El objeto-relato como dispositivo de memoria."

<sup>22</sup> See Diego Cagüañas Rozo, "Almas dañadas, rostro, perdón y milagro: Reflexiones a propósito de Bojayá, Chocó" [Damaged souls, face, forgiveness and miracle: Ruminations about Bojayá, Chocó], *Estudios Políticos* 61 (2021): 48–71.

<sup>23</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, "Almas dañadas, rostro, perdón y milagro," 51.

So on the one hand, tell us about what you, echoing the voice of the community, have described as “the harm of the soul.” It is a kind of harm that is conjugated with the demand of the dead whose death has not been adequately accompanied. The tissue of the community is broken or, in the words you attribute to the community, “the dead are thirsty.” You write: “In one of the rainiest regions of the planet, the ancestors are thirsty. Thirst does not let one forget. Thirst is memory and insistence on something that needs satisfaction, something overwhelming and disheartening. In Bojayá, the body suffers the thirst, and the thirst harms the soul.”<sup>24</sup> Diego, please tell us about this aspect of your work. Later on, we will look at another side that I would like to explore, the question of forgiveness articulated through the experience with the *alabaos*.

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** OK. There is a lot to unpack here. Where should I start? First, let me start with what is perhaps most particular about my ethnographic work. There are other *alabaos* throughout the Pacific region, but I write about these *alabaos* in particular. I write about *this* community, *these* people, *these* faces, *these* lives. In this context, the concept of radical evil, despite being so powerful, is too abstract, too general. It is important to attend to the local modes of articulation: How does the community articulate what happened or is happening to them? This is why I think the concept of harm to the soul is so powerful; it is the way—one of the ways—in which the community describes what has happened to them.

The soul is both the soul of the community and each individual soul; each person goes through what happened in their own way. There are people who lost ten or twelve relatives that day and people who didn’t lose anybody but who still must suffer the effects of that day in their lives. Obviously, however, it is also something felt collectively, so the community has articulated it in these terms. The question, however, is about neither an entirely homogeneous communal articulation nor each individual’s separate articulation. The nation-state apparatus has many difficulties when translating all of this, because it does not know how to translate the “harm to the soul” into terms of reparations. In my opinion, the work of the officials, even those trained and devoted to attending victims of the conflict, is very unrewarding because they come with their pre-given forms and all they find is a series of untranslatable concepts.

For example, I remember that in the discussion about reparations and recommendations to the state in this regard, the community was demanding a hospital as a form of reparation. The community’s access to healthcare is rather precar-

<sup>24</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, “Almas dañadas, rostro, perdón y milagro,” 59.



ious: they have to travel to Quibdó, which is three hours away by motorboat, to seek medical attention. So one of the people from the victim attention group (who was probably just doing their job) said to the community: “We can’t give you a hospital. All I can offer you is to restore the health clinic.” Evidently, this is due to the fact that reparation in this context is conceived literally as the restoration of what was there before the massacre. A woman from the community, however, got angry and told them: “OK, if this is how you conceive of reparation . . . people used to be alive; you might as well bring them back to life.” I found this very powerful because again . . .

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** It is impossible to restore what has been broken, as you put it.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** It is impossible to restore it, and yet something must be done. This is the dilemma. The law is not able to translate actual situations, and yet we need it to. We need the state there, doing what it is doing, and ideally doing more. It is a very complex situation because reparation and restoration as such are impossible to achieve and yet they must somehow take place, even if what is done will always fall short. It is like a curse. There is no way of doing this appropriately. There is no way of doing it perfectly. Reparations are doomed to failure. People get angry with state officials: it is always the state’s fault. But state officials . . .

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** . . . have limitations because there is a framework that allows them to understand only in a particular way, to listen to only certain things, to record only some things. This brings up something that you have also worked on. You emphasize the importance of attending to other modes of dispensing justice that may differ from strictly legal, judicial, criminal, and restorative approaches.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes, and these other modes of justice end up taking place outside the official sphere of the state. The fact is that I am a bit skeptical, and I would rather have forgiveness. I would rather state institutions stop putting together scenes and events of official forgiveness. They are useless.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Perhaps a good way to talk about this is the story that you recount in your texts about the “Cristo del Atrato”<sup>25</sup> and about *almas dañadas* [damaged souls].<sup>26</sup> These official events of forgiveness end in absolute failure because they reproduce a large variety of stereotypes and impose a law of forgiveness on the community rather than having the community itself decide how it wants to dispense forgiveness. Yes, the events are not only meaningless in this sense but also in that they have a predetermined meaning and can therefore cause even more harm.

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** Indeed, they cause more harm. I have recently been thinking that people can’t possibly expect to get anything out of these forgiveness events. It is impossible to expect anything because there is no way to guarantee what is expected; I am not sure what to call it. Is it perhaps sincerity? People expect sincerity at these events, but how can sincerity be assured? The state should just stop talking about forgiveness, in my opinion. They should rather talk about reparations and about how to avoid the repetition of the conflict! I don’t buy the gesture of having the leftist guerrillas or the paramilitary or even the army ask for forgiveness. It is useless, and it makes things worse because people expect something. Expectations are created again and again, and nothing comes of it. Nobody is ever going to believe in the sincerity of Iván Márquez or Timochenko.<sup>27</sup> I have been following the events organized by the current Truth

<sup>25</sup> See Diego Cagüañas Rozo, “Cristo en el Atrato: Un episodio en la historia de la facultad mimética” [Christ in the Atrato River: One episode in the history of our mimetic faculty], in *Humanos, más que humanos, no humanos: Intersecciones críticas en torno a la antropología y la ontología* [Humans, more than humans, nonhumans: Critical intersections between anthropology and ontology] (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, forthcoming). The story regards a religious image of a Black Christ that was sent by former members of FARC guerrilla group to the community of Bellavista as part of an official act of asking for forgiveness for the events in Bojayá in 2002. The community not only rejected the gift but were extremely offended by it and, particularly, by the racism behind the depiction of the image.

<sup>26</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, “Almas dañadas, rostro, perdón y milagro.” *Almas dañadas* is the term the community uses to refer to those “souls” that “died before time” and haven’t been able to get the proper burial rites.

<sup>27</sup> Former commanders of the communist guerrilla FARC (and protagonists at the peace negotiations that took place in Havana, Cuba, in 2012–16. Unlike Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri (a.k.a. Timoleón Jiménez or Timochenko) who presents himself as committed to truth, reconciliation, and reparation in the context of the peace agreement, Márquez ended up leaving the agreement after it was signed and returning to the war.—Trans.

Commission.<sup>28</sup> In my view, these events show the limits of forgiveness when it takes place through official or institutional means.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** But something does happen, something very particular is nonetheless recorded. This, however, cannot occupy the space that the state seeks to occupy, a space that, as you say, is impossible in these cases. There is something, however, that I find very interesting in thinking about the experiences of the Truth Commission that you are citing: the fact that one can show how fruitful it is to think about forgiveness understood in terms different from the state's terms. You write, in the specific context of Bojayá, about how forgiveness is an exercise that itself produces memory, how it is a productive exercise of resistance to forgetfulness. "To forgive the bad death" [*perdonar la mala muerte*], you say, echoing what the community says. This is a kind of forgiveness, of course, that does not take place within the times and grammars of the political; you are crystal clear about this. It is, however, a political issue in that it redistributes the sensible, redistributes the space of what is defined as audible, inaudible, intelligible, and unintelligible, to open itself toward the present or to open up the present and expose it to something else.<sup>29</sup>

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** Yes. In fact, this is a quotation from a text that you wrote, and that I cite in my article . . .<sup>30</sup>

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Indeed, and you reworked it in your text. Mine follows what I think Hegel is doing with the experience of forgiving as a type of political agency that is not within the framework of what we consider "the political," but that precisely seeks to trouble . . .

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** . . . institutional frameworks . . .

<sup>28</sup> See Comisión de la Verdad [Truth Commission], "Encuentros por la Verdad" [Encounters for truth], YouTube video playlist, last updated October 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyzj0UDWZhCXsug4CygRNmJ3ZGYEMf7bP>. María Victoria Uribe also refers to these encounters in her interview; see María Victoria Uribe, "Rehumanization Must Be Memory's Task," interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Cagüañas Rozo, "Almas dañadas, rostro, perdón y milagro," 66.

<sup>30</sup> See María del Rosario Acosta, "Variaciones sobre el perdón: Una sugerencia sobre política y transición a partir de Hegel" [Variations on forgiveness: On Hegel, transition and politics], *Universitas Philosophica* 29, no. 59 (2012): 33–50, <https://revistas.javeriana.edu.co/index.php/vnphilosophica/article/view/10808>.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Institutional frameworks, exactly. Forgiveness seeks to trouble institutional frameworks, to move them aside and install other grammars and other registers. You frame the problem in terms of other registers of justice by referencing Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas in your discussion. I would like us to wrap up with this. I think that in this context you have a very interesting way of understanding what the community in Bojayá is actually doing and developing. Alternatively, you at least construct a perspective that approaches what it means to have something like reparation from within the community and on its own terms. You do this in conjunction with a recognition of what cannot at all be recognized as other than “irreparable,” namely, the harm that has been inflicted and that, regardless of how many of the dead are exhumed, it just cannot be repaired. As the woman said in the meeting you brought up, the dead are not going to return to life; their absence is irreparable.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** This is a very difficult question. In all honesty, I am not quite sure if I wrote this for myself or for someone else. Perhaps I wrote it to be able to tell myself that something like what you are describing is possible. Sometimes the situation is just so disheartening. María, sometimes I think that memory and forgiveness are great and all, but what the community really needs is a hospital, a school, running water, and sanitation!

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** I understand where you are coming from. But if we take a look, for instance, at the Havana peace agreement and the subsequent peace referendum,<sup>31</sup> Bojayá as a municipality voted 92 percent in favor of the agreement! I think that this has to do with their experience: they are ready for another history, for another reality, with or without a hospital, but without war.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes, perhaps you are right. The problem is that it is so difficult to not demand a hospital after everything that has happened. Everything they have been through. It is hard, isn't it? So this is what I write. Recently, Aurora Vergara sent me pictures of the inauguration of a virtual library in Bellavista. People are always doing things, it is true. We cannot just give in to despair.

<sup>31</sup> After negotiation in Havana between FARC and the Colombian state, the peace agreement was submitted to a popular referendum for ratification, held on October 2, 2016. In a surprising turn of events, voters rejected the agreement by a narrow margin (0.4 percent). This resulted in a short process of renegotiation, after which the agreement was ratified by the Congress of Colombia in late November 2016.—Trans.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Absolutely, we must imagine different alternatives.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes. In the end, however, I am more inclined toward what Benjamin says. After all is said and done, it is a problem of meaning, it is a question about meaning: What is the meaning of what happened? What can be done with it? The *alabaos* are precisely *an* answer to this question (obviously not the only answer); *alabaos* are a way to deal with what happened. Even if dealing with it is an endless task, a loss will always be a loss. It is irreparable. You know I know very little about Hegel, but I believe what he says and what you express in your text as well: the crime will always have taken place, there is nothing we can do about it. This is why one cannot go back; one cannot redo the situation otherwise. After the crime is committed, however, at the stages of the construction of meaning and of understanding, other modes of justice can be conceived. But the harm is still horrible; what happened to them, and what they are still going through, is so horrible. The massacre, as the report from the National Historical Memory Center shows,<sup>32</sup> starts way before 2002, and it is still going on in some ways. What can I do with this? Sometimes I think that the most helpful approach in these cases is to try to publicize what happened and what keeps happening. All we can do is amplify what people are doing with the horror they went through. What else could we do?

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** This is what you say in the text . . .

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** What I say about witnessing, yes . . .

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** What can be done about this horror is to bear witness to it.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes, perhaps I could do more, but I don't know how. Maybe other people are going to do something more, and hopefully they will do it better. I just try to understand what happened. This is what I attempt to do, but it is always incomplete, always a failure. Moreover, we should ask, what are the lessons that come out of all of this? Especially, what can one learn from people like the community in Bojayá? Think about it. In a country with such inequality and with so much privilege concentrated in such a small number of people these communities are doing everything they can despite it all. This is why I think that

<sup>32</sup> Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *Bojayá: La guerra sin límites*.

what Benjamin says is so productive because we are moving at the level of history in this context. People, including news outlets, say, for example: “It’s been fifteen years since the massacre! Why do they keep thinking about it?” The fact is that

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The fact is that the massacre is not over yet. It is not over. The past is in the present . . . We have to understand the situation in these terms: How can we continuously rebuild the present? This is something we all do, but the people of Bojayá have to do it in a radical way because their lives are on the line.

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

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

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** I think that your texts show this very well. They make explicit the vitality of the community and how to approach their experience beyond the massacre. How to relate to their experience in terms of everything that they are seeking to reclaim and everything that has allowed them to go on despite such poverty, destruction, and violence.

**Diego Cagüeñas Roza:** Yes. I should also say that it is especially the women who have played a crucial role in all this, even though when newspapers, for example, go to interview people in the community, they usually interview a man. These women are truly impressive. Every time there is a commemoration event—by the way, each time fewer media people show up; I was told that the last event was rather empty, even if people still go—these women start cooking and chopping wood at four in the morning. Later, however, when major newspapers show up at eleven in the morning after everything has been arranged, they interview the same people as always. The women’s labor, of course, is a labor of care—care for the elderly, care for the dead—that is so often invisible.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Care for memory.

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** Yes, though they rarely use the word “memory.” I think it is important to insist on the particularity of this. In other words, to not recount this story as memory work, although it is, nor to recount it as a story of racism, though it is, nor a story of sexism, though it is, nor of capitalism, yet it is. It is all these things. But how to avoid recounting all this yet another time? How to avoid writing a paper that has been read and reviewed a million times? So many times I have been asked to review papers the conclusion of which I know from the first page.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** I understand your concern about thinking carefully about the work of writing, the dilemmas, the methodologies that one emulates, and the approaches that one wants to resist. At this point, I would like to ask you a question that I have asked everyone at the end of their interview. What are the voices that accompany you in your work? What voices are essential for you and your work, which is such a particular combination of disciplines?

**Diego Cagüeñas Rozo:** When I write about Bojayá, the voices of people in the community are the first ones for me. One has to let the voices and the words haunt oneself. This is why I always say I have a problem with immediacy. I recorded my work in Bojayá around five years ago, and I think I only recently started to understand what they told me, the vastness of what people say, of what I saw, and in which I took part. All of this requires time, which is short when one has mandates as, for instance, the Truth Commission does. I think that the university should be a space to allow for longer times of reflection, to give time to time.

So first the voices of the community in Bojayá are the voices that haunt me. After them, of course, also Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s thought is just so profound, there’s no doubt about this. He is key to understanding even this question about time. I also very much like Emmanuel Levinas’s insurrection, his very urgent demand for justice. I understand that in the context of Levinas’s thought there is a whole Jewish theological background that I am not too familiar with, but his thought is central for me. There are two more authors I like very much, Jacques Derrida and Michael Taussig, because of their search for other modes of writing in their work. And finally, my friends; people that I talk to and with whom I share ideas: Alejandro Martín, Raquel Díaz, Diana Bocarejo, Laura Quintana, Daniela Castellanos, Carlos Manrique, María Emma

Wills (María Emma is very important). On Bojayá in particular, I think Natalia Quiceno's work is fundamental.<sup>33</sup> There are people in this country doing incredible things, and we do not listen enough to each other.

Moreover, of course, the National Historical Memory Center is very important to me: I think Colombia has some unexploited resources in the center's reports. There are some very impressive things there. I think, for instance, that the work around landmines is worth mentioning as well as the work on gender violence. I should also mention a project that they did, which they did not have enough time to carry out, on other forms of victims: the rivers, the bridges, and so on. So I think that since you are working on this project with the World Humanities Report, we should acknowledge the archive of the center. Fortunately, despite the current orientation taken by the National Historical Memory Center, the archives have been preserved; they are there. I think that there is still much to be explored in this archive; it contains a very large amount of information. It would be worthwhile to acknowledge all the people that have contributed to this work, because it is truly impressive.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** It is in fact groundbreaking work that introduced a type of approach that was not available in Colombia. The National Historical Memory Center introduced an interdisciplinary methodology that was not discussed in the country, and it has always done this from a self-critical perspective that has allowed it to move forward, in my opinion, and to be increasingly more thorough and much more pluralist in its approach.

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** Yes, the work of the center is very reflexive, and, when compared to what was done before in the field of historical memory, there is really a qualitative leap regarding the depth and complexity in the analysis of the conflict. I think this is very important because we tend to stereotype the conflict and to reduce it to two sides (heroes and villains) or to reduce it to economic terms (the struggle for land). To be sure, this is obviously part of the explanation, but I think the center has been able to show us how to account for the complexity of the different processes and temporalities of the conflict while emphasizing the importance of localized analyses.

<sup>33</sup> See Natalia Quiceno Toro, *Vivir sabroso: Luchas y movimientos afroatratoños, en Bojayá, Chocó, Colombia* [*Vivir sabroso: The Afro-Colombian movements and struggles in Middle Atrato: Bojayá, Chocó, Colombia*] (Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario, 2016).



**María del Rosario Acosta López:** And it has done all of this while actually accompanying each of the communities.

**Diego Cagüañas Rozo:** Of course, Fabio Zambrano, I believe, already said that “Colombia is a country with very distinct regions.”<sup>34</sup> We have to attend to this diversity and understand it. Otherwise, the process will not move forward. I am referring here to the peace process, because obviously we live in a very diverse country. In sum, I think that the National Historical Memory Center and its reports, despite the fact that, again, the center has recently tried to find other methodologies, are fundamental. The center and its reports are very important, and they should be more widely known.

**María del Rosario Acosta López:** Well, the goal of this project, of these interviews and everything that accompanies them, is precisely to make all this work on historical memory much more visible, to give it resonance. As you say, it is a unique experience. We have a very valuable archive that we still need to work on and digest very seriously. We must process this archive in this specific temporality that you mentioned: the times of academia, the times that the humanities allow for, the long temporalities in which we give time to reassemble the present in different ways. I really liked this phrase that you used in the interview. I would like to end with this and to use your phrase as the title of the interview. Thank you very much, Diego!

*Translated from the Spanish by Julian Rios Acuña*

<sup>34</sup> See Fabio Zambrano, *Colombia: País de regiones* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1998).

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