Left-wing melancholia and activist memories of the Colombian conflict in Fabiola Calvo Ocampo's Hablarán de mí

Article

MEMORY STUDIES

Memory Studies
1–14

DOI: 10.1177/17506980221114068
journals.sagepub.com/home/mss


Left-wing melancholia and activist memories of the Colombian conflict in Fabiola Calvo Ocampo's *Hablarán de mí*

Cherilyn Elston
University of Reading, UK

Abstract

Dialoguing with recent memory studies scholarship that has questioned the field's predominant focus on violence, victimhood and trauma, this article explores the emergence of forms of memory in Colombia that alongside commemorating the armed conflict also incorporate positive memories of the past and memories of left activism. To do so, it analyses Colombian journalist and academic, Fabiola Calvo Ocampo's testimonial text *Hablarán de mí* as a key example of recent transitional justice and memory discourses emerging out of a new peacebuilding context in the country. Although detailing a history of trauma and a melancholic vision of the catastrophic destruction of the left in Colombia, the article reads Calvo Ocampo's testimony through Enzo Traverso's reading of left-wing melancholia to suggest that the text recovers a memory of the vanquished as part of an attempt to restore a left-activist memory of past historical struggles, which can be mobilised for the current peacebuilding scenario.

Keywords

activist memory, Colombia, Fabiola Calvo Ocampo, left melancholia, testimony

Introduction

Shortly after the beginning of peace talks between the Colombian government and the country's oldest and largest guerrilla group, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC), the journalist and academic Fabiola Calvo Ocampo published *Hablarán de mí* (They Shall Speak of Me, 2013). Defined by the author (Calvo Ocampo, 1 August 2019, personal interview) as a 'novelised testimony with surrealist elements',[1] the book marked a stylistic departure in Calvo Ocampo's work. Known for her scholarly and journalistic analyses of Colombian political violence, and in particular her histories of another of the country's left-wing insurgencies, the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (Popular Liberation Army, EPL), in *Hablarán de mí* Calvo Ocampo turned towards a more experimental form. Fictionalising Calvo Ocampo's own life and her personal connections to the EPL – her brothers Óscar William and Jairo de Jesús (Ernesto Rojas) were two of the guerrilla group's leaders – the book merges fact

Corresponding author:
Cherilyn Elston, Department of Languages and Cultures, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6EE, UK.
Email: c.elston@reading.ac.uk

and fiction to tell the story of Amalia, a journalist forced into exile after the assassination of Óscar William in 1985. A testimonial text which narrates the impact of Colombia's more than half century war on its author-protagonist, *Hablarán de mí*, clearly relates to the proliferation of women's testimonies in the country since the turn of the century (Sánchez-Blake and Luna Gómez, 2015: 942), as well as the emergence of a discourse of historical memory of the conflict over the last two decades (Lazzara, 2018: 19).

However, unlike the more well-known examples of women's written testimony in Colombia (see, for example, Grabe, 2000; Lara, 2000; Vásquez Perdomo, 2006), *Hablarán de mí* has received almost no critical attention. This article aims to resituate the text as a key example of recent transitional justice and memory discourses emerging out of a new peacebuilding context in Colombia. While on the one hand detailing the traumatic consequences of the war and her brothers' decision to join the armed struggle on the Calvo Ocampo family, I show how Calvo Ocampo defies normative testimonial conventions to use literary-fictional elements as a way of resignifying a history of pain and trauma. Dialoguing with recent memory studies scholarship that has challenged the field's predominant focus on violence, victimhood and trauma, to explore the links between memory and activism (Gutman, 2017; Hamilton, 2010; Reading and Katriel, 2015) and memory and 'positive forms of attachment' (Rigney, 2018), I read *Hablarán de mí* through Enzo Traverso's reading of left-wing melancholia. Thus, the literary-testimonial commemoration of her brothers' activism and the text's inclusion of forgotten documents from the historical archive forms part of a melancholic remembrance of the dead that is also able to recognise the political promise of past struggles for the present and future. In the case of *Hablarán de mí*, the text importantly restores the ignored, and seemingly paradoxical, role of the armed left in calling for democratic reforms that led to the creation of a new constitution in 1991.

Moreover, *Hablarán de mí* mobilises this activist memory as part of an intervention into Colombia's ongoing memory debates and uses of discourses of transitional justice since the mid-2000s. Situating the text within a counter-discourse of grassroots memory practices by victims of state crimes, left-wing activists and former guerrillas, the article shows how Calvo Ocampo's text challenges official narratives of justice and reconciliation, which have sought to minimise state crimes, as well as deny the political motivations of the guerrilla groups. Indicating how this makes visible another more radical history of transitional justice and peacebuilding in Colombia, the text's recovery of memories of activism also incorporates another long-silenced aspect of the Colombian conflict, the experience of political exile. In documenting the psychological and physical effects of exile on Amalia, who seeks political asylum in Madrid after the assassination of her brothers, Calvo Ocampo figures political exile – an institutional strategy to eliminate political opposition (Roniger and Sznajder, 2009: 11) normally associated in Latin America with the military dictatorships – as a practice also occurring within the Colombian war, and the framework of an ostensibly democratic state. Highlighting new avenues of research in Colombian memory studies, the article argues that *Hablarán de mí* mobilises the idea of the Colombian diaspora not solely around a collective understanding of trauma but around the experience of political militancy.

Memory and political trauma

The EPL was active from 1967 to 1991, when it laid down arms as part of a peace deal with the Colombian government. Considered one of the most dogmatic and sectarian of the multiple guerrilla groups that were formed in the country in the 1960s (Archila, 2009: 189), the EPL was founded by a Maoist splinter group from the pro-Soviet Colombian Communist Party and largely operated on the margins of national politics until the 1980s when it entered into peace talks with the government of President Belisario Betancur (1982–1986). This history, as well as the development and

eventual breakdown of the peace talks after the assassination of Óscar William by the Colombian army in 1985, is recounted in two texts published by Calvo Ocampo in the mid-1980s: *EPL, diez hombres, un ejército, una historia* (*EPL, Ten Men, An Army, A History*, 1985) and *Colombia: EPL, una historia armada* (*Colombia: EPL, An Armed History*, 1987). Forming part of a body of testimonial writing that coalesced around the peace talks and occupied 'a central role in the search for paths for dialogue and peacebuilding', as well as an urgent need to narrate the worsening of the conflict from the 1980s (Estripeaut-Bourjac, 2012: 18), these earlier works by Calvo Ocampo could be considered examples of the Latin American *testimonio*. Commonly defined as an 'authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g. war, oppression, revolution, etc.)' (Yúdice, 1996: 44), in these texts Calvo Ocampo interviews her brothers and other members of the EPL and serves as an interlocutor for their testimonies of life in the guerrilla group.

Hablarán de mí's publication in 2013 covers much of the same history as Calvo Ocampo's earlier texts. Similarly defined as a testimony, it likewise recounts the political history of the EPL and the armed struggle in Colombia from the 1960s. However, unlike the texts published in the 1980s, *Hablarán de mí* adopts a form that eschews the conventional idea of the *testimonio* as an unmediated version of events or transparently representational (Bartow, 2005: 25). Here, the journalist interlocutor channelling the collective voice of a group of witness-informants disappears. In its place appears a difficult to define, genre-bending text that is partly a testimonial account of the effect of the war in Colombia on Calvo Ocampo's own life, partly a political history of the conflict and the EPL backed up by archival documents, and partly an experimental work of literature told through the third-person narrative of Calvo Ocampo's fictional alter-ego, Amalia. In adopting this experimental format, the text overtly reflects what critics have described as the hybrid nature of recent women's testimony in Colombia, which crosses generic boundaries 'between testimonies, journalistic documents and fictionalised biographies' (Ortiz, 2012: 54).

Moreover, *Hablarán de mí's* experimental format is not only shown in its crossing of generic boundaries but in Calvo Ocampo's decision to mediate the entire narrative through memory. In a prologue entitled 'Key to reading this book', she explains that she did not aim to provide an unmediated representation of events but sought to interpret this artistically through her own subjective memories: 'I use artistic licence with this memory and put on the page memory's multiple dimensions' (13). This is demonstrated in the structure of the book. While roughly following a chronology that begins with Óscar William's assassination in 1985 and ends with Amalia's return to Colombia after a period of exile in 1990, the text in fact adopts a non-linear structure that frames Calvo Ocampo's testimonial account of her own life and the political history of the EPL through memory. As Calvo Ocampo (1 August 2019, personal interview) states, this reflected her desire that the narrative 'was not linear, because you are in one moment but in that moment you are struck by a memory'. The text thus constantly shifts between multiple time periods, ranging from the day of Óscar William's death and funeral, to Amalia's memories of a childhood in Colombia's coffee region, her own political awakening and personal development, her account of the 1984 EPL peace accords and Ernesto Rojas' military trial in 1975, her exile to Madrid in early 1986 and her clandestine return to Colombia via Venezuela and Peru in 1990. It also includes a colophon at the end of the book which overlays three time periods: Bogotá 1990; Madrid 2003; and Bogotá 2007.

In its explicit framing of testimony through a memory lens, *Hablarán de mí* represents a changed context in Colombia from the time Calvo Ocampo published her earlier testimonial accounts of the EPL. When the EPL laid down arms in 1991, constructing a memory of the war was not a key concern in a country that had historically used amnesties as a 'regular feature of conflict resolution' (Chernick, 2009: 88). From the mid-2000s, however, the Colombian state embraced a new approach, transitional justice. Underpinned by the idea that peace and political stability can only

be achieved through balancing less retributive forms of justice with truth and reparations for victims, over the last two decades Colombia has seen the creation of a series of official truth-seeking and memory initiatives, as well as the emergence of what has been termed a memory 'boom' in the country (Lazzara, 2018: 19) in which the memories of victims of the conflict have become increasingly prominent in the public sphere. *Hablarán de mí* can consequently be seen as part of this memory boom. Published in the midst of the FARC peace talks, it returns to an earlier period of the conflict and seeks to commemorate Calvo Ocampo's brothers as victims of the war, as well as bring to memory the effects of the conflict on Calvo Ocampo's own life. Indeed in 2015, 2 years after the publication of Calvo Ocampo's text, the Centre for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation in Bogotá held an event to pay homage to Óscar William on the 30th anniversary of his death. Organised by civil society organisations alongside the Colombian state's Victims' Unit, at the event the Colombian government publicly recognised Óscar William as a victim of violence and sought to dignify his memory in line with the country's new aims of 'truth-seeking, the promotion of justice and providing reparations to victims' (2015).

Although evidently in dialogue with Colombia's official turn to memory and transitional justice, *Hablarán de mí*'s use of discourses of memory and its challenge to the traditional modes of the *testimonio* also points to a broader move away from the discourses of the left and the armed struggle that characterised both the history of the EPL and Calvo Ocampo's earlier work. This importantly connects to the influential analysis of Andreas Huyssen, who has argued that the emergence of memory as a key global concern at the end of the twentieth century did not simply represent what has now become a self-evident truth that a society must 'come to terms' with the legacy of past violence (United Nations Security Council, 2004: 4). Instead, for Huyssen the global preoccupation with memories of past atrocities – as also represented in the consolidation of memory studies as a discipline – was a result of the collapse of the grand narratives and forward-looking utopias that had shaped the previous century (2000). This point is echoed by Enzo Traverso (2016) in his book *Left-wing Melancholia*, where he relates this turn to the past, and the end of an idea of emancipation projected into the future (p. 4), to the collapse of real-existing socialism.

Thus, published more than two decades after the majority of the events it narrates, *Hablarán de mí* very clearly responds to a context in which the revolution and the armed struggle in Colombia have been superseded by discourses of historical memory. In this way, it echoes the series of female ex-combatant testimonies that were published in Colombia in the early 2000s. As Constanza López Baquero (2012) has argued, these texts reflect how recent Colombian women's *testimonio* does not conform to classic definitions of the genre due to its inscription within discourses of memory: 'this new testimonial narrative has less to do with legitimising the guerrilla struggle than looking to the past, analysing the nature of this struggle, commemorating and remembering its motivations' (p. 31). These aims also arguably motivate *Hablarán de mí.* While Calvo Ocampo is obviously compelled by a desire to commemorate a leftist history – the guerrilla, for example, is described as 'the dreams of a generation that gave its life for an ideal' (181) – the text also displays a critical distance towards the past and the rigid paradigms of the left. Despite professing her love for her brothers and celebrating their values, Calvo Ocampo critiques Óscar William's machismo – 'like all idealists of his time, he wanted to change the structures of state and society, without delving into himself and shaking off the cobwebs of machismo' (37) – and in one scene she describes Amalia's return to Colombia from exile in 1990 and her reencounter with two old EPL comrades who are described as stuck in the paradigms of the Cold War: 'After listening to the same discourse from twenty years ago, I understood that neither their concepts nor their attitudes had changed' (208).

In critiquing the orthodoxy of her brother's former comrades and their refusal to 'assimilate change' (208), Calvo Ocampo represents what could be described as a kind of left melancholia. Derived from the thinking of Walter Benjamin, as Wendy Brown (1999) summarises, this refers to

a melancholic, backward-looking attachment to lost 'sentiments and objects [rather] than to the possibilities of political transformation in the present' (p. 21). Following Brown, after the end of actually existing socialism in the 1990s, this has come to refer to a certain refusal on the left to abandon outmoded categories of political analysis even after their defeat. However, as Traverso's work indicates, the term has also been used in recent years to diagnose the broader, global turn to memory at the end of the twentieth century. Traverso (2016) argues that the collapse of communism broke the 'dialectic between past and future' (p. xiv) to produce a melancholic vision of history as marked by catastrophic violence, loss and defeat. Indeed, despite Amalia's critique of the backward-looking discourse of the EPL in the 1990s, it could be argued that *Hablarán de mí* as a whole appears to adopt a vision of 'history as catastrophe' (Traverso, 2016: xvi) in which the utopian dreams of the left were not only consigned to the past but violently defeated. The narrative therefore focuses on a series of traumatic events – the assassinations of Óscar William and Ernesto Rojas by the Colombian army, as well as the killing of another brother Héctor after receiving paramilitary death threats – which are inextricably related to the systematic elimination of thousands of leftist social and political leaders, trade unionists and ex-combatants during one of the worst periods of Colombian political violence. In the book, these events are constantly revisited by Amalia who is repeatedly described as unable to 'envision the future, only the past' (171) and seems to embody a post-1989 context of 'a present charged with memory but unable to project itself into the future' (Traverso, 2016: 7).

This is clear from the outset of *Hablarán de mí* which begins on the day of Óscar William's death. Before narrating the day's horrific denouement, however, Amalia is found in a building on the Avenida Jiménez in central Bogotá. Her observation of the movement of armed soldiers on the streets below draws her mind back to another hugely traumatic event in Colombian history, the siege of the Palace of Justice, only a few weeks previously: 'Days ago, only a few blocks away, on the corner by the Casa de Florero, she had watched the Palace of Justice burn' (19). This in turn prompts another memory from even further back, of her childhood classes on 'Historia Patria' (National History) about the beginning of the country's war for independence, which had occurred in the same place, the Plaza de Bolívar, 175 years previously: 'The Plaza de Bolívar, formerly Santafé, looked like a battlefield. Today, the same as in colonial times, in the same place and at the same time' (22). Multiple layers of Colombian history are thus interwoven in Amalia's mind and are importantly linked to the country's history of political violence, which is figured as an endless cycle of trauma: 'Colombia continued to bleed itself to death through an internal conflict' (23).

Illustrating a common trope in Colombian conflict narratives, in which different periods of the conflict are woven together in a cyclical fashion, the text roots the political violence of the 1970s and 1980s in a longer history going back to the founding of the nation, as well as in the more recent civil conflict of the 1940s and 1950s known as the *La Violencia*. Similar to guerrilla testimonies and other writers of her generation,[2] Amalia's political consciousness is traced back to the violence she observed as a small child in Colombia's coffee zone: 'During her childhood, at school or during the holidays, every day Amalia would see the images of the dead in the newspapers and the cadavers floating down the river' (64). However, standing on the streets of Bogotá after Óscar William's death, these childhood memories are not consigned to the past but threaten to overwhelm Amalia:

> So many experiences were part of the past and the present because they were under her skin and today, despite no longer being on the coffee and banana plantations, she was living it, she was alive, alive with death close by. She could feel death, it wasn't waiting for her, it walked with her. (67)

Exhibiting here what trauma theorists would diagnose as the possession of the traumatised individual by an image or event that cannot be left behind (Caruth, 1995: 4), *Hablarán de mí*

demonstrates how for Amalia the distinction between the past and present collapses under the weight of trauma. The text appears to confirm Amalia as suffering from a classic case of Freudian melancholy, where the subject is pathologically unable to let go of the lost object, which invades their own subjectivity. She is described as being unable to separate her psyche from her past memories and lost kin – 'when some leave and others are left behind, they convert the past into the present to make absence less painful' (54) – feels physical pain when her brother Ernesto is assassinated, speaks about her dead brother David 'as if he were alive' (157), and suffers the physical effects of her inability to mourn: 'she wore uncertainty on her skin, in her stomach, her uterus, her heart and even her head' (181).

Refiguring trauma

In one sense then *Hablarán de mí* appears to reinforce the global turn to historical memory and a vision of history marked by catastrophe, loss and trauma. Yet, alongside detailing a history of trauma and the melancholic destruction of the left in Colombia, the text also filters its testimonial impulse through a highly literary and emotive narrative, which includes fragments of poetry, tangos, salsa, and lyrical and romanticised descriptions of the Colombian landscape and Amalia's memories of the past. Large swathes of the text are preoccupied with Amalia's digressive, lyrical reflections – '[Amalia] spent her time in a state of contemplation: the flowers, the green of the trees, the birds, the clouds with their multiple forms, the sound of the river' (106) – and her childhood memories take on a magical, mystical quality. Her hometown, Cartago, for example, is described as 'a place full of memories, spirits, magic . . . In our code we called it Macondo, the closest thing to Aureliano Buendía's town' (206). These literary-imaginative elements demonstrate the text's distance from traditional understandings of testimonial writing and the revolutionary discourses of the left. As John Beverley (1996) defined it, the *testimonio* was an 'extraliterary or even antiliterary form of discourse' separate from the artifice and ideological apparatus of (bourgeois) literary fiction (p. 37). However, they also point to how Calvo Ocampo uses the literary format to imagine transformative alternatives to the history of pain and trauma. As the author (Calvo Ocampo, 1 August 2019, personal interview) states, her decision not to write a 'political pamphlet' and to incorporate elements of poetry, music and emotions in her story came from her desire to diffuse the trauma it contained: 'I believe that the act of writing is not just rational and that the only way for language to move beyond rationality is to reconfigure its meaning through feeling, poetry and the senses'.

In this vein, Calvo Ocampo makes the surprising decision to include in a work of testimony an entirely fictional surrealist set piece where she imagines an alternative funeral for Óscar William attended by her brother after his death. While not quite an instance of magical realism, the party, where 'there was neither weeping, nor sadness, nor reason' (53), is imagined as a celebratory, joyful space where the entire Calvo Ocampo family dance, sing, shout and say their goodbyes to Óscar William. For Amalia, the party creates a space for physical and emotional healing: 'a fountain sprung from her. It wasn't tears, it was a gesture of love and life to say goodbye to her brother, it was the moment she began to find herself again' (58). Significantly, this parallels another surreal and ritualistic moment at the end of the book where Amalia retreats to a wooded area on the edge of Bogotá, which becomes a subterranean meeting place between the living and the dead and where she decides to 'return to the present, enshrining memory in an eternal ritual for life, her voice, the voice of the absent' (218). On the one hand, this refiguring of trauma appears to echo Western trauma theory and discourses of transitional justice, which argue that storytelling or 'coming to terms' with past violence forms a key part of recovery. Yet, these dreamlike and surrealist moments – Amalia is described as growing wings as she dances and the scene is invaded by

'fireflies [that] illuminated the moonless night' after the figure of Óscar William 'disappears into the infinite cosmos' (57) – are actually embedded in a broader move that is not simply a process of catharsis.

Recent scholarship in memory studies has sought to challenge the field's dominant focus on catastrophe, loss and trauma, as identified by Traverso and Huyssen. Indeed, as Huyssen et al. (2012) have influentially argued, despite being motivated by a utopian claim – never again, *nunca más* – the global preoccupation with memories of trauma has reached an 'impasse' and failed to prevent the recurrence of violence or imagine alternative futures (p. 227). Responding to this, a new body of scholarship has sought to complicate the seemingly inextricable link between memory and trauma, as well as move from a focus on victims and victimisation to political activism and activist memories.[3] A key aspect of this work, as Ann Rigney (2018) emphasises, has been to explore 'alternative modes of remembrance and alternative traditions of recall' (p. 369) that also include 'positive forms of attachment' (p. 370), such as pleasure, joy and happiness, in the construction of collective memory. Indeed, as Carrie Hamilton (2010) argues, while the left, revolution and activism are commonly associated with mourning and loss, this erases how such struggles were also constituted by positive emotions, such as pleasure and joy, as well as their promise of alternative futures. This parallels Yifat Gutman's (2017) work on 'memory activism', whereby groups mobilise new, often oppositional, understandings of the past to influence debates about present problems and project new resolutions for the future.

Echoing this shift in memory studies and chiming with Hamilton's (2010) call for the inclusion of positive emotions such as 'pleasure and promise' (p. 269) within memories of left activism, recent scholarship on Colombia has similarly emphasised how female ex-combatant testimonies do not solely reinforce discourses of loss and trauma but also narrate their experiences in insurgent groups using tropes of happiness, joy and pleasure. While such tropes are considered taboo in mainstream transitional justice scholarship, which expects repentance and forgiveness from former combatants (Nieto Valdivieso, 2016: 79), their use can also be seen as forming part of an attempt to reconstitute the idea of an insurgent memory in the country, as well as challenge mainstream demobilisation and reintegration discourses that frame ex-combatants through a language of victimhood rather than as political subjects (Elston, 2020: 71–72). While Calvo Ocampo is not an ex-combatant testimony, *Hablarán de mí* can also be situated in this context, where alongside the narrative of loss and mourning outlined above there is also a very overt attempt to recover the positive feelings connected to left activism in Colombia. Thus, the text expresses the 'emotion and enthusiasm' of a generation of young people who 'thought the revolution was just around the corner' (111) and Amalia herself describes the beginning of her political activism at age fourteen:

> She became passionate about the fight for justice . . . It was a moment of rebellion and affirmation. From that moment she began to organise literacy campaigns with peasants and those living in marginalised areas, she studied Marxism, read literature, and would meet up with Óscar William. (110)

Importantly, this revaluation of left activism does not simply reinforce a nostalgia for the armed struggle. Instead, juxtaposed against Amalia's subjective, lyrical narrative, which resignifies a personal history of trauma and emphasises the positive emotions connected to left activism, the text also mobilises a further narrative that complicates the story of Calvo Ocampo and her brothers as simply a story of trauma and victimisation. This importantly connects back to the idea of left melancholia and in particular Traverso's reading of the concept. Indeed, the recent revaluation of the pleasure and promise of activist memories in memory studies scholarship is actually echoed in Traverso's interpretation of left-wing melancholia. As Traverso (2016) argues, this differs to dominant memory and transitional justice discourses which 'sacralize the memory of victims, and

mostly neglects or rejects their commitments' (p. xv). In contrast, drawing upon a Marxist tradition of 'a melancholic vision of history as remembrance (*Eingedenken*) of the vanquished' (Traverso, 2016: xiv), left melancholia 'perceives the tragedies and lost battles of the past as a burden and a debt, which are also the promise of redemption' (Traverso, 2016: xv).

Traverso's argument has been echoed in Colombia where alongside the dominant discourse of memory focusing on victims of violence, there has also been a move to challenge the predominant framing of victims as depoliticised subjects marked by innocence, trauma and suffering. Paralleling Traverso, Renán Vega Cantor (2016) argues that against the idea of the victim, understood as a 'passive being devoid of a political project' we should instead speak of the 'vanquished'; taking into account that the 'vanquished embodied a project, and died or were tortured or disappeared because they represented this project, another world for which they gave their lives'. As we shall now go on to see, *Hablarán de mí* also connects to this alternative understanding of memory 'as a struggle for a cause rather than [solely] a matter of victimisation' (Rigney, 2018: 371). In fact, the book draws to memory two key moments in the activism of Calvo Ocampo's brothers by incorporating two largely forgotten texts from the historical archive, which problematise the dominant understandings of memory in the country.

Memories of the vanquished

The first of these is a speech made by Óscar William during the signing of the 1984 ceasefire between the EPL and the government of President Belisario Betancur. The Betancur peace process marked the first time that the government sought to bring an end to the violence through a negotiated political solution with the country's various guerrilla groups. As Eduardo Pizarro (1992) argues, the process marked a sea change in the political profile of the guerrilla groups, which began to move from prioritising military over political activity, to becoming a 'source of proposals for national policymaking' (p. 170). Óscar William's speech was a key aspect of this, and in *Hablarán de mí* it is produced in its entirety. Thus, as Amalia and her family say goodbye to Óscar William in his alternative funeral, the text describes the real event where his coffin processes through Medellín while a tape of his speech at the signing of the accords plays. In it, he criticises the current regime in Colombia as a 'deformed democracy in extinction' (46) and calls for a 'democratic opening' to create a real 'Estado de derecho' (democratic rule of law) (47). To do so, he argues, the country needs a constitutional reform, 'decided by direct popular participation' in a National Constituent Assembly elected by the people (46).

Óscar William's proposal that the deepening of democracy was a necessary precondition for peace prefigured an emerging idea in Colombia in the 1980s that constitutional reform would not only correct the democratic deficits of the 1886 constitution but could be a means of putting an end to violence. As the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH, 2013) observe, 'an idea widely disseminated at the time was that the Constitution had a pacifist vocation, that it could be a kind of peace treaty between Colombians' (p. 218). In response to the severe crisis of governability and violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, 7 years after Óscar William first proposed the idea, a National Constituent Assembly passed a new constitution for the nation in 1991 that has been widely celebrated for its progressive credentials. Yet, in the mainstream historical narrative of the passing of the constitution, which emphasises the role of president-elect César Gaviria and members of Colombian civil society, particularly the *séptima papeleta* (seventh ballot) student movement, the role of Óscar William and the EPL has been side-lined. Calvo Ocampo (1 August 2019, personal interview) argues that what is erased from this history is how the proposal for constitutional reform did not originate in Colombia's traditional political sphere or civil society but actually came from the left: 'the left have given a lot to this country and the 1991 constitution . . . was

really a proposal made by a left-wing organisation and not just a left-wing organisation but a guerrilla group and a left-wing party'. *Hablarán de mí* consequently seeks to repay what Calvo Ocampo described at the 2015 commemoration of Óscar William as an 'historical debt to his memory . . . Óscar was the first Colombian to propose a Constituent Assembly in 1984 and it is important that the country remembers this' (Victims' Unit, 2015).

As Calvo Ocampo herself acknowledges, this recovery of the role of the left in what was essentially a liberal-institutional reform is surprising considering the history of the EPL. Yet, *Hablarán de mí*'s attempt to restore the contributions of the EPL to Colombian political history importantly points to how the text, which was published almost 30 years after this earlier peace process, also seeks to intervene in the current politics of memory in Colombia. Indeed, while the country's turn to transitional justice would appear to suggest it was finally 'coming to terms' with the legacy of the armed conflict, this actually belies what has been referred to as a 'battle for memory' (Alarcón, 2020) in which 'a multitude of complex mnemonic communities' (Carrillo Lerma, 2016: 198) have articulated diverse narratives of the multifaceted war. Reflecting how critical transitional justice scholarship has interrogated the field's narrow legalistic focus and called for a 'thicker' understanding (McEvoy, 2007) of how these concepts and practices work in 'specific fields of political contestation' (Theidon, 2009: 297), the Colombian case provides a paradigmatic example of how discourses of transitional justice and memory have been mobilised by diverse groups with contrasting political agendas over the last few decades (Rowen, 2017: 627). Indeed, alongside the creation of official memory practices, the country has seen the proliferation of numerous grassroots, unofficial memory projects (Reátegui Carrillo, 2009), many of which predate the creation of state-led institutions.

An important aspect of these grassroots memory practices – within which we could situate *Hablarán de mí* as a text published by an independent publishing house set up by Calvo Ocampo – is what could be defined as a prominent counter-discourse that has sought to problematise dominant understandings of peace, justice and reconciliation in Colombia. Led by grassroots victims' organisations, particularly victims of state human rights abuses, and those like Calvo Ocampo who are connected politically and personally to the left, since the emergence of institutional memory practices in the early 2000s, this has contested what has been interpreted as an attempt to construct a selective account of the conflict that exempts 'paramilitary and military groups as perpetrators of violence' and solely assigns historical blame to the guerrilla groups (Rodríguez Castro, 2020: 673).[4] In this way then, *Hablarán de mí's* inclusion of Óscar William's speech, with its criticisms of the nature of Colombian democracy, as well as its representation of his assassination by the Colombian army after the signing of a ceasefire – just one name in a long list of demobilised *guerrilleros* or left-wing activists who have been killed in Colombia after the signing of peace accords – can be seen as reinforcing an alternative narrative of the conflict that makes visible how state and para-state terror has been used 'to disrupt, dismantle and destroy all viable opposition' (Raphael, 2009: 163) within the country. Calvo Ocampo's decision to highlight this narrative at the beginning of the 2010s, shortly after the implementation of the controversial Justice and Peace Law, which did not recognise victims of state crimes and was accused of adopting the language of transitional justice as a rhetorical instrument to create impunity (Uprimny and Saffon, 2008: 176), suggests that the text can be viewed as a critical response to the use of official memory and transitional justice discourses seeking to minimise the role of the state in perpetrating violence.

However, the text does not just reinforce an alternative narrative of victimisation. By recognising Óscar William's contributions to the development of Colombia's democratic reforms and positioning him as a political actor, the text complicates the Colombian state's denial of a political agenda to the guerrilla forces, as well as points to a more radical history of peacebuilding and

transitional justice in Colombia. This is also reinforced by the second archival text included in *Hablarán de mí*. Reproducing another speech by one of Calvo Ocampo's brothers, which illustrates the text's multiple time periods, this derives from 1975 and was made by Ernesto Rojas, the leader of the EPL. Paralleling Óscar William's critique of Colombian democracy, this speech sweepingly analyses Colombian history to depict a story of repeated cycles of violence and war and a state of 'permanent repression' of popular power by the country's elites. As he states, 'The country has never known a long truce or lasting peace but has lived under a permanent sign of violence imposed by the powerful classes' (92). The speech, however, is significant not just because of its content but its context. Delivered during Rojas' trial by military tribunal (*Consejo de guerra*) during the presidency of Alfonso López Michelsen, as Calvo Ocampo (1987: 104) states, this practice was condemned by emerging human rights organisations in the 1970s and significantly formed part of the denunciations of military abuses in Colombia that were taken to the Russell Tribunal, an unofficial war crimes tribunal set up by philosopher Bertrand Russell which initially focused on the role of the United States in Vietnam and in the early 1970s looked at military repression in Latin America (Zunino, 2016).

While judging civilians in military courts under state-of-siege legislation was declared invalid by the ordinary justice system in 1976 (González-Jácome, 2016: 131), Calvo Ocampo's decision to highlight what she argues is now largely an unknown practice demonstrates how *Hablarán de mí* also mobilises alternative understandings of transitional justice that go beyond liberal frameworks. As Marco Zunino (2016) argues, the Russell Tribunal could be understood as an early instance of transitional justice that challenged legalism, state-centrism and criticised the global capitalist order; thus pre-empting recent critiques of transitional justice's legalistic, state-centric and liberal-capitalist biases and calls for a 'transitional justice from below' which is 'attuned to community responses' (p. 212). By acknowledging this largely hidden history in Colombia, and its connection to an alternative global history of the concept, *Hablarán de mí* hints at a more radical conception of transitional justice that complicates the field's transcendent claims or the idea of a normative set of technocratic mechanisms (Kent, 2016: 4). Significantly, the text suggests that such moments from the historical archive can be redeemed for the current struggle for peace in Colombia, and as a way of contesting unitary, or exclusionary, definitions of peace and justice.

Conclusion – Memories of political exile

In addition to recovering the political contributions of the left to the development of Colombian democracy and recuperating alternative understandings of transitional justice in Colombia, Hablarán de mí's construction of an activist memory of the conflict also includes another largely silenced aspect of the war, the experience of political exile. The text narrates how shortly after the killing of Óscar William, Calvo Ocampo's mother receives a phone call warning her that her other children would be also be targeted: 'Señora, prepare to mourn again, David and then the journalist will be next' (69). After David is assassinated 2 days before he was due to flee the country (134), Amalia prepares to leave Colombia for Madrid to join the ranks of political dissidents forced to uproot themselves 'to avoid persecution, imprisonment or death in the imminent but unknown future' (Rowe and Whitfield, 1987: 229). *Hablarán de mí* then details the psychological, existential and material hardship Amalia suffers in exile. Thus, Amalia's fusion of the past and present in the narrative can be related to how exile is often psychologically conceived by those who experience it as a liminal space that is also reflected in the breaking of time into two frames (Roniger and Sznajder, 2009: 22), as Amalia experiences a rupture in her sense of self, being and place after she arrives in Madrid. She is described as being physically in one

place but 'her spirit was far away' (135); feeling 'within herself an indescribable sensation, as she believed she was where she found herself but at the same time she did not feel herself, the pain and sadness were not part of her' (131).

This representation of the exilic condition echoes numerous literary-testimonial works on political exile in Latin America, where it has predominantly been associated with the expulsion of political dissidents by right-wing military dictatorships. In relation to the Colombian conflict, however, historically there has not been an outpouring of literary or testimonial accounts of political exile and the issue of international displacement caused either directly or indirectly by the conflict has largely been neglected as a topic of scholarly and policy research (CNMH, 2018: 19). Anastasia Bermúdez (2017) explains that silence on the issue of Colombian exile furthermore reflects how 'Colombian emigration has been identified mainly as economic and not connected to the conflict', and scholars have 'ignored the Colombian case because it does not represent a classic example of a political diaspora', partly due to the (racial, class and political) heterogeneity of the Colombian population abroad and the complexity of the conflict itself, with multiple victimisers and political differences among the exiled community (p. 213).

Julia Carrillo Lerma (2016) argues, however, that it is possible to identify a 'diaspora within' the Colombian transnational community, which conforms to the characteristic features of the concept as referring to the forced migration of a particular group, which constructs a collective identity typically based on memories of collective trauma as well as affinity to the homeland (pp. 1–2). Yet, for Carrillo Lerma, this 'diaspora within' refers not to a static definition of a diasporic identity but is one that has been politically mobilised and constructed. Significantly, she argues that in the Colombian case, the idea of a Colombian diaspora, a concept the Colombian state has been reluctant to adopt, has been used to describe a specific political community defined by experiences of state persecution, as well as left-militancy and activism (Carrillo Lerma, 2016: 222). In line with this political mobilisation of the idea of the Colombian diaspora, *Hablarán de mí*'s publication in 2013 and its recognition of political exile as an intrinsic element of the conflict can be seen as reflecting a broader transformation in the representation of Colombian conflict-related exile since the beginning of peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC. Alongside an emerging body of scholarship that has begun to piece together the history of the Colombian diaspora (see, for example, Bermúdez, 2017; Iranzo Dosdad and Edson Louidor, 2018), over the last decade collectives of Colombian political exiles have become increasingly vocal and prominent in campaigning for recognition as victims of the conflict and for their inclusion as significant actors in the peace process.[5]

In this way then, *Hablarán de mí*'s representation of exile, while reinforcing a collectively shared understanding of trauma and loss, roots this in the experience of political militancy and a process of transformation in which Amalia begins to become involved in activities seeking to influence politics in her home country, another key aspect of diaspora politics: 'she immersed herself in activism that allowed her to support those struggling at home, it was a way of continuing to live for those who had died' (137). This importantly reinforces the broader aims of the text. Although detailing a history of trauma and a melancholic vision of the catastrophic destruction of the left in Colombia – which would appear to reinforce the global turn towards the past as a history of violence – this article has shown how *Hablarán de mí*, a crucial if largely overlooked recent work of Colombian testimony, complements new trends in memory studies that have complicated predominant narratives of trauma and victimhood. Published at a key moment for transitional justice in Colombia, the text can therefore be read as recovering a memory of the vanquished, not as a simple story of loss and failure, but as part of an attempt to restore a left-activist memory of past historical struggles that can be mobilised for the current peacebuilding scenario.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Cherilyn Elston https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0623-0187

Notes

1. All translations from Spanish are the author's own.
2. See, for example, the testimonies included in Olga Behar (1985), *Las guerras de la paz*.
3. My use of the idea of activist memory draws upon Anna Reading and Tamar Katriel's call to move away from the foregrounding of violence and trauma in memory studies and towards alternative lines of memory work that explore forms of human agency. However, while Reading and Katriel (2015) explicitly situate their analysis within memories of nonviolent action, clearly demarcated from 'violence in the form of warfare' (p. 1), this article explores memories of activism that occurred within contexts of violence and which complicate a simple binary between violent and nonviolent struggle.
4. While the 2005 Justice and Peace Law was presented by the Colombian government of President Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) as 'a peace process requiring new and explicit "restorative" understandings of justice' (Díaz, 2008: 189), this occurred within a paradoxical context in which the government refused to neither recognise the existence of the armed conflict itself nor negotiate with the left-wing guerrilla groups who were labelled narco-terrorists (Riaño and Uribe, 2017: 10–11). Critics of the law have thus argued that discourses of transitional justice were adopted as part of an attempt to minimise the state's own role in the armed conflict (Rowen, 2017: 630). Despite the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC, this 'denialist politics' has continued under successive right-wing governments and resulted in the expulsion of the National Centre for Historical Memory, under director Ruben Darío Acevedo, from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience in 2020 (Rodríguez Castro, 2020), as well as marked a shift away from an initial attempt by official memory institutions to construct more comprehensive and plural narratives about violence in Colombia (Riaño and Uribe, 2017).
5. This has resulted in the recognition of victims of the conflict, and victims abroad in recent transitional justice mechanisms. The 2011 Victims' Law provided for 'victims outside of Colombia' for the first time; in 2018 the National Centre for Historical Memory published a report on Colombian exile; a representative of the Colombian diaspora was included in the victims' delegations to the Havana peace talks and the truth commission emerging from the FARC peace process is one of the first in the world to take testimony from victims living abroad.

References

Alarcón D (2020) La batalla por la memoria. *Arcadia*, 25 February, p. 171. Available at: https://www.revistaarcadia.com/impresa/portada/articulo/el-centro-nacional-de-memoria-historica-esta-en-crisis-y-el-museo-de-la-memoria-tambien/80767 (accessed 30 April 2020).

Archila M (2009) 'El maoísmo en Colombia: la enfermedad juvenil del marxismo-leninismo'. In: Archila M, Cote J, Delgado Á, et al. (eds) *Una historia inconclusa: izquierdas políticas y sociales en Colombia*. Bogotá, Colombia: CINEP, pp. 179–214.

Bartow J (2005) *Subject to Change: The Lessons of Latin American Women's Testimonio for Truth, Fiction and Theory*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Behar O (1985) *Las guerras de la paz*. Bogotá, Colombia: Planeta.

Bermúdez A (2017) *International Migration, Transnational Politics and Conflict: The Gendered Experiences of Colombian Migrants in Europe*. London: Springer.

Beverley J (1996) The margin at the center: on testimonio (1989). In: Gugelberger G (ed.) *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 23–41.

Brown W (1999) Resisting left melancholy. *boundary 2* 26(3): 19–27.

Calvo Ocampo F (1985) *EPL, diez hombres, un ejército, una historia*. Bogotá, Colombia: Ecoe Ediciones.

Calvo Ocampo F (1987) *Colombia: EPL, una historia armada*. Madrid: Ediciones VOSA SL.
Calvo Ocampo F (2013) *Hablarán de mí*. Bogotá, Colombia: Acracia Proyecto de Investigación Editorial.
Carrillo Lerma J (2016) *A Colombian 'Diaspora': from living and leaving a conflict to engaging in peace-building and the rewriting of social memories of violence*. PhD thesis, Sciences PO, Paris; The New School for Social Research, New York.
Caruth C (1995) Trauma and experience. In: Caruth C (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD; London: The John Hopkins University Press, pp. 3–12.
Chernick M (2009) The FARC at the negotiating table. In: Bouvier VM (ed.) *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, pp. 65–94.
Díaz C (2008) Challenging impunity from below: the contested ownership of transitional justice in Colombia. In: McEvoy K and McGregor L (eds) *Transitional Justice from Below*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp. 189–216.
Elston C (2020) Nunca invisibles: insurgent memory and self-representation by female ex-combatants in Colombia. *Wasafiri* 35(4): 70–78.
Estripeaut-Bourjac M (2012) Introducción: itinerario de una investigación. In: Estripeaut-Borjac M (ed.) *Palabras de mujeres: proyectos de vida y memoria colectiva*. Bogotá, Colombia: Siglo del Hombre Editores, pp. 17–39.
González-Jácome J (2016) Derechos humanos y pensamiento de izquierda en Colombia (1974-1978): una relectura de 'El libro negro de la represión'. *Vniversitas* 65(133): 105–138.
Grabe V (2000) *Razones de vida*. Bogotá, Colombia: Planeta.
Gutman Y (2017) Looking backward to the future: counter-memory as oppositional knowledge-production in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. *Current Sociology* 65(1): 54–72.
Hamilton C (2010) Activist memories, trauma and the pleasures of politics. In: Crownshaw R, Kilby J and Rowland A (eds) *The Future of Memory*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 265–278.
Huyssen A (2000) Present pasts: media, politics, amnesia. *Public Culture* 12(1): 21–38.
Huyssen A, Vermeulen P, Craps S, et al. (2012) Dispersal and redemption: the future dynamics of memory studies – a roundtable. *Memory Studies* 5(2): 223–239.
Iranzo Dosdad A and Edson Louidor W (2018) *Entre la paz y la guerra: los lugares de la diáspora colombiana*. Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad de los Andes, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.
Kent L (2016) Transitional justice in law, history and anthropology. *The Australian Feminist Law Journal* 42(1): 1–11.
Lara P (2000) *Las mujeres en la guerra*. Bogotá, Colombia: Planeta.
Lazzara MJ (2018) The memory turn. In: Poblete J (ed.) *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power*. New York: Routledge, pp. 14–31.
López Baquero C (2012) *Trauma, memoria y cuerpo: el testimonio femenino en Colombia (1985-2000)*. Tempe, AZ: Asociación Internacional de Literatura y Cultura Femenina Hispánica.
McEvoy K (2007) Beyond legalism: towards a thicker understanding of transitional justice. *Journal of Law and Society* 34(4): 411–440.
National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) (2013) *¡Basta ya! Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad. Informe General Grupo de Memoria Histórica*. Bogotá, Colombia: Imprenta Nacional. Available at: http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/informeGeneral/descargas.html
National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) (2018) *Exilio colombiano. Huellas del conflicto armado más allá de las fronteras*. Bogotá, Colombia: CNMH. Available at: https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/exilio-colombiano-huellas-del-conflicto-armado-mas-alla-de-las-fronteras/
Nieto Valdivieso YF (2016) The joy of the militancy: happiness and the pursuit of the revolutionary struggle. *Journal of Gender Studies* 26(1): 78–90.
Ortiz L (2012) El testimonio colombiano como instrumento de construcción de memoria en Colombia. In: Estripeaut-Bourjac M (ed.) *Palabras de mujeres: proyectos de vida y memoria colectiva*. Bogotá, Colombia: Siglo del Hombre Editores, pp. 43–61.
Pizarro E (1992) Revolutionary guerrilla groups in Colombia. In: Bergquist C, Peñaranda R and Sánchez G (eds) *Violence in Colombia: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*. Wilmington, NC: Scholarly Resources Inc., pp. 169–193.

Raphael S (2009) Paramilitarism and state terror in Colombia. In: Jackson R, Murphy E and Poynting S (eds) *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice*. Oxford; New York: Routledge, pp. 163–180.

Reading A and Katriel T (eds) (2015) *Cultural Memories of Nonviolent Struggles: Powerful Times*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reátegui Carrillo F (2009) Las víctimas recuerdan. Notas sobre la práctica social de la memoria. In: Briceño-Donn M, Reátegui F, Rivera MC, et al. (eds) *Recordar en conflicto: iniciativas no oficiales de memoria en Colombia*. Bogotá, Colombia: International Centre for Transitional Justice, pp. 17–39.

Riaño P and Uribe MV (2017) Construyendo memoria en medio del conflicto: el Grupo de Memoria Histórica de Colombia. *Revista de Estudios Colombianos* 50: 10–23.

Rigney A (2018) Remembering hope: transnational activism beyond the traumatic. *Memory Studies* 11(3): 368–380.

Rodríguez Castro L (2020) The politics of memory in post-accord Colombia: interventions from women social leaders and decolonial feminisms. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27(7): 669–682.

Roniger L and Sznajder M (2009) *The Politics of Exile in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rowe W and Whitfield T (1987) Thresholds of identity: literature and exile in Latin America. *Third World Quarterly* 9(1): 229–245.

Rowen J (2017) 'We don't believe in transitional justice': peace and the politics of legal ideas in Colombia. *Law & Social Inquiry* 42(3): 622–647.

Sánchez-Blake E and Luna Gómez Y (2015) Camino a la paz: repertorios simbólicos testimoniales de una nación en transición. *Kamchatka. Revista de análisis cultural* 6: 941–957.

Theidon K (2009) Editorial note. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 3(3): 295–300.

Traverso E (2016) *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

United Nations Security Council (2004) The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies. Available at: https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/2004%20report.pdf (accessed 19 November 2020).

Uprimny R and Saffon MP (2008) Usos y abusos de la justicia transicional en Colombia. *Anuario de Derechos Humanos* 4: 165–195.

Vásquez Perdomo ME (2006) *Escrito para no morir: bitácora de una militancia*. Bogotá, Colombia: Intermedio.

Vega Cantor R (2016) Crítica a la noción de víctima. *El Colectivo*, 16 December. Available at: https://elcolectivocomunicacion.com/2016/12/16/critica-a-la-nocion-de-victima/ (accessed 2 November 2021).

Victims' Unit (2015) Homenaje a Óscar William Calvo en los 30 años de su muerte. Available at: https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/reparaci%C3%B3n/homenaje-%C3%B3scar-william-calvo-en-los-30-a%C3%B1os-de-su-muerte/11313 (accessed 15 April 2021).

Yúdice G (1996) Testimonio and postmodernism (1991). In: Gugelberger G (ed.) *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 42–57.

Zunino M (2016) Subversive justice: the Russell Vietnam war crimes tribunal and transitional justice. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10(2): 211–229.

Author biography

Cherilyn Elston is a Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies at the University of Reading, United Kingdom. She researches contemporary Colombian literature and culture, memory studies and the Colombian conflict, and feminism and women's writing in Latin America. Her first monograph, *Women's Writing in Colombia: An Alternative History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), was awarded the 2018 Montserrat Ordóñez Prize by the Latin American Studies Association.