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Open wounds: commemorating the Colombian conflict

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Open Wounds: Commemorating the Colombian Conflict
Cherilyn Elston

Cherilyn Elston, specialist in Colombian history, literature and culture, questions the role of commemoration in a state where violence is ongoing and highlights the plurality of both official and grassroots forms of commemorative practices in contemporary Colombia.

How and why does a society commemorate a conflict that is not yet over? How can opposing narratives of the past (and present) be reconciled in a way that appropriately commemorates violence, provides reparations to victims and ultimately leads to peace? These are the urgent questions being asked in Colombia. Home to a decades-long conflict that has involved multiple armed actors and left more than 8 million victims, the country is currently engaged in the momentous task of trying to come to terms with its long history of violence, even despite the complexities of defining the Colombian situation as 'post-war'.

The 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the guerrilla group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) was a major step towards ending the more than half-century conflict. This historic agreement, after numerous failed attempts, not only paved the way for the laying down of arms of the country's oldest and largest guerrilla group, but established the blueprint for a sophisticated and comprehensive transitional justice system that seeks to provide justice and reparations for victims, establish the truth of the conflict and guarantee non-repetition of violence. This system includes an official truth commission, special tribunals to try those accused of war crimes and human rights abuses, and a unit to search for the disappeared, alongside other memorialisation and commemorative initiatives. In line with international peace-building and conflict-resolution norms, Colombia is putting into practice the idea that facing up to the past is necessary for national reconciliation and peace.

Significantly, the transitional justice measures connected to the most recent peace agreement form part of a broader commemorative impulse, or memory boom, in Colombia that has come to prominence in the last few decades. Like many countries throughout the world emerging from war, Colombia has sought to foster a national dialogue and collective memory of the causes and legacies of the conflict. This *bringing to remembrance*, to draw upon the etymological roots of commemoration, is shown in the creation since the mid-2000s of a number of official bodies and memory initiatives. These range from investigative entities and archives, such as the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (National Centre for Historical Memory), responsible for writing a series of reports and archiving documentary material on the conflict, to the construction of *lieux de mémoire* and memory museums, such as the *Casa de la memoria* (House of Memory) in Medellín and the *Centro de memoria, paz y reconciliación* (Centre for Memory, Peace and Reconciliation) in Bogotá, and the organisation of public ceremonies and outreach activities, such as the signing of the 2016 peace agreement in Cartagena and the 2018 exhibition *Voces para transformar a Colombia* (Voices to transform Colombia), to name just a few.

Yet, there is an important factor that separates commemoration in Colombia from the numerous examples of memory work that have characterised the global memory boom of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Unlike Holocaust remembrance, First World War commemorations, the engagement with memory in post-genocide Rwanda, post-apartheid South Africa and post-dictatorship Southern Cone Latin America, amongst many other cases, where practices of commemoration were initiated *after* war or the end of authoritarian rule, in Colombia memory initiatives have emerged prior to the end of the conflict. In a context in which violence is ongoing and armed groups are still active (including supposedly demobilised paramilitaries and now a dissident faction of the FARC), the 2016 peace agreement does not

mark the final end of this complex war. Thus, if commemoration is understood not simply as the respectful remembrance of past events but as a mobilisation of the past, and a struggle over its meanings, in the aftermath of violence, in Colombia this definition must be modified and understood as part of a contested struggle to end a war that is not confined to the past but continues in the present.

Moreover, the use of memory discourses and practices by the Colombian state even prior to the peace deal with the FARC demonstrates an unprecedented situation in which transitional justice has been implemented without any clear political transformation; and has been adopted by the same state which has been implicated in gross human rights abuses and has often denied the existence of the armed conflict itself. Reflecting on the future of commemorative practices, the Colombian case could therefore lead us to question, as many memory studies scholars have done, the assumption that remembering violence is a deterrent to ongoing and future human rights violations. At a time in which we are inundated with memory, but where the remembrance of past abuses has not prevented continuing violence and injustice, Colombia could provide another example of how commemoration in fact imposes a closed, top-down version of history where justice and reconciliation form part of an empty rhetoric that reinforces existing power relations or negates the real transformations that are needed to end a state of violence.

Fully accepting this reading of the Colombian situation, however, would do an injustice to the rich polyvocality and plurality of commemorative practices and transitional justice processes in the country. Focusing solely on the emergence of official, institutional memory initiatives like those outlined above ignores the ways this operates in dialogue, or in tension, with numerous grassroots, non-official memory initiatives led by human rights groups, peace activists, victims of state crimes, relatives of the disappeared and those displaced by the conflict. Indeed, for many years these grassroots organisations themselves have adopted the language of transitional justice and memory – even creating their own truth-seeking and memorial initiatives, such as the feminist and pacifist NGO the *Ruta Pacífica*'s independent truth commission, the *Comisión de Verdad y Memoria de Mujeres* (Women's Truth and Memory Commission) and the independent memory museum *Salón Nunca Más* (Hall of Never Again) in Granada, Antioquia – with the aim of making visible alternative narratives of the conflict, campaigning for an end to the war and justice for victims; as well as putting pressure on the forms official commemorative initiatives were taking.

A crucial part of this grassroots work has been the use of creative methodologies. While scholars and practitioners have only recently begun to recognise that peacebuilding is not simply the result of normative, legal mechanisms, for many years Colombian memory activists have been pioneering artistic and cultural practices as a means of providing symbolic reparations to victims and generating empathy and solidarity between different groups. In Colombia these practices range from the outpouring of literary-testimonial writing, performance art and theatre, weaving, visual art and photography, to ritual practices such as stone painting, the adoption of unidentified victims and commemorative pilgrimages.

This is not to say that such practices offer an easy route to peace and reconciliation. In a context as politically polarised as Colombia and where the structural causes of the war have not been resolved, acts of memory carry the risk of generating anti-reconciliatory narratives that can close down discussion and introduce hierarchies into our accounts of conflict. This has serious consequences in Colombia, where commemorative practices operate in situations of ongoing risk and danger for many of those who have been victimised by the war. Yet, reflecting on the ways commemoration can lead to reconciliation, it is important for us to be mindful of how reconciliation as a normative concept is poorly defined and often contested, dependent on local political contexts and power relations. Indeed, the example of Colombian memory practices demonstrates that commemoration and reconciliation do not mean the construction

of an official version of history that reconciles opposing narratives in a conciliatory compromise. In contrast, reconciliation involves the creation of plural spaces that do not simply allow a society to heal its wounds but enables them to keep them open; enabling a critical analysis of the pain of war and the articulation of plural and dissenting narratives of official history.

Consequently, Colombia's conflict commemoration prior to the end of violence has important lessons for post-war memory projects throughout the world. Colombia disrupts any simple temporal distinction between past and present; starkly demonstrating the predominant understanding of memory as the past made present, or the mobilisation of the past for the needs of the present. However, post-war commemoration has often been marked by a teleological narrative in which conflict is consigned to the past and where, despite the rhetorical declaration of a conflict as 'over', the continuities of violence, injustice and oppression continue into the 'post-conflict' scenario. Colombia's 'pre-post-conflict' mobilisation of memory complicates such a teleological narrative and reminds us that the act of commemoration is never simply the act of looking back (of remembering) but is a forward-looking practice that involves urgent political struggles over narratives of the past, as well as alternative presents and possible futures.

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