

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.
Mikhail Bakhtin

BUILDING MEMORY IN THE MIDDLE OF CONFLICT (transl.)

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Carlos Del Cairo and Jefferson Jaramillo, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia

Interview by Ana Fonseca

This is a translated transcription of our audio interview conducted in Spanish, [Construyendo memoria en medio del conflicto](#) (“Building Memory in the Middle of Conflict”). This interview was originally published in an extended version by Radio Heteroglossia on February 2014. The original interview has been shortened for this publication to fit our new, condensed format.

Ana Fonseca: Thanks for listening to Radio Heteroglossia. I'm Ana Fonseca and our guests today are doctors [Jefferson Jaramillo](#) and [Carlos Del Cairo](#), both associate professors at the [Pontificia Universidad Javeriana](#) in Bogotá, Colombia. Today, we will be discussing the article written by these two academics entitled, [“Los dilemas de la museificación. Reflexiones en torno a dos iniciativas estatales de construcción de memoria colectiva en Colombia”](#) (in English, “The Dilemmas of Museification. Reflections on Two State Initiatives for Building Collective Memory in Colombia,”) published in 2013 in the academic journal *Memoria y Sociedad* of the Universidad Javeriana. Specifically, we will be focusing on the first part of their article which talks about the 2001 proposal to exhibit a towel that belonged to Manuel Marulanda Vélez (the top leader of the Colombian guerrillas FARC in 2001 and commonly known as “Tirofijo”) at the National Museum of Colombia, to get into the main theme of our talk today about the challenges that exist while telling difficult or traumatic memories especially in socio-political contexts of ongoing conflict such as the one in Colombia.

We then welcome professors Carlos Del Cairo and Jefferson Jaramillo and to start I would like to ask you about the idea of “temporal distance” while constructing memory in Colombia mentioned in your article. You explain how in the midst of the debate that took place over the 2001 proposal to

exhibit the towel of Tirofijo at the National Museum of Colombia, the museum's director at the time, Elvira Cuervo, brought to people's attention this idea of "temporal distance" that perhaps should be taken into account before Colombians start to revive violent memories in their country, and that the museum was aware of because objects such as Tirofijo's towel evoke memories of the violence that is still part of Colombia's present, therefore it is perhaps not the right moment to recall them. In such a context of ongoing conflict, how viable is it to build memory in Colombia?

Jefferson Jaramillo: Unlike other countries which have made the transition to democratic processes and initiated processes of transitional justice and reconstruction of memory after their experience with traumatic events and systematic violence, Colombia has had to do it in the middle of the internal conflict that is being experienced. Here there hasn't been a spatial, neither a temporal end of the war that has lasted for about fifty-four years, from 1958 to 2012, which we could call the emblematic period of the internal conflict in Colombia especially the insurrectional conflict and the state or para-state responses to the latter.

During the ongoing conflict, Colombia has had to deal with great challenges around issues of memory specifically in regards to the creation of memory in the middle of the conflict, which is what we are doing and makes the situation of Colombia a bit peculiar. And this also explains why it is so difficult at times to have that temporal distance from the conflict and a consensus about what needs to be remembered among different social groups in this country. Actually we believe that there is hardly a place in the world where there has been a consensus about what needs to be remembered because if memory is a social cement, it is also a space of struggle and tension about what it means to represent the past or the lived experiences of different social groups. But in Colombia those tensions are exasperated because the war hasn't ended, we have had to create memory in the middle of the bloodshed, and even in the middle of disputes of when the conflict started and who the main actors of this conflict are. And precisely, Manuel Marulanda is one of those main axis of dispute in this conflict. For most people, and in general as a result of the way memory about the conflict has been constructed during these fifty-four years, Marulanda ends up being the main perpetrator, even as the sole perpetrator, and as the undesirable character in Colombia's history. Part of that reading, I would say much of that reading or perception of what Marulanda represents, contributed to the way in which the debate of

whether his towel could be included as a museum piece or not took shape. In other words, we tried to show in the article how among those who debated the proposal of Elvira Cuervo, the Museum's director, there were also arguments along the lines of morality and class namely that Marulanda was a peasant and not just a peasant but a militant and illiterate peasant that had caused too much harm to this country and therefore, undoubtedly, he wasn't part of the hegemonic history that should be told. Here there is an important dispute for memory that takes place in the middle of the conflict. Many authors have suggested that there is also a need to put an end to the conflict and promote processes of transition and peace-building in Colombia in order to take the discussion about the meanings of the people who have conventionally been considered as undesirable in Colombia's history to another level. And I think we will have to face this in the near future given the possible and desirable scenario of peace-building that is being proposed in Colombia.

Ana Fonseca:

Yes, because one of the challenges is that Colombia is once again going through a process of peace-negotiations which is quite interesting because the controversy around the proposed exhibition of the towel of Tirofijo at the Colombian National Museum took place in a similar context to the current historical moment of Colombia, namely the former peace-dialogues undergone in 2001 under the Government of Pastrana. Of course, the current peace-talks that have been undertaken since 2012 have their own characteristics, i.e., they are being conducted in another country etc. In this historical moment, have there been other debates similar to the one caused by the proposed exhibition of Tirofijo's towel at the Colombian National Museum in 2001?

Jefferson Jaramillo:

We don't really know of other debates similar to the one caused by the proposal of exhibiting the towel of Manuel Marulanda. But recently in 2013, there was a debate around a polemic contest proposed by some international channels that had to do with the "Great Colombian," Which would be really interesting to compare what happened with Manuel Marulanda -an undesirable person for many people in this country that should be excluded from Colombia's recent national history- with what occurred with the election of the "Great Colombian." This was a national contest and people voted for Álvaro Uribe Velez as the "Great Colombian" in Colombia's history. So what calls our attention is what kind of national history is exhibited. Or how the debate around who should be included in the memory of the nation is conducted. Manuel Marulanda must be excluded because he was the anti-hero for many, but for the

majority of people Álvaro Uribe Vélez should be included in Colombia's national history as the "great hero." So this is very interesting to examine, and this also shows how memory is also a space of dispute and tensions. Carlos has a comment to share.

Carlos Del Cairo: There is probably something that is creating some level of controversy in the last few days and this is the proposal recently made by Carlos Valderrama, the soccer player, the "Pibe Valderrama," who is considered as an icon of Colombia's national identity by some people. He proposed to play a soccer game for peace, alongside other current and former soccer players, with the FARC's negotiating team that is in Havana. This generated some controversy among some people, although not as much or at the same scale as the controversy of Tirofijo's towel. But I think there are some similarities here in terms of how some people questioned why a positive icon such as the Pibe Valderrama wanted to play a soccer game with the FARC negotiating team, and this is seen by some not as an act of reconciliation but as an act that promotes the actions of these "terrorists" etc., as some people see them. Then I think that, even though it did not happen at the same scale as the other controversy, this shows all of those processes and scenarios where certain figures, peoples or objects are selected to try to represent some national sentiments which are also challenged by other sectors of society that consider they don't represent what the country should be in an appropriate manner, and like Jefferson pointed out a while ago, this occurs in a context where the conflict hasn't ended and this exacerbates all the disputes about memory which ultimately have an impact on the present more than on the past.

Ana Fonseca: Great observation to end our conversation for today. Thank you both for your time and for sharing with us your knowledge and perspectives about these issues.

Carlos Del Cairo & Jefferson Jaramillo: Sure, good bye.

Further information on some points and names mentioned during the interview:

- **Álvaro Uribe Vélez:** President of Colombia for the period of 2002-2012, under his government the FARC were severely weakened militarily.
- **FARC:** *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Colombian guerrilla group.
- **Peace talks in Colombia:** The current peace talks are being undertaken in Havana, Cuba, since 2012; not in Colombia as the 2001 Colombian peace talks did.

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