

Chapter A

A

INTRODUCTION



▲ Photo by Jesús A. Colorado, 2010

A 1. HISTORICAL MEMORY WORK IN CONFLICT/POST-CONFLICT TIMES

What motivates the urge to reconstruct, recover or reclaim “the past”?

Why remember? What do we remember and how?

The types of memory work described here take place in highly contentious and diverse contexts where a host of historical, political and cultural factors come to shape a complex landscape of memory claims, projects and discourses. Memory and memorialization have taken a center place in the work and priorities of a large number of community groups, civil society organizations, victims/survivors groups and non-governmental organizations in conflict/postconflict times. *Remembering and Narrating Conflict* considers the lessons learned and the many dilemmas that emerge from this work. It offers resource materials for critically engaging with questions of how to create and foster plural spaces for narrative and testimonial encounters; who and how should be involved, and in what; and how to contribute to tasks of historical clarification, truth telling, or dignifying the memories of the victims when memory constitutes a critical and disputed terrain.

Commemoration and memorialization projects have been called on in transitional justice and historical memory interventions as one of the key mechanisms that can help societies and groups come to terms with a past of war or mass violence and move societies towards non-violence and no repetition. Memory workers, indigenous peoples, activists and social organizations worldwide have located their work within this broader goal, while critically assessing its premises. In acknowledging the relevance of memorialization and engagement with memory as part of the right to know and to reparation, they challenge assumptions that a violent past is something that can be “dealt with” through top-down interventions, a commission, a monument, or an apology. Instead many such groups have activated plural, autonomous, long term, and participatory processes to recover, reclaim and/or find evidence of past violations and their impacts, while placing those who have been traditionally silenced and their knowledge at the center of memory work.

Remembering and Narrating Conflict seeks to promote the construction and reconstruction of memories that challenge the existing power imbalances between the personal stories of victims and the institutionalized versions of the past of political leaders, armed groups, state officials, or the media. The hope is that this sort of memory work becomes a

dynamic site to make the voices, knowledge, and interpretations of victims central in narratives and histories of conflicts and to strengthen social organizations, communities, and victims' organizations. This is the sort of work that is meant here by the term "historical memory," working with individual and collective memory(ies) as a dynamic source and means to document and interrogate the past and to understand the varied ways in which memory informs every day life choices and claims of survivors of mass violence. These resources aim to support memory workers to be sensitive to political differences and differences of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, caste, region, religion, language, age, and physical ability that cut across victimized communities, the armed actors of the conflict, and even the organizations that do memory work.

How the past is remembered, forgotten, or silenced is a highly contentious issue that can put the safety of memory workers at risk or keep social tensions alive. It is not easy to do memory work, particularly in contexts of ongoing conflict and or a post-conflict context, and so these resources also aim to support memory workers' ability to recognize and respond to the risks of doing this work.

The resources here can be used in various ways. You may find a particular memory work activity presented useful in your context – or you might want to adapt it. You might want to hold a workshop, of anywhere from an afternoon to several days, using several of these activities. You might not choose to use any of the activities but find the discussion of issues to consider before doing memory work useful. You may be particularly interested in the tips for providing psychosocial support when doing memory work. There are a variety of resources here and we hope that some of them will be useful for your work.

A 2. HOW THESE RESOURCES CAME TOGETHER

These resources began as a project of the Colombian Historical Memory Group (*GMH: Grupo de Memoria Historica*), which was created in 2005 as part of the National Reconciliation and Reparations Commission. Its mission was to develop an inclusive and comprehensive narrative of the reasons for the emergence and the evolution of the internal armed

conflict, armed groups, and their competing claims. The commission also aimed to document the memories generated in the midst of cycles of violence, and to privilege the memories of the victims whose voices have until now been suppressed, subordinated or silenced.

As part of that work the commission held memory workshops around Colombia with two aims: to elicit voices that had been silenced, and to identify and document other versions of what had happened in the country. Many who participated in these workshops appreciated the various methods that were used and wanted to know more about them so that they could hold similar sessions, and so a toolkit was created that spoke to the what, how and why of this sort of work. It is available online in Spanish: <http://www.centrodehistoriainformatica.gov.co/descargas/informes2009/cajadeherramientas/presentacionbaja.pdf>.

The toolkit was well received in Colombia, and it was suggested that it could also be useful to those doing memory work in other contexts of violence. To make the toolkit more appropriate and relevant in other countries and contexts, a dialogue was opened, with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Government. Thirty-three memory workers in twenty countries (across four continents) were asked to read and comment on an initial English translation and adaption of the toolkit. Twenty of these then attended a workshop held in Vancouver, BC, Canada May 25th and 26th, 2011.





▲ Workshop participants, photo by Lara Rosenoff 2010

A 3. DOING MEMORY WORK IN CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT CONTEXTS: ISSUES AND TENSIONS

The discussions during the workshop with memory workers in Vancouver coalesced in particular around key issues that suggest the tensions, dilemmas, possibilities, political and social contexts in which practitioners around the world advance historical memory work. What we learned from this workshop was that when people in very different situations engage in historical memory reconstruction, there are not certainties or recipes directing what or how to do but rather dilemmas, questions, tentative insights and attention to the changes in context. We suggest doing memory work starting from this set of questions [or those encounter in the preparation of the work] rather than a set of hard and fast principles about what works or how memory work should be done. If well these questions are briefly addressed in the following pages, they are also touched in various ways throughout the text.

A 3.1 IS THERE A MOMENT FOR TRUTH / STORY TELLING?

Truth telling and memorialization have been thought of in transitional justice or official memory projects as critical mechanisms that help societies move through transitions, for example, in the work of Truth and Reconciliation commissions and tribunals. However, memory practitioners and groups question whether historical memory work is only to be conducted at a particular time, specifically during transitional periods (establishment of a peace deal or a democratic opening), or if rather it needs to be thought as a process and beyond transitions. Here considerations of both safety and momentum for the work are important. It can be dangerous to speak truth and seek justice in polarized communities, especially if perpetrators are still in power, but there have been several cases where this work was used to either remove perpetrators from power or keep candidates who were perpetrators from winning elections. There is no linear set of steps, nor types of memory work following any particular set of stages of a conflict or post conflict situation. Rather it is more useful to think of different methods of documentation as a web or a spiral to draw on as best fits a context.

A 3.2 WHOSE STORY IS IT TO TELL? WHOSE VOICE IS HEARD OR SILENCED?

Memory workers may want to place survivors in control of both the process and the outcome of memory work (i.e., how stories are told), but this is neither a naïve nor an easily achievable goal. Some present at the international workshop were themselves struggling with how to share and interpret survivors' stories and others felt that memory workers should not be the ones to edit, order, organize or interpret the stories but rather should always do this with survivors themselves.

You may want survivors to be the ones who choose what shape the stories take, be it a book, a community mural or memorial, a performance, a town assembly, a video, a lesson plan for children etc. This may best be discussed at the beginning, rather than the end, of doing memory work. However, ethical questions are ongoing when working with these stories and bringing them to various audiences and settings. It is important to consider contentious coexistence and local competing narratives when dealing with narratives of division and dissent within the local communities, regions or even nations. Trust and trust-building is a key element for negotiating and establishing ownership and autonomy of narratives and exploring ways to tell stories within polarized communities.

A 3.3 THE POLITICS OF NAMING AND TELLING: VICTIMS OR SURVIVORS?

In Colombia the term 'victim' is used by the 'victims movement' that has re-appropriated the term (see the discussion in section B 1.5). In other international contexts, memory workers prefer the term 'survivor', arguing that victims are often asked only about how they were victimized, and share only their stories of pain. One of the issues is the extent that a location as victims may silence other stories, and whether room can be made for stories of how they survived, and for them to share their stories of resilience, recovery and resistance. For example, what skills did they develop to live near their perpetrator neighbor? How did their spirituality or dreams sustain them? This is particularly true for survivors of sexual violence. Doing so honors their agency and offers resources to those who continue to experience violence.

A 3.4 WHOSE MEMORIES SHOULD BE INCLUDED? AT WHAT POINT AND FOR WHAT?

There was much discussion at the international workshop as to whether and how to include perpetrators in memory processes, particularly in non-official or civil society led initiatives of historical memory reconstruction. Some thought that it was essential to do so to get a fuller picture of what had happened and that if memory work is understood as a process for restoring balance, it is essential for perpetrators to listen to the stories of victims.

Others argued that victims would not feel, or be, safe if perpetrators were listening or otherwise included – particularly when perpetrators continue to be in power and when they manipulate memory for their purposes. A pivotal element of these processes is to create an atmosphere of trust for people to feel that what they are saying is important to others, and such an atmosphere may not be possible if perpetrators are there. Some felt that perpetrators should be heard and offered opportunities for transformation, but in a separate process (perhaps needing different methodologies) – and that they should not be listened to at the expense of victims.

It makes a difference if perpetrators are also victims, and if perpetrators are from inside or outside of a community. It also makes a difference if perpetrators come forward voluntarily, seeking reconciliation. Some felt that reconciliation should not be the goal, but rather transformation. One participant argued they should be called protagonists not perpetrators. A separate but related issue is the inclusion of those from dominant society who were not directly perpetrators but who stood by while violence happened to others. Memory work can also serve to unsettle and transform them.

A 3.5 WHAT DOES TRANSFORMATION LOOK LIKE?

How do we make memory work strategic? How do we link this strategic vision to matters of culture and cultural reconstruction? How can we

design strategies for collecting stories that safely maintain a record of the voices of the victims?

Some participants in the international workshop felt that a transitional justice focus on formal accountability mechanisms put memory work in a disadvantaged position because it tends to be thought of as a merely individual issue. It was argued that reparations and legal processes often open more wounds than they close. Some reflected that legal proceedings did not make room for mourning nor for the expression of multiple truths. There can be a divergence between the goals of justice and reconciliation and those of localized memory work. These observations invite a critical reflection on how memory work can help in the transformation of contexts of violence and the fragmentation of social life.

Others however thought it was important that memory reconstruction activities be structured so as to provide material that could be later used for legal processes. Some did both informal work and arranged for victims to give sworn affidavits to attorneys for use at a later time when formal mechanisms might be available. Some felt it was important to do memory work within the auspices of an official government body for accountability purposes, some that it was important to be legally recognized, while others argued for the freedom of having neither of these and rather for fostering civil initiatives. Memory work is necessarily political and calls for an exploration of purpose and recognition of risks.





- ▲ International memory workshop in Vancouver, 2011. Photo by workshop participant and photographer Jesús Abad Colorado, who is a member of the Colombian Historical Memory Group. His powerful visual memory photography can be seen online.

