

Nuestra Orilla podcast: challenging history as a reparation project in Colombia

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Abstract

This article examines the epistemological proposal of *Nuestra Orilla podcast*, an eight-episode audio series resulting from a participatory research process, carried out in collaboration between historians, communicators, and two Afro-Colombian social leaders from the Bajo Atrato region in the Colombian Pacific. The series, also hosted on a website where history unfolds through a curation of primary and secondary sources, tells the story of the Colombian region of Bajo Atrato from the perspective of its inhabitants and through the narrator's life experience: Ana Luisa Ramírez. This project aimed to produce a history (regarded as a critical method of inquiry and as a narrative genre at the same time) of this region of the Colombian Pacific that challenges the places, temporalities, and methodologies used to tell the stories of violence in Colombia, with the hope of producing counter-histories that help repair the way we relate to each other and to the environment.

Keywords: historiography; reparations; transitional justice; podcast; Colombia.

Nuestra Orilla podcast: desafiando la historia como proyecto de reparación en Colombia

Resumen

Este artículo desarrolla la propuesta epistemológica de *Nuestra Orilla podcast*, una serie sonora de ocho episodios resultado de un proceso de investigación participativa, realizado en una colaboración entre historiadores, comunicadores y dos líderes sociales afrocolombianos de la región del Bajo Atrato en el Pacífico colombiano. La serie, albergada también en una página web que la expande desde una curaduría de fuentes primarias y secundarias, cuenta la historia de la región colombiana del Bajo Atrato desde las perspectivas de sus habitantes y a través de la experiencia de vida de la narradora: Ana Luisa Ramírez. Este proyecto tuvo como objetivo producir una historia (entendida como método crítico de indagación y como género narrativo a la vez) de esta región del Pacífico colombiano que desafía los lugares, temporalidades y metodologías usadas para contar las historias de violencia en Colombia, con la esperanza de producir contra-historias que ayuden a reparar la manera como nos relacionamos con los demás y con el entorno.

Palabras clave: historiografía; reparaciones; justicia transicional; podcast; Colombia.

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Introduction

Nuestra Orilla is a podcast series published in 2023 that seeks to address the problem with the role that historical narrative plays, both in the production and reproduction of violence and in repairing the forms of relationships between human groups and between humans and our environment. It is not a project that arose from a purely academic motivation. It came about from the dialogue between three partners: an academic historian (who wrote this text); two Afro-Colombian social leaders; and a collective of communicators focused on producing podcasts for social change. As a historian, I became interested in the alternative production of histories as a way of contributing to the transitional justice process that Colombia has been undergoing since the signing of the peace accords between the Colombian government, led by President Juan Manuel Santos, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group in 2016.

At the time of the signing of the accords, a group of professors and students from the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá founded the research group “Historias para lo que viene” (Stories for what is coming). The group was based on the premise that historical thinking is crucial in any peace-building process after a past of massive human rights violations. To be effective, the social, political, economic, and cultural transformations that a society seeking to move towards peace needs to make require a deep understanding of the conjunctural and structural causes that produce violence. Injustice and oppression cannot be effectively confronted from a presentism perspective; They are the product of a system that has been in the making for a long time and that we need to reconfigure so that there is effective non-repetition. As the Nigerian-American philosopher Olúfẹmi Táíwò has argued, reparation, beyond a symbolic act or financial compensation, necessarily requires a profound transformation of the patterns of distribution of material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages that have been developing around global capitalism since the 16th century and that continue to be in force today (TÁÍWÒ 2022).

But in addition to producing rigorous and sufficiently complex explanations of the past to understand and be able to confront violence, historians of different

generations who make up the group also ask the question of the relationship between the production of the historical narrative in our society and the generation and reproduction of different forms of exclusion that are closely associated with war. There are many investigations that, from social history, postcolonial and subaltern studies, anthropology, and feminist theory, among others, have pointed out the way in which the construction of historical knowledge and the archive itself have contributed to the configuration of power structures. Critical perspectives have invited us to question the presuppositions of the discipline and how the linear and teleological conception of time, the narratives of progress and the use of categories such as civilization and barbarism or modern and premodern, have placed certain groups at the center of history and silenced others, legitimizing domination and violence (AZOULAY, 2019; BSHEER, 2020; CHAKRABARTY, 1992; HARTMAN, 2008; MILES, 2021; RIVERA CUSICANQUI, 2010; STOLER, 2010; TROUILLOT, 1995).

This question, which recognizes history's influence on shaping social relations, highlights the potential connection between transforming how we produce history and fostering more positive ways of relating to and existing in the world. Thus, in the research incubator, we ask ourselves about the possibility of using historical thought not only to expand our knowledge of the past, but to produce stories “for what is to come,” that is, stories that help us to imagine and forge better futures (CASTRO, 2021). If history has contributed to generating and reinforcing inequalities, it can also contribute to generating criticism of power and redefining the way we relate to each other. This challenge implies rethinking our profession, since it is not enough to investigate and narrate silenced stories using conventional forms: we must critically investigate the way in which the discipline, with its temporal presuppositions, its meta-narratives, and its methods, has contributed to this silencing, and in turn, to naturalizing power, exclusion and violence. What implications has conceptualizing time in a linear and progressive way had? Taking for granted that the nation-state and democracy are exclusive of authoritarianism and violence? Privileging the written archive as the foundation of the objectivity of knowledge? Privileging writing over orality as a vehicle of knowledge?

Thus, the objective we set for ourselves with *Nuestra Orilla* was precisely to question the historical discipline, proposing a different theoretical, methodological, and practical vision of history itself: a counter-history. I use the term counter-history in the sense that Saidiya Hartman uses it, to refer not only to alternative narratives that oppose the dominant ones or illuminate silenced experiences, but to stories that challenge the assumptions of the discipline itself in its conventional ways (HARTMAN, 2008). Throughout this article I will explain how *Nuestra Orilla* constitutes a provocation to history. In the next section, I will begin by introducing the podcast, its co-authors, objectives, and production process. Then, in three more sections, I will develop our commitment to challenging the conceptions of temporality characteristic of the dominant narratives about violent pasts. First, I focus on the invitation to expand the emphasis that numerous narratives of historical memory have placed on the recent past, during which the human rights violations that are expected to be left behind occurred, to include a longer-term historical perspective. Second, I develop the proposal to escape the conception of time as linear and progressive that has been privileged by traditional narratives and that has served to naturalize power in different ways. On the one hand, it has naturalized the superiority of some groups considered more advanced over others that are supposed to be backward or even outside of history. This modern conception of time has obscured the historical agency of communities assumed to be premodern, pre-political and a-historical. On the other hand, it has left the nation state unquestioned as the pinnacle of progress and the ultimate goal of history, obscuring the violence and interests that have been an essential part of its formation process. Third, I develop the questioning that we propose in the podcast series of the compartmentalization of the categories of past, present, and future that accompanies our modern notion of time and that has been central to the conceptualization of transitional justice (MILLER, 2021). In particular, I formulate the possibility of making history based on the longing for a different future.

Nuestra Orilla

In 1997, when Ana Luisa Ramírez and Jenry Serna were barely teenagers, the Afro-Colombian communities of the lower Atrato River region to which they belong suffered a massive, forced displacement. This region, located in the north of the department of Chocó in the Colombian Pacific, is crossed from south to north by the Atrato River and is an area of enormous wealth. It is a tropical rainforest of extraordinary biodiversity, where gold, cocoa, rubber, and wood, among other things, have been extracted since the 16th century. The Spanish conquerors were unable to settle there, besieged by rebellious indigenous people and the jungle climate, but they did establish gold mines worked by gangs of enslaved people, given the massive reduction of the original indigenous population (JIMÉNEZ, 2004; SHARP, 1981). As they gradually achieved their manumission and after the final abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century, former slaves found themselves in an exceptional situation: since the Spanish and Creoles did not occupy this territory, they had sufficient land at their disposal where they could settle and achieve levels of independence that other ex-slaves did not achieve anywhere else in the Americas (LEAL, 2020). Chocó, inhabited today mostly by Afro-descendants and secondarily by indigenous people, is a region where the presence of the Colombian State has historically been weak, except for the military presence. Levels of access to health, education, and justice, for example, are among the lowest in the country. Given its wealth and strategic location, with access to the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, the lower Atrato region attracted new actors in the last decade of the 20th century: left-wing guerrillas and far-right paramilitary groups entered the region to fight for control of the territory (SALINAS ABDALA; MOLINARES; CRUZ, 2020). The communities of Ana Luisa and Jenry were caught in the middle of this struggle. According to the Ombudsman's Office, more than 15,000 people from the basins of the Cacarica, Jiguamiandó, Curbaradó, Domingodó, Truandó and Salaquí rivers, tributaries of the Atrato River, were displaced in 1997 by an attack by paramilitary groups and bombings by the Air Force and the National Army (COLOMBIA, 2002). The paramilitary groups intimidated and attacked the peasant communities in the area, accusing them of being collaborators of the guerrillas. For its part, the Colombian military justified the massive bombings of the so-called "Operation

Genesis” due to the presence of two fronts of the FARC guerrilla in the area. Together, they generated the mass exodus of Afro-descendant communities whose community organizations were in the process of obtaining a collective title to their territories at that time (CNMH, 2022; CHICA; GÓMEZ; RAMÍREZ, 2017; CORTE IDH, 2013; SALINAS ABDALA; MOLINARES; CRUZ, 2020).

In this process, hundreds of people, including Jenry's father and brother, were disappeared by armed groups. Thousands fled the region, escaping the violence. In the case of Ana Luisa, after walking for several days through the jungle with hundreds of other families, she lived for nine months in a camp for displaced people in Pavarandó. They slept on the ground, under plastic tents, in unsanitary conditions and with little food. In the midst of this displacement situation was when Ana Luisa and Jenry began to orient themselves towards social leadership. The communities organized themselves and eventually returned to the territory, claiming their collective property rights over it, but the war has not stopped. Ana Luisa had to flee again a few years later, first to Bogotá and then to Medellín, persecuted by armed groups for her work as a social leader (CHICA; GOMEZ; RAMIREZ, 2017). The war has continued because the territory has not ceased to be valuable to various illegal and legal actors, both for its wealth and for its strategic location. It is disputed by strong economic interests, including drug trafficking, arms trafficking, the banana sector, and the palm oil production sector. Community organizations such as ASCOBA and ACAMURI, in which Jenry and Ana Luisa actively participate, continue to resist, defending the right to remain in the territory, strengthening cultural identity, and promoting autonomy and sustainability through alternative economic projects to agro-industrial projects (RESTREPO, 2011).

As part of their community leadership activities, Ana Luisa and Jenry have identified the need to tell the story of their communities in their own voices and from the territory. This need is tied to several concerns. One is the fact that journalists and researchers constantly visit this territory and seek their help to be able to report what has happened there, but even though they accompany them to do the corresponding interviews, the researchers leave, and nothing is left for the communities; they take the stories to tell them elsewhere. Another concern

is that due to the absence of local information repositories and the prevailing "law of silence" surrounding the painful past, young people are unaware of their community's history—especially the struggles of their ancestors to secure the right to live with dignity in their territories. This is worrying because it weakens community leadership in the future. Finally, another motivation is to counteract stereotypes that weigh on black and indigenous people in the Colombian Chocó. In many of the stories about this region that are reproduced in the media, notions of their communities as backward, apolitical, lazy, and precarious, materially and intellectually, prevail. Regarding displacement, for example, Ana Luisa and Jenry find it offensive to be represented only as victims and want to highlight that, in the face of tragedy, their communities have responded with different initiatives. For example, it was they, by organizing themselves and negotiating a commitment of support with the government, who arranged the return to their homes after the displacement. It was also they who, resisting losing their lands, adopted the figure of "Communities of Peace" to be able to return, declaring themselves neutral in the face of the armed actors (SILVA, 2007). For all these reasons, Ana Luisa and Jenry decided to undertake the path of researching, documenting, and telling their own stories. It is not a frivolous sectarian interest in presenting their communities in a romantic way; it is rather a constructive interest in questioning the power relations to which they have been subjected.

In 2017, Ana Luisa told her story as co-author of the book *Las heridas de Riosucio 1996-2017* (CHICA; GOMEZ; RAMIREZ, 2017). In 2021, she and Jenry were winners of the Viva Voz scholarship, offered by the Ford Foundation and the Memria organization, in association with the Truth Commission, to support community communicators in sharing their stories of peacebuilding in different formats. As a result, they conducted dozens of interviews with members of their community and edited eight short stories in podcast format that were disseminated through the [Viva Voz](#) website. Thus, Ana Luisa and Jenry had already embarked on the path of becoming communicators for their communities when we began the project that resulted in *Nuestra Orilla* podcast. For this project, we established a collaboration in which three different knowledge groups participated: that of Ana Luisa and Jenry, as community leaders and

communicators; The NORMAL collective, an interdisciplinary group of documentary filmmakers that combines ethnography, journalism, design, and music in the co-creation of podcasts for social change with collaborative methodologies; and mine, as a historian. We were united by a shared interest in telling stories with a transformative intention: some from social leadership, others from communications expertise and I from historical thought.

The main objective of our project has been to explore the potential of researching and telling stories, using a collaborative method, to advance the repair of communities that have been victimized, but have also resisted cycles of violence. We established a collaboration agreement from the beginning, in which we defined the responsibilities of each member of the team so that each one would contribute from their knowledge and with the objective that the project would be outlined and executed by everyone, from start to finish. We agreed that all the sound material collected within the framework of the project would be the shared property of all the members of the team and that the resulting sound documentary would have shared authorship. Community partners participated as peer researchers and not simply as informants.

We made the narrative decision to weave Bajo Atrato's history around Ana Luisa's life experience as a woman and community leader, not with the intention of making a podcast about her, but to weave, through her life, the history of the community, of those who came before and those who will come. We wanted to use this story to illuminate the interconnections between past and present forms of exclusion, as well as the strategies of the protagonists to combat injustice. The work began with a series of life story interviews with Ana Luisa and, based on what was gathered there, we began to define themes for the episodes. In the different episodes, we made sure to navigate between the past and the present, with the intention of not relegating the past to a mere preamble or context, but to be able to illuminate the ways in which the past lives on and is a matter for today. We opened two fronts of research to build knowledge about the past and present of this region: one focused on conventional historical knowledge, investigating primary and secondary sources, and another oriented to local conceptions of the past, which focused mainly on oral histories, but also on the

inclusion of the non-human environment, since the conception that these communities have of history is built in dialogue with the environment that surrounds them. For example, the testimony that people shared with us in oral history exceeded the narrative of human events: people constantly referred to rivers and plants not only as settings but as an active part of the future. For them, talking about the flow of time means talking about how each member of the community who is born is tied to the territory from birth through practices such as the *obligada*, which we explained in episode 3. These local understandings emerged in the oral history largely because it was not conducted by external people alien to these understandings, but rather Ana Luisa and Jenry were in charge, preferring to call them conversations rather than interviews. Given their belonging to the community and the place of trust they had built as community leaders, the depth of the testimonies they were able to collect from the more than forty interviewees surpassed what any external researcher could have achieved. On the other hand, Jenry appropriated the incorporation of the environment in the podcast through soundscapes. She recorded the sounds of *Riosucio* and the riverside communities that are part of this region: the water, the birds at dawn, the jungle. This soundscape is at the heart of a narrative that we wanted to enrich beyond words and the human. With these materials, Daniel Ruiz-Serna oversaw writing the scripts. Daniel is an anthropologist, member of the NORMAL collective, and has been doing ethnographic work in these communities for more than two decades. In the scripts, he interwove the life story of Ana Luisa, who was the main narrator, with other voices of older adults and young people from the community that resulted from oral histories, as well as archival recordings, soundscapes, and a musical recording that included regional music and an original composition. The scripts went through several rounds of review and editing, in which, in addition to ensuring quality in terms of form and content, we sought to ensure that Ana Luisa and Jenry always had control over the representation of the history of their territory. Along with their obvious participation here as co-authors, their role in editing the scripts also responded to the ethical imperative of care, since armed actors are still active in their territory. Finally, the sound mix was done by Paula Peña, also a member of the NORMAL collective, who took on the challenge of making the podcast not only

communicate and challenge the audience in an argumentative way with words, but also in a sensorial way. We relied on aesthetics to produce a story that would evoke and provoke, beyond convincing.

After two years of work, together we published the eight-episode audio series *Nuestra Orilla* podcast (RAMÍREZ FLÓREZ; SERNA CÓRDOBA; NORMAL; HISTORIAS PARA LO QUE VIENE, 2023). In addition, Seluna Fernández, designer and member of the NORMAL collective was in charge of producing a website (www.nuestraorilla.co) that contains an expanded version of the podcast series, offering our audience the possibility of delving deeper into the story through a curation of primary and secondary sources for each episode, including maps, photographs, soundscapes, archival documents, and bibliography. Finally, we also set out to produce a listening methodology that had three elements. First, we partnered with six community radio stations (Riosucio Estéreo, Darién Stéreo, Brisas de Acandí, Lloró Stéreo, Cocomacia Stéreo, and Ecos del Atrato) to broadcast the podcast through them, after a process of workshops with their leaders to design radio content that would generate conversations with their audiences. Second, Ana Luisa and Jenry designed listening meetings that they carried out in four trips to several riverside communities in the Bajo Atrato: the Chicao Community, now displaced on the Domingodó River; the Pava and Clavellino Communities on the Truandó River; the Salaquisito and Tamboral Community on the Salaquí River; and the Montaña Community on the Atrato River. These are remote communities, where access is only possible by boat on the rivers, and where there are no basic services such as electricity. There, they held nightly meetings with the community to listen to the podcast together and talk about it. Third, in partnership with teachers Helga Moreno and Fernando Gálvez, we produced pedagogical guides so that teachers across the country can use the podcast in teaching social sciences, Spanish, and ethics; the guides can be downloaded for free from the website.

In the sections that follow, I will focus on how, through this audio series, we seek to propose a different approach to the temporality of stories about the war in Colombia, relevant to other contexts as well. I will explain how the narrative we co-created challenges the temporalities and meta-narratives of conventional

history, in the hope of producing counter-stories that can help repair the ways in which we relate to each other and to our environment.

Existing narratives: the path traveled and its challenges

In Colombia, there is a solid experience in the production of research and historical memory stories about the armed conflict, even though the war has not ceased. This experience was consolidated around the Historical Memory Group (GMH), which was later incorporated into the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), as well as multiple civil society organizations. In 2005, the national government created the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (CNRR), within the framework of the promulgation of Law No. 975 of 2005 (Justice and Peace Law), which sought to facilitate the reintegration into civilian life of members of the various illegal armed groups in Colombia, offering them short sentences in exchange for contributing to the truth and reparation for the victims. Among the functions of the CNRR were to guarantee the participation of victims in the processes of clarification of the facts and to present a report on the causes of the emergence of illegal armed groups and their evolution. In order to produce this report, which would not have any legal consequences, the GMH was created within the CNRR, which operated between 2007 and 2011, the year in which it became part of a new institution that exists to this day: the CNMH. Made up of an interdisciplinary group of researchers and experts, the GMH had the task of redressing the victims' right to the truth by fulfilling the "duty of memory" that Law No. 975 stipulated corresponds to the State. This involved investigating the facts of the serious human rights violations to produce, preserve and disseminate what the Law called "historical memory" of the conflict. Although, paradoxically, the GMH was created in the context of a right-wing government, the Group established itself as an autonomous body and managed to develop its research activities with academic freedom. One of its most innovative aspects was the fact that, despite incorporating a plurality of voices, including those of the perpetrators, they placed the voices of the victims, with their demands for truth and reparation, at the center of this process of constructing historical memory. In addition to producing an archive that names the events and makes them public, these reports

provide interpretative explanations of the past and show the magnitude, systematicity and participation of the State in the horror (JARAMILLO MARÍN, 2014; URIBE; RIAÑO, 2017).

Before producing the comprehensive report *¡Basta ya! Colombia: memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Enough is Enough! Colombia's Memories of War and Dignity) (GMH, 2013), the GMH produced a series of 24 reports on broad themes (such as forced displacement, kidnapping, land dispossession, or sexual and gender violence) and what it called “emblematic cases,” which were studies of some notorious massacres. These reports were the GMH's response to the challenge of covering and showing the systematic nature of more than five decades of violence, which spread throughout the country and involved multiple armed actors, including guerrilla groups, far-right paramilitaries, and the armed forces. This work was in line with the enormous international attention that transitional justice processes that placed victims and the right to truth at the center of the world received at the beginning of the 21st century. In a very important way, it contributed to refuting the stigmatization to which the victimized people were subjected by the perpetrators, but also by society in general, which associated being victimized with someone who was necessarily a guerrilla or a collaborator with their cause.

But on the other hand, and as researchers who were part of the group have pointed out, they also faced the dilemma that the state dynamics in which they were framed limited their work as they sought to “domesticate and instrumentalize these memories” (URIBE; RIAÑO, 2017). This institutional framework restricted their periodization from 1958 to 2012, focusing solely on the immediate antecedents and the formation of the armed groups active during this time. Some groups, such as indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, criticized the fact that this periodization limited the status of victim to human rights violations in the recent past, overlooking processes such as conquest, colonization, and enslavement, which they see as linked to processes of victimization, both distant in time and recent. Although the GMH did not ignore structural racist, sexist and classist violence, the timeframe established by its institutional framework imposed a limitation.

The Colombian state's memory initiative, embodied in the GMH and later in the CNMH, has not been an isolated effort. As Elizabeth Jelin has pointed out, the meaning of the past is an object of dispute between multiple social actors with diverse political experiences and expectations (JELIN, 2002). The state is only one of these actors interested in using memory to legitimize itself and in fact it is not monolithic: different groups within it have varying agendas. Other groups seeking to promote their accounts of the past in the public sphere include of course the people considered victims, who are not a homogeneous group either. In Colombia, dozens of civil society associations have developed their own memory initiatives and have articulated critiques of institutionalized state memory. Some examples are *la Asociación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos - ASFADDES* (the Association of Relatives of Detained Disappeared Persons), *el Movimiento Nacional de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado - MOVICE* (the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes), *Hijos e Hijas por la Memoria y contra la Impunidad - HIJOS* (Sons and Daughters for Memory and Against Impunity), *la Corporación Reiniciar* (the Restart Corporation) and *la Casa de la Mujer* (Women's House).

The criticisms that these associations have raised are multiple and have included, in an important way, a resistance to state narratives that are mainly interested in victimization, reducing them to that condition and instrumentalizing it. Along the same lines, they criticize that their lives and community experiences are not limited to the moment of human rights violations: they want to represent themselves through more complex and longer stories to escape the narrative prison of a moment that does not define them. In particular, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities have emphasized the need to go back further than 1958 to recognize the long history of dispossession and other forms of physical and symbolic violence related to colonialism and structural racism, which did not end with the establishment of the republican State. Women's organizations have also criticized limiting attention to women's human rights violations to the armed conflict, arguing that these are historical injustices and violence that encompass other areas such as the family, political, labor, and sexual (ALCALDÍA MAYOR DE BOGOTÁ, 2010; GRUNER et al., 2016).

Beyond the temporality of recent victimization and the linear time of progress

When we initially approached Jenry Serna and Ana Luisa Ramírez to share our interest in starting a collaboration to tell the story of the Bajo Atrato region, they explicitly stated some of these criticisms. In their view, the narratives told about Chocó from outside tend to emphasize lack, poverty, backwardness, violence and, hand in hand with this, victimization. Although they do not deny the historical difficulties their territory is going through, they see the emphasis on the negative as problematic, since it reinforces narratives of inferiority and exclusion. One of their interests was to tell a more complex story of their territory, without this implying silencing the challenges that their communities face.

Ana Luisa explained it in an interview for the newspaper *El Espectador* like this:

[...] with this podcast we broke a paradigm to tell things backwards, that is, start from the positive: who have been the resilient people, why have we been resilient, why have we become survivors from victims, what makes people be within the territory, why people live there, why have they not left (BRITTO, 2024).

The podcast begins by introducing the territory, the arrival of enslaved Afro-descendants during the colonial period, the long history of black people claiming these lands as their own, the daily practices that tie them to the territory and some of the structural challenges of remaining there, before addressing, in the fifth episode, the displacement of 1997. Thus, the story told by *Nuestra Orilla* substantially goes beyond the recent armed conflict and the corresponding armed groups: these are just one chapter, which also makes sense as part of a deeper historical process. Instead of appearing as a stumble or irruption in the history of liberal democracy, it appears as part of a historical process that has been exclusive and violent since long before. The violence perpetrated by armed groups in the recent past is the most aberrant expression of a violence that is structural. In his analysis of the truth commissions of Argentina (1983-1984), Chile (1990-1991) and Guatemala (1997-1999), historian Greg Grandin emphasized how the efforts of the first two, inspired by a nationalist project of unity, left the liberal state and its forms of exclusion and even repression unchallenged. Those who formed these

commissions were mainly lawyers interested in affirming liberal values that they believed would prevent the repetition of the atrocities committed during the dictatorship. They feared that inquiring into economic interests, collective struggles for equality or political movements would bring back violence. Their look at the past was not, then, one that sought causes in social relations and power dynamics; it was one that used the past as a parable, that is, as an example of the dangers of the interruption of democracy to promote liberal values such as tolerance and pluralism. Thus, Grandin's (2005) criticism of these commissions is that, by leaving aside a longer-term historical perspective that would illuminate economic interests, social divisions, and political struggles, they interpreted terror as the opposite of liberal democracy and not as a constitutive part of its historical construction.

For the communities of the Bajo Atrato, the violence to which they were subjected in the recent past (including the forced displacement of 1997, but also other previous and subsequent displacements, disappearances of people, murders, sexual violence, and recruitment of minors, among others) is not the product of a slip or misplacement of liberal democracy; violence has been constitutive of the process of formation of the liberal democratic State. In episode 2 we narrate, for example, how the implementation of a liberal democratic State at the beginning of the 19th century did not imply the abolition of slavery and the role that black communities played in achieving the freedom that the ruling elites did not grant them. Thus, the justice that these communities demand today is not limited to recent human rights violations but exceeds them. The demand for justice extends to the structural conditions that have allowed violence, both in the recent and distant past, relegating them to a condition of precarious citizenship. The fourth episode is dedicated to the difficulties faced by communities in obtaining an education in that territory and the historical inequality in access to this basic right. We seek to escape from a narrative that limits the explanation of the violence of the late twentieth century to the action of certain armed groups, obscuring the structural nature of violence and the way in which it has gone hand in hand with the expansion of capitalist liberalism. In episode 7, for example, the social leaders interviewed emphasize that the displacement did not only result

from the struggle between armed groups: it was about removing black communities from the territory to promote the interests of businessmen around palm and wood.

This raises another issue: the way history, as a discipline established in the nineteenth century, has often reinforced and left unchallenged nineteenth-century notions of time as linear, progressive, neutral, and universal (BENJAMIN, 2007; KOSELLECK, 2004; WILDER, 2022). This notion of time, which has its own history, has been shaped around particular interests and has served to legitimize the liberal nation state. It therefore conceals the violence that has permeated its formation process from the beginning.

Joan W. Scott (2020) has invited us to question the belief that history, understood as a parable of progress, can uncover truth, correct the moral order, and achieve justice after past atrocity. Instead, she emphasizes the need to interrogate the politics behind the conception of history as unilinear, universal, advancing progressively towards a final goal: the nation state. According to Scott (2020), this conception of history naturalizes the power structures that enable violence and leaves them unquestioned. Conventional notions of history as a discipline, which took root at its birth in the German university in the 19th century and continue to prevail today, have been integral to the current hierarchical configuration of social relations and epistemologies distinct from the modern Western one. This conventional approach to the discipline leaves unquestioned the notions of past, present, and future, assuming that historical knowledge is the discovery of factual truths that move in the singular and linear direction of progress. Furthermore, it is based on the claim that historical knowledge can be separated from its producers and from its roots in time and space. In this way, history continues to be used to legitimize power arrangements – such as the nation state – while overlooking its participation in them. Today, many groups, both reactionary and progressive, invoke “history” to clarify data, as if the correct fact had the power of a definitive judgment; as if good and evil were universal and a-historical; as if the authority of history rested on its isolation from group interests.

The historical understanding and experience of the black communities of the Bajo Atrato challenges historiographic narratives based on this progressive time that assume that the transition from a caste society to a society of equal citizens, from slavery to freedom, has already taken place, or that liberal democracy is an already resolved object. It also shows that these assumptions are convenient for certain groups that claim to be the standard-bearers of such progress, and harmful to communities that, like the black communities of Bajo Atrato, appear to be pre-modern, pre-political and therefore alien to the narratives of progress.

Historian Julie Gibbings, who has worked on the political history of indigenous people in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala, uses the concept of “knots of time” to narrate the history of the multiple colonialisms experienced in the region, including that derived from the Spanish conquest in the 16th century and those that resulted from the continued efforts to achieve economic, political, social, and cultural modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries. These “knots” challenge the assumption of the linearity of modernization, which assumes that we move in an empty and homogeneous time, and that a past stage comes to an end to give way to the next. Instead of signaling continuities or ruptures, the knots emphasize intertwining: disparate, unfinished, contingent histories that drag sediments from the past and fold over themselves, generating modified re-inscriptions (GIBBINGS, 2020).

The story we tell in *Nuestra Orilla* is aligned with Gibbings’ proposal (2020). We confront the dichotomies that persist, such as civilized/backward, modern/premodern, capitalist/precapitalist, victim/victimizer, by emphasizing the historical agency of those whom these dichotomous readings leave at the margins. Our narrative draws attention to the violence and exclusion of modernity, to the ways in which the past has not passed, and to how the historical narratives of modernity, which leave the nation unquestioned, are part of the structures of oppression. The history we tell does not seek progress, unity, or closure: rather it records discontinuities, a process more contentious than ordered, a persistence of the past in the present, and multiple temporalities that coexist.

Making stories for the future: stories for what is to come

Our questioning of the way conventional history approaches temporality also included a longing for different futures. A conventional training in the historical discipline does not allow space to reflect on the applicability of historical thought to imagine or construct the future. The history student is taught that the tools of the discipline, which privilege rigor in the handling of primary sources, must be applied exclusively to resolve questions about what was. Trying to extend learning to the present is still seen by many as risky: it can presuppose falling into the dreaded presentism. In a column written in August 2022, the president of the American Historical Association, James Sweet, launched a strong criticism of historians whose work attempts to have political relevance in the present, for falling into presentism, that is, promoting views that, in seeking continuities between the present and the past, lose sight of the duty of the discipline: to study the past on its own terms, without coloring it from the present (SWEET, 2022).

The criticism of historians such as Sweet (2022), who is not exceptional, is tied to a conservative vision of the discipline that continues to insist that historians must and can be neutral when facing our object of study and that our work must be isolated from any political interference. In this way, the more removed in time the object of study is, the better. Thus, we have left the study of the recent past to political scientists, sociologists, lawyers, among others. The events of the last decades are not considered historicizable, since the historian is still involved (ROUSSO, 2018). The longed-for neutrality would imply being able to free ourselves from the threads that bind us to a temporal and spatial positioning to observe from “outside” what we study: politics can be our object of study, but it is not part of our profession. This idea that knowledge occurs outside the social reality studied has been strongly criticized throughout the 20th century from different disciplinary angles. From history itself, the rise of social history since the 1960s has revealed, perhaps unintentionally, the close ties between the production of knowledge and power. By focusing their attention on historically excluded groups, such as women, workers, Afro-descendants or indigenous people, social historians ended up illuminating not only the experiences of these groups, but also investigating the way in which domination operates. Thus, they also ended up

evidencing the way in which the construction of knowledge has been part of the configuration of power relations (APPLEBY; HUNT; JACOB, 1994). We could hardly argue that history may not be political, even if we study a period very distant from us in space and time (SCOTT, 2022). Historians, as Trouillot (1995) reminds us, are social actors and storytellers at the same time, and these two elements are inseparable.

If applying historical thinking to the present has been discouraged by the fear of presentism and recognizing the politics of history, relying on it to imagine and forge the futures to which we aspire is even less discussed in academic corridors (CASTRO, 2021). The profession for which we train our students is oriented almost exclusively to the ability to clarify, understand, and critically analyze the past, leaving aside the thought of historical change as a key element to imagine the possibilities of change in the future. Even mentioning a possible association between history and the future is a sign of a lack of rigor.

The ability to imagine possible futures is a vital issue in the face of the pessimism that seems to dominate our societies around the climate crisis, the evident environmental and social unsustainability of frenetic productivism, the refugee crisis and authoritarianism, among others. American historian and anthropologist Gary Wilder (2022) has argued that any political project aimed at imagining other possible worlds necessarily involves being able to think about and analyze historical change. He suggests that, in order to outline possible paths that allow us to avoid climatic, political, and economic disaster, it is essential to have both critical thinking – to question the existing order and the way in which its historical configuration hinders change – and political imagination, to identify possibilities for transformation towards alternative orders that seem impossible, but whose seeds are present.

Wilder (2022) gives us several examples of thinkers who, in the past, appealed to historical thinking to outline concrete utopias, including Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, José Carlos Mariátegui, and W. E. B. Dubois. In the case of Lukács, for example, he replaced a universalist and a-historical notion of alienation, which therefore made it inescapable, with a socio-historical understanding of it, which therefore presupposed the possibility of overcoming it with the abolition of

capitalism. Dubois, for his part, pointed out that racism went hand in hand with the historical development of capitalism, and therefore imagining emancipation necessarily involved an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle. Today, his proposals would be harshly discredited by an academy whose radicalism is based on an overvaluation of negative criticism and censors political imagination as naive and optimistic. Wilder (2022) makes an argument for rescuing a kind of thinking and action that he calls “concrete utopianism,” for which historical thinking is fundamental. To rethink and reconstruct our social formations towards a more solidary model, we need a critical and realistic understanding of the current social order and to be able to unthink our notions of here/there, now/then, us/them. Here historical thinking is key: “historical explanation and political analysis of the situation are intrinsically related to political imagination and perspectives for transformative action” (WILDER, 2022, p. 155).

Questioning what we know and remaking it in more supportive ways, that shake the foundations of the place from which we observe and that we take for granted, was one of the bets of *Nuestra Orilla*. We do not tell the story of Bajo Atrato only to illuminate the past and contribute to our understanding of it, in the usual way. The voices of the community were at the center and we academics were open to learning from them. Together, as co-authors, we defined the contours of the project and participated in the research and production process as peers. The objective was not to produce knowledge for knowledge's sake: it was to invite the local and external audience to think historically about how the present and past conditions and future possibilities of these communities are intertwined. Past, present, and future are not isolated and independent times for the populations of Bajo Atrato. It would not make sense for them to remain in an exploration of the past, since the past has not passed, but coexists with the present (for example, despite having already returned to their territory, the displacement has not ended), nor to produce explanations of the past and the present for the sole incentive of producing understanding. History is made to transform and that future that is imagined is not imagined disembodied from what has been and what is, but as tied to the limitations and possibilities that its own temporality grants. Thus, the different episodes do not present a chronological

narrative, but rather jump in time, narrating and interweaving past, present, and future in a relational way and not as isolated compartments or as a succession of events in an empty time.

The last episode of the series, in which we address the challenges of young people both in the past and today, is titled “The Reborn.” This is the term used in Bajo Atrato to refer to the new generations. It also alludes to the suckers or new shoots of the banana plant, which sprout from the older plant: they represent life renewing itself. This concept captures precisely that past that lives in the present and in the future. And it is precisely that intersection of temporalities that allows us to think of ourselves as historical actors who, being part of the flow of time, are both product and potential. This story was built for them: for the reborn in the Bajo Atrato, as well as for history students and for young people in general, who carry with them traditions that delimit their physical and imaginary worlds, but also the capacity to mold those worlds in new ways.

Conclusion

The idea that building peace requires history is not new. History has been used by different apparatuses that have sought to do justice after massive human rights violations, under the premise that it is necessary to deal with the past in order to move towards a peaceful future. But the uses of the past to do justice have been diverse. The definition of what is the past that should be examined has varied. Is the past only observed in which the human rights violations under scrutiny occurred? Generally, transitional justice apparatuses, including courts and truth commissions, make decisions about periodization that shape this look at the past. Which facts should be examined? For example, the mandate of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused on acts classified as serious human rights violations linked to political objectives and occurring between 1960 and 1994. As a result, other forms of violence, such as segregation and dislocation—which could have highlighted structural economic and social causes—were left unexplored (CASTILLEJO-CUÉLLAR, 2007; SCOTT, 2020). Who are the relevant actors in investigating this past? Is only individual responsibility considered or collective responsibility as well? (ARENDR, 2007; ROTHBERG, 2019).

The way different justice scenarios have engaged with the past reflects underlying assumptions about history itself. Joan W. Scott highlights that, in cases like the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a linear concept of history was employed, leaving the nation-state—seen as the source of justice and progress—unchallenged. The work on the *Nuestra Orilla* podcast has involved an ongoing, parallel reflection on how history and temporality have been conceptualized in various transitional justice scenarios, and how alternative approaches could deepen the process of reparation. Some of these reflections are captured in this article.

Through *Nuestra Orilla*, we propose that peace requires more than simply telling silenced stories—it demands an entirely different narrative: a new way of making history and a conception of time that critically challenges the framework of liberal modernity. Our aim has been to move beyond conventional history, which accumulates knowledge about the past while pretending to stand apart from the social and political dynamics of its present, often seeking to resolve, redeem, or close chapters. Instead, we strive to create a restorative, engaged, and active counter-narrative—one that acknowledges its place within the conflict. This narrative does not seek to conclude, convince, or settle debates, but rather to open them up, suggest new perspectives, provoke reflection, and inspire us to imagine new ways of being together, listening to one another, and fostering dialogue.

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