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History on the margins: truths, struggles and the bureaucratic research economy in Colombia, 2016–2023

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ABSTRACT
This essay reflects upon the challenges and the achievements of an exploration of the marginalized experiences of the armed conflict in Colombia. Our methods – interdisciplinary, rooted in an ethos of co-production and openness to a great plurality of ways of storytelling – have created a fuller and richer representation of the horrors of war and their consequences. The lessons we have learned through making it happen will have major policy and administrative implications for the delivery of bilateral research collaborations funded by state resources.

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Over the past few years, Colombians have engaged in a remarkably public reckoning with their past, which resulted in July 2022 in the publication of the Truth Commission’s report, and the election of Gustavo Petro as the country’s first left-wing president, and Francia Márquez as its first Black vice-president, standing on a ‘Historical Agreement’ ticket of a broad coalition of opposition groups. Their government is committed to delivering on the commitments of the 2016 Peace Accords between the
Colombian state and the FARC guerrilla group. At the time of writing, hopes are again high that, in the words of the Truth Commission (CEV Comisión de la Verdad, Truth Commission 2022), ‘with truth, there can be a future’. In this essay, we reflect on the challenges and the achievements of the part that we have played in these transformation – an exploration of the marginalized experiences of the armed conflict in Colombia that has taken us around the country in our efforts to listen to as many voices as possible. Our methods – interdisciplinary, and rooted in an ethos of co-production and openness to a great plurality of ways of storytelling – have created a fuller and richer representation of the horrors of war and their consequences. The lessons we have learned through making it happen have policy and administrative implications for the delivery of bilateral research collaborations funded by state resources. The idealistic spirit behind our initiative, clearly shared by our funders in the UK and Colombian Research Councils, was that better knowledge of the horrors of the past would enable the foundations to be set for a sustainable peace and the possibility of reconciliation. Our commitment to the principles of equality and local expertise brought us into repeated conflict with the institutions that were entrusted with its delivery. Taken together, the obstacles we faced are revealing of what Ritterbusch (2019, 1297) calls ‘the frictions between university productivity, institutional safety guidelines and liability protocols, and the time-sensitive emotional labour and care practices necessary for keeping relationships at the centre of both teaching and research for social justice’.

The bravery and creativity of the Colombians from the geographical and social margins who have shared their histories with us are the lights that have sustained us through some terrible times.

**Opportunities for new ways of doing history**

In 2016, the Colombian government of Juan Manuel Santos signed a Peace Agreement with the guerrilla group FARC-EP. At the time many people believed that this offered a good chance of bringing the continent’s longest-running armed conflict to an end. Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and spoke of Colombia as a ‘laboratory of history’ (Santos 2017, 11). The numbers of killings in what Eric Hobsbawm (2016, 401) once called ‘Murderous Colombia’ dropped dramatically. Stories and images of negotiators dressed in white and smiling demobilized soldiers hugging their children filled the world’s websites and newspapers. International scientists revelled in being encouraged to
travel to mountain and jungle areas from which they had been deterred for several decades, proclaiming the discovery of new forms of knowledge, even new species. Colombia’s history was a Good News story at last! [Spoiler alert: it didn’t last. Colombia remains the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist, and journalists, signatories of the Peace Agreement, community leaders and environmentalists continue to be murdered with impunity].

As part of this new beginning, in 2017, the United Kingdom Research Councils (RCUK, restructured in 2018 into United Kingdom Research & Innovation, UKRI) and its Colombian counterpart, Colciencias (restructured in 2019 into the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Tecnología, Minciencias), launched a multi-million pound funding call that looked to commission research into the construction of a sustainable peace in Colombia. The call (UKRI 2017) specified that, as part of the implementation of the Peace Accords, research should take place in at least one of the 170 municipalities which had been most affected by the armed conflict. It explicitly looked to build knowledge from the local level up, incorporating the experiences of people who had been most affected by the armed conflict.

As researchers who had already laboured together on projects investigating the role of human creativity in building peace in Colombia and Peru, and with working relationships in place that might be quickly mobilized, we overcame our fear of the 35 page application form (which had to be submitted in both English and Spanish, see MEMPAZ 2017) and created a project that would prioritize local expertise and knowledge that would be designed around horizontal working practices and underpinned by an ethos of co-production. Our local partners were costed into the programme and would act as professional researchers whose local rhythms would drive the collaboration. They would do the research themselves and send us their findings in the formats they found most appropriate. The academic researchers would recognize the partners’ expertise and administer the partnership. This became ‘Bringing Memories in from the Margins’ (later abbreviated to MEMPAZ, from the Spanish memorias (memory) and paz (peace).

Reader, they gave us the money! We went to a bar and drank tequila in the middle of the day. Viva Colombia! Viva la paz! We called our partners and rejoiced in this new era of state-funded research, South-North co-production and a sustainable peace. We allowed ourselves to dream that we would be remaking history in exciting ways. As in the neighbouring municipalities of Caucasia and Cáceres in highland Antioquia, two hours’
drive from Medellín, our partners at the NGO La Ruta Pacifica would be using theatre to work with women who had been affected by violence, employing the creative arts to work through difficult stories and remake themselves into the protagonists of history rather than its victims. In the northern Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, in the shadow of mountains and a hop and skip from the Caribbean sea, we would be working with the National Library and the indigenous Arhuaco Communications Collective to collect and share young people’s memories of the recent past through a brand new Library of Indigenous Memory. In the tropical musical centre of Valledupar, we would be learning from musicians linked to the National Network of Memory Sites as they created new songs telling the history of the conflict and reconciliation in their region. And finally, thousands of kilometres to the south in Colombian Amazonia we would be collaborating with women using cookery and communal eating with migrants seeking to re-establish memories of home from before their forced displacement during the armed conflict. These partners would work for two years on the development of a ‘memory piece’ or ‘pieza de memoria’. This might be text, play, food, art, photography, or song. MEMPAZ would bring them into dialogue with one another and with the institutions of the new peace in Colombia. It was no coincidence that most of our ‘memory pieces’ would be produced by women, whose experiences have been marginalized throughout Colombia’s existence as a nation-state. By bringing these memories from the margins (both geographical and social) into the centre of policy-making MEMPAZ would be using marginalized memories to lay the foundations of a sustainable peace. We remembered the words of Arendt (1963, 231) at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: ‘how utterly different everything would be today . . . if only more such stories could have been told’. We would not discover ‘the truth’ about the past, but rather we would build ways of uncovering marginalized memories of the past that were overshadowed or ignored by official history, complicating binary interpretations of good versus evil, us versus them. We hoped to amplify the voices of those who had previously been silenced, drawing on trusting and meaningful relationships and working in respectful, flexible, and horizontal ways (Martinez-Cruz and Wilson Vasquez 2021; Ansoms et al. 2020; Grieve and Mitchell 2019; Shuayb and Brun 2021; Paulson and Shanks 2022).

The histories that resulted would be multivocal and multipolar, drawing on truths from many regions, based on municipalities that had been affected in very different ways. The project would build upon scholarly
debates about the territorialization of memory and the theorization of bottom-up transitional justice. MEMPAZ analyzed the extent to which memory is inscribed in place through creative practices, and how this might be the basis for a pluralist model of reconciliation, through connecting the practices and literatures of localized and top-down transitional justice (Archila Neira 2017; Krishnan and Bwa Mwesigire 2019).

MEMPAZ was institutionally based on the two universities in which the authors of this article were employed. Mid-way through the project, we signed a collaboration agreement with the Truth Commission, which enabled us to support its data collection and analysis. In this article, we reflect on the place of history in our interdisciplinary, multi-sited efforts, and present the freely accessible, online versions of ‘memory pieces’ that were produced so that readers can immerse themselves in the new histories that we have created together.

Out of historiography to remake history

MEMPAZ was always conceived as a work of history grounded in an interdisciplinary and co-productive ethos. We valued the non-academic research skills of our grassroot partners and their experience of ‘people’s history’. We embraced the diverse disciplinary expertise of our academic researchers’ backgrounds in Education, Political Science and Cultural Studies and our previous collaborations on non-verbal communications in memory projects. The intellectual roots of our histories lay on both sides of the Atlantic. The authors have degrees from universities in Colombia, Canada, Nicaragua, the U.S.A, the USSR, the UK, the Netherlands and Italy. Three of the researchers had worked together on the Colombia/Peru Peace Festival project involving Ruta Pacifica, the Biblioteca Nacional and the Red de Lugares de Memoria, and these relationships formed the core of the MEMPAZ collaboration (Peace Festival 2021). We were seeking, just as did Hartman (2019, 31), to reconstruct ‘the experiences of the unknown and retrieve[e] minor lives from oblivion [. . . a] way of redressing the violence of history, crafting a love letter to those who had been harmed’.

MEMPAZ was certainly, as Raphael Samuel wrote of People’s History in London (Samuel 1981: xvi), an ‘attempt to broaden the basis of history, to enlarge its subject matter, make use of new raw materials and offer new maps of knowledge’, just as it tried, as Jorge Orlando Melo wrote in Medellin (Orlando Melo 1979, 7), ‘to create a richer vision of the past, so that contemporary events can be viewed without the hopelessness or
impatience of those who seek to change the world without first understanding its past’. We sought to face the past with ‘all of its complexities’ by adopting methodologies that enabled us to see around binaries and prejudice (Posada-Carbó 2018, 16).

History has a crucial and paradoxical place in public life in Colombia (a country whose history is barely taught in UK history departments, of course, yet on which everyone has an opinion thanks to Netflix). Independence from colonial rule in the early 1800s was followed by two centuries of culture wars in which historia patria – the statues of war heroes, the glorification of the foundational military struggle against Spain – came to overshadow other ways of memorializing and retelling the past (Cañizares-Esguerra 2015; Brown 2014). In the 1960s, the discipline of History was professionalized in Colombia through the work of a generation of historians inspired by the Annales school – Germán Colmenares, Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, Álvaro Tirado Mejía, Margarita González, Jorge Orlando Melo and Marco Palacios – whose trademark was dedicated sleuthing in the manuscript sources of local, regional and national archives. (This generation was supported from the UK by the Colombianist historians Anthony McFarlane, Christopher Abel, and Malcolm Deas). Further to this, successive presidents wrote history at the same time as they felt themselves to be making it, culminating in President Virgilio Barco’s financing of a glorious new building for the National Archive in Bogotá in the mid-1980s. Yet the truths told by these historians and their students, of an incomplete and often repressive state apparatus and the legacies of ethnic, class, territorial and gender inequalities left by the colonial and republican periods, came to be uncomfortable truths for the social and economic elites who still ran the country even through the violence of the 1980s. At the very same time that History was being professionalized and institutionalized in Colombian universities, history and historians were being side-lined from public debates about the past. In 1984, history was removed from the school curriculum as a standalone subject, incorporated into the study of citizenship. Researchers who engaged with public history were persecuted, and some were murdered, such as Alberto Alava in 1982, and Darío Betancourt Echeverry and Jesús Antonio Bejarano in 1999. Contemporary public history became as likely to be practiced by professional sociologists and political scientists, and was swallowed up by the very Colombian supra-discipline of violentology (violentología). Knowledge of the past became patchy and politicized. Debates about the violence of the past and its consequences have shaped three decades
of political violence and attempts at peace-building in which many of the protagonists had only the faintest recall of the histories upon which they took position (Sánchez Meertens 2017; Bergquist, Sánchez, and Peñaranda 1999; Jaramillo Uribe 2007; Guerrero Barón 2020).

From the UK, MEMPAZ might be situated as a radical history project, enabled by fortuitous institutional investment in the attempt to gather ‘history from below’ using whatever ‘raw materials’ came to hand. Yet, its real foundations were in Colombia, and in the *sentipensante* (feely-thinky) tradition of Orlando Fals Borda, the sociologist and co-author of the *La Violencia en Colombia* (Campos, Umaña, and Fals Borda 1962; Fals Borda 1979; Ritterbusch 2019, 1303–4; Rappaport 2020). This body of work, which remains largely unheralded in English, grew out of the intellectual ferment of Colombia in the 1960s, where new historical sociology located knowledge-production in shared emotions, experience and feelings as much as formal interviews or questionnaires. This scholarship was largely rural, drew on the storytelling of ordinary people and was a conscious attempt to critique the official history of the heroism and dedication of state actors. We sought to draw upon the courageous example of scholars working in this line in Colombia, setting out to bring memories in from the margins, learning to listen to the ways that people in the geographical and social margins were talking about and working through their experiences of the armed conflict. This meant a lot of shared thinking and shared feeling. The most important aspect of our methodology was therefore trust, the building of which was the cornerstone of our efforts. We knew that our grassroots institutional partners were already working on these questions and in these areas without us, and would continue to do so regardless. Our efforts could support, amplify and create new opportunities for their stories to be told and heard. We told them that we trusted them to get on with it without us and to share with us what they came up with.

In contrast to the interview-based and textual analysis methods of most work in violentología, we put creativity at the centre of our methodologies and our relationships with project partners. This was not a project of ‘creative history’ in which professionally trained historians embraced the creativity denied them in the UK neoliberal university (though it was encouraged by the work of historians like Will Pooley and others in this area, such as Bickers et al. 2020). Rather, we drew succour and inspiration from the work of our partners with creative methodologies, from improvised theatre to cookery, music to storytelling, classroom innovations and drone photography. One of the balances
we sought to find was between our urge to drive research to discover hidden truths about the armed conflict, and the desire to give the partners the space and freedom to develop their methods on their own terms and in their own time.

The histories we created

Much of the history of the armed conflict in Colombia has been preserved through self-protective silences and passed on through careful oral tradition. The creative methodologies adopted in MEMPAZ allowed stories of forced migration and violence to emerge in ways that have not been captured by previous written histories. In listening to these diverse forms of history telling, MEMPAZ (2023a) was led by the orality and experience-oriented focus of our participants, and our image-led online interactive documentary, produced and hosted by the National University of Colombia (MEMPAZ 2023c), evokes the tone and feeling of our collaboration. We envisaged the creation of what we called a ‘memory piece’ from each partner, thinking this might be a piece of physical art, a book or a painting. Instead, most of the partners chose to create performances or to present the memories that had been shared in real time as their ‘memory piece’. We have archived these memories through photographs and films as well as in providing opportunities for the participants to feed into the Truth Commission’s work more formally. Yet there is no escaping that many of our ‘outputs’ were ephemeral and will continue to be marginal to the formal historical register. We detail here what histories were produced, where records of them can be found, and how they can help us to understand the past differently. Together the memories from the margins produce a richer and future-oriented history, one which reflects upon the horrors of the past in order to ensure non-repetition and a sustainable peace.

Acting and healing memories

Ruta Pacífica is a national network of women’s activist groups committed to producing a sustainable peace through non-violent means. In two of the areas, most afflicted by criminal and political violence in recent years, Cáceres and Caucasia in the Lower Antioquean Cauca, researchers from La Ruta worked with local women to collect their memories of the past and draw the threads together into a point of resistance. Bringing over 200 women together in each place, and combining collective workshops
with individual conversations, a series of performances remembering the violent actions of the past were designed, enacted and filmed for posterity. These performances combined individual experiences and memories with collective expressions of loss and resistance, and emphasized the embodied and emotional tolls of conflict, as well as embodied forms of healing and resilience. Films of the performances, and interviews with the participants reflecting on the production, can be watched on the MEMPAZ website (Ruta Pacífica 2023).

**Food and memory**

In Cartagena del Chaira, MEMPAZ partners MUMIDAVI organized five workshops amongst migrants who had come to the town fleeing the violence in their homes at Peñas Coloradas, several thousand of whom arrived in 2004 at a time of extreme violence between the army and the FARC-EP. Memories of food from home enabled the sharing of histories that had been silenced by the violence, from arson attacks on restaurants to very personal memories of disrupted and lost homes. Participants came together to transform a piece of waste ground into ‘The Memory Wood’ where people could eat outside, recall and exchange recipes, and build community. Participants prepared and shared delicacies and commonplace food such as yuca, beans with papaya, barbecued meat and chicken soup. In the many meetings that were organized, participants shared their personal stories, triggered by the aromas and tastes they were immersed in. Community leaders attested to the restorative value of these events. In the medium term, they aim to open a shop selling local produce and baked goods that can start to rebuild the social ties that were destroyed in the war. Some of the recipes used, films of the events, and interviews with some of the participants, can be found on the MEMPAZ website (MUMIDAVI 2023).

**Playing history**

Music can make history. At the San Jacinto Museum, MEMPAZ partners working through the National Network of Memory sites invited people who had been affected by the violence – whether directly through physical attacks, as relatives of victims, or through forced displacement, to come together to devise, write and perform a series of songs around the subject of memory. Over 100 people came to these joyful events from as far away as La Pelona in Sucre, from the Wayuu indigenous community
in La Guajira and from the Wiwa community in the famous Tayrona national park. The songs that were written and performed on those days included ‘Feminine resilience’, ‘Let’s Reflect’, ‘Not a single death more: if they kill one of us, five of us will go onto the streets’, ‘Let’s embrace one another’ and ‘I want to tell you this in song’. Subsequent to these meetings, the recordings were edited by the group leaders and can be listened to on the MEMPAZ website (RCLM Colombian National Network of Memory Sites 2023), along with interviews with the partners reflecting on the process. At the Pueblo Bello event, workshop facilitators reflected on the ways these songs were able to both recall and break the silences that had accompanied the violence of armed conflict.

**Photographic memories**

Simunurwa is one of the Arhuaco communities that preserve ancestral traditions on the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the snow-capped mountain range that looks out over Colombia’s Caribbean coast. The young people growing up in this community tell of connected histories of several centuries in which their culture has been threatened by outsiders, from pirates and Protestant missionaries to narcotraffickers and political influencers. In their work with MEMPAZ, they received training in photography, filming and editing, and undertook a series of visual archiving projects alongside the construction of a new Indigenous Library built nearby with the support of the National Library of Colombia. These images capture the people and landscapes of the community in their resistance to the violence. The refusal to engage explicitly with the violent past in these images might be interpreted in various ways: as a form of self-censorship in a situation of continuing and indeed worsening violence; as a choice to focus on the resilience and independence of the community rather than presenting it through the lens of victimhood; as a refusal to centre or single out the violence of one particular armed conflict from a history of multiple violent incursions over time; or as a combination of these. The images, and a beautiful trilingual photobook documenting the construction of the Library, can be viewed on the MEMPAZ website (CCA Colectivo de Comunicaciones Arhuaco 2023).
**Teaching peace**

Our partners Rodeemos el Diálogo (ReD) ran 37 peace workshops with a total of 918 young people in Cundinamarca, Nariño and Valle del Cauca. They trained teachers, established a peace network across 19 schools and produced a well-used pedagogical guide to teaching peace. Out of these many conversations came *A Ser Historia* – literally, Making History. Mentored by ReD colleagues, participants produced testimonies of their experiences growing up surrounded by violence and hopes for peace. The book *Making History* (which can be freely downloaded from the MEMPAZ website, alongside the ReD pedagogical guide in English and Spanish for teaching peace, and a nine-part podcast series called Between History and Memory, Rodeemos el Dialogo 2021; 2023, e2023) ends with a collectively authored manifesto written by these young people which shows how knowledge of the past is deemed to be central to the transformation of the future. They declare:

> We understand that peace is more complicated than just the end of physical violence. Cultural and structural violence continues to haunt our Society. As young people we have no time for attempts to stigmatize us and the causes that are dear to us. Wanting a fairer society does not make us vandals or subversives. We are dedicated to learning about the past. The study of history is central to the construction of a different kind of country from the one that we have inherited. We are convinced that only a history that includes those who have always been excluded, that takes their histories into account, is the only way to create a shared vision for the country (Rodeemos el Dialogo 2021, 317–9).

**Administering histories**

Our goal was the production of peoples’ histories in the plural without romanticizing the ‘people’ either as victims or as heroes, or generalizing marginalized communities into a homogenous lump outside of history. We were led by the stories told on the social margins rather than imposing our frameworks from afar. We sought to understand the resistance of keeping memories alive in song, play and art. But before we could make history, we had to fill in a lot of forms.

The day after receiving the news that our application had been successful we set about laying the foundations for the successful implementation of this ambitious, transnational and risky project. While the
historian was nominally the Principal Investigator on the project in the UK, the term Principal Unsuccessful Negotiator with Unsympathetic Bureaucracies would have been more appropriate. Writing a detailed account of the ways in which the university was unprepared to deliver this project would occupy far more of our time and open too many wounds than we are prepared to accept. We are not interested in washing our institutions’ dirty linen in public (well, tempted). Instead, we reflect here on the institutional challenges encountered by the research project we had dreamed up and miraculously received funding for, and how they shaped the history we made.

As promised in our application, the first thing we did was to set up our Ethics Committee, charged with overseeing the way we worked with victim/empowered communities, using the experience of our previous work on the Quipu Project and Peace Festival (see Brown and Tucker 2017; Vásquez et al. 2020). We agreed to put ongoing informed consent at the centre of our interactions, taking care to explain the proposed reach and impact of the project. All of our local partners had experience in managing trauma, and all of our interventions would be accompanied by a representative from the partner organizations with training and experience in these issues. Our insistence on maintaining an ethical partnership of consultation and co-production across unequal institutions and territories led to an abundance of obstacles, delays and disappointments that were the constant background to our efforts. Some of the highlights/lowlights were:

**Due diligence**

In line with UK government guidelines from 2016, the University of Bristol required our partners to complete a long form detailing all of their administrative history and confirming that they complied with all sorts of British laws. This form was in English, despite our partners all operating in Colombia. Our requests for the form to be translated into the languages of our partners were declined. We therefore translated the form ourselves and completed it with each of the partner organizations in turn before submitting it. We then waited several months for this form to be approved (perhaps unsurprisingly in hindsight, given the many interested parties involved), until which we could not begin to send them the funds they needed to get started. We estimate that by the time these forms had been approved, we had already used up half of the time allocated in the grant award to carry out the research. Despite our
partnerships being based on trust, the UK university set up its defences based on a distrust whose colonial origins were clear for all to see. Further to this, the way in which the Due Diligence process was introduced demonstrated very clearly to grassroot partners that the University did not trust them and that our partnership was an unequal one. Partners in Colombia asked if the University was reflecting on its own histories with the profits of slavery but Due Diligence only went one way. Some changes were subsequently made to simplify this process, but it remains the case that the lack of resources to fulfil it at both ends affected the ability to conduct the research and undermined the entire stated purpose of the project.

**Attitudes to risk**

Many of the issues that we spent our time dealing with revolved around the subject and perception of Risk. The University of Bristol perceived a great deal of risk in working with small, independent organizations in countries that were believed to have weaker communications or institutional infrastructures. Some of this revolved around financial accounting – how could the UK funders be sure that their money was being spent properly, for example? Of course, these factors were themselves part of the justification for the research in the first place, and the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) components are designed to alleviate them. (In 2021 the UK government removed its commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on ODA, not directly affecting MEMPAZ but immediately producing significant cuts to similar projects elsewhere, and irrevocably damaging ongoing research in this area. See Grazia Imperiale et al. 2022). Projects like MEMPAZ rely on the trust between academic researchers and their grassroots partners. Much of the debate about Risk was clouded by ignorance, stereotypes and misinformation. At all stages, the partners and researchers felt that the institutions were offloading risk onto them, covering their back with bureaucracy, visibilizing what Ritterbusch (2019) calls out as ‘participatory bluffing’. Rising levels of politicized and narco-violence in the areas where we have been working throughout the five years of our project meant, of course, that risks were mainly found at the local level, for example with physical travel sometimes impossible because of the activities of illegal armed groups, and the continuing threats and violence against human rights defenders.2
Contracts and translation

All of the MEMPAZ team are fluent Spanish speakers. None of the members of the professional services team at the University of Bristol spoke, read or wrote Spanish. (We don’t hold this against our colleagues – multilingualism is not in their job description, though that is precisely the point). It reached the stage whereby every time we received an internal communication which correctly spelled Colombia rather than Columbia our hearts leapt with pathetic joy. The everyday administration of the project was therefore outsourced to the researchers who were able to communicate with the partners in their languages. Whenever anything went wrong or a partner requested information on the arrival of a payment, that work fell to the researchers. Creative bureaucratic persistence in the face of indifferent and unresponsive institutions became the everyday research methodology. The repeated delays meant we received many enquiries from anxious partners and we laboured to minimize their anxieties. Administrators found us troublesome and started to ignore us. For months on end, we were entirely unable to locate answers to simple questions. We were sometimes irascible and combative. On the one hand, we were lauded by our employers for ‘successfully achieving grant success’ and on the other the same institution seemed structurally unable to allow us to do the work we had been commissioned to do.

Payments going wrong

We are aware of the irony of this reflection on the difficulties of sending money from the UK to Colombia, when some of the obstacles have been erected precisely in order to prevent money-laundering and other by-products of the illegal narcotics industry. The crux of the issue as it affected MEMPAZ is that the grassroot partners needed to receive funds before they could do the work: we considered it unethical and unrealistic to expect them to do the work before payment. Nevertheless, this was how the university ‘expenses’ culture worked. Staff at the partner institutions were left with no option but to use their own money to get the research started, and then waiting for many months for payment to arrive. All of our partners had to spend their own funds, or their volunteers’ own resources, because of the delays in sending funds from the UK. In the early days of the project in 2018 and 2019, we often joked that it
would be quicker and easier to simply take suitcases stacked with wads of thousands of dollars to the airport in Bogotá. (We didn’t, and after March 2020 we didn’t make those jokes anymore). The pressure point always fell on the least institutionally advantaged part of our collaboration: on the local partners. We maintain that the obstacles were caused by institutional cultures that can be changed rather than by financial regulations. There was disconnection between different sections of the UK university, for example Financial Services (which was restructured during MEMPAZ) at both Faculty and Central levels (and itself between Procurement, Purchasing and the actual individuals tasked with approving payments), Research Governance (which oversees Ethics), Contracts, IT systems (which introduced a new platform, MyERP, during MEMPAZ). Each of these separate groups had their own needs and obstacles which were magnified by the language and cultural difficulties. Sometimes it seemed like this system was set up in order to make us fail. Payments were rejected without notification, once because an invoice was in Word rather than saved as a pdf, another time because the invoice was in Spanish. More often payments were refused without explanation. Some transactions were lost or rejected without notification because the names of the partner organizations were too long for the boxes that appeared on the system and so could not be automatically recognized. Some invoices sat in the system for over a year. We had to send many letters to Colombian banks confirming that we had indeed sent the resources, to convince them to authorize our partners to access the funds, which caused further delays.3

**Immigration**

The introduction of a ‘hostile environment’ for immigration in the UK meant that any partners visiting from grassroots partners in Colombia had to negotiate a series of obstacles intended to dissuade them from feeling like our partners before/if they finally got here. The difficulty and growing expense of getting visas for visitors from our grassroots partner organizations contributed to our decision to relocate many planned events to Colombia. We organized a week of events in Bristol in October 2019, with in-person talks and events led by gender specialist Alejandra Coll, former director of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica Gonzalo Sanchez and Truth Commissioner Carlos Beristain.
In 2019, we ditched the idea of bringing over our partners for a big final event, instead deciding to employ resources in-country and on-line. This was definitely a positive change to the initial plan – these resources strengthened our partners and enabled the production of outputs in the longer term (Ryder 2019).

**Communication**

Working in collaboration and in community across hemispheres, languages and cultures requires technology, sensibility, time and trust. As the Colombian historian Jaime Jaramillo Uribe put it, ‘it is impossible to come to know the Other without a spiritual openness which we might call sympathy’ (Jaramillo Uribe 2007, 124). Over several years, we have moved from email attachments and bespoke conference call systems to the opaque document-hiding machinations of Microsoft Sharepoint, and from Whatsapp to Telegram. We have used social media sparingly, recognizing that drawing attention to our partners’ work could be counter-productive in an era of renewed political violence. These communication technologies have enabled the maintenance of the national and global networks that underpinned MEMPAZ. At their heart are the local communities in the marginalized municipalities where relationships were more likely to be face-to-face and regular rather than through phones or screens and irregular. The shift to digital mediation nevertheless had a negative effect upon our plan to use memory work to accompany social healing. Corporality is important, and we lost a lot of this to the pandemic.

**COVID-19**

Of course the pandemic blasted many of our plans out of the water from March 2020 and exacerbated the inequalities outlined above. Researchers and partners alike found themselves at home and looking after children and partners, ill, and/or facing economic difficulties. Travel restrictions meant that we suspended a series of planned meetings (microencuentros) which would have enabled partners to visit each other and learn from each other’s experiences. Both UKRI and Minciencias granted us a year’s extension. Government policy in Colombia facilitated a rise in threats and attacks on community leaders. Some municipalities where we worked, such as Caucasia and Cáceres, witnessed steep rises in violence.
as illegal armed groups competed for control (Hylton 2021). In April 2021, street protests escalated into a National Strike characterized by popular euphoria and police brutality (Parkin Daniels 2021). Many of our partners in rural municipalities caught COVID. Often months passed without any communication. When it happened it could often be limited to, how are you? Are you ok? As our worlds began to incorporate the pandemic into our lives and our memories, we started to become aware of the histories we had managed to create together against all the odds. We have tried to ‘open our hearts and minds to critical learning from our mistakes, from our triumphs and from others who have shared spaces with us across difference’ (Ritterbusch 2019, 1314). We have made history, though not as we had dreamt it.

**Sustaining histories**

In the words of the editors of *The Colombia Reader*, the country’s history is characterized by ‘multiplicity and contradiction’ (Farnsworth-Alvear, Palacios, and López 2016, 1). Generations of writers have struggled to reconcile the diversity of its landscapes, its communities, and its peoples into a single historical narrative. As part of the negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP a Historical Commission was established to determine and agree the causes of the armed conflict. Twelve authors (including no professional historians) were appointed, and each wrote a chapter. Their report (Historical Commission 2015) could not find agreement on the causes of the armed conflict.

The Truth Commission (CEV 2022), from its initials in Spanish, Comisión de la Verdad) made a more serious quest to understand Colombia’s recent history. It was set up under the terms of the 2016 Peace Accords to collect new evidence, and to clarify the truth of what had happened in the armed conflict of the last half-century. In its own extended name, it explicitly aimed to ensure that these events will not be repeated, and to encourage Colombians to live together peacefully. The eleven commissioners (again, no professional historians) were tasked to gather information and present their report within three years. The twin obstacles of funding cuts and the pandemic made this task ever more difficult. The mindsets of the CEV commissioners overlapped with the way we had conceived of MEMPAZ, and they approached us for support. We applied twice to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for extra funds to work closely with the CEV, in the first case working with the CEV’s Gender Working Group through our partners Ruta Pacífica to
collect, transcribe and analyse the testimonies of over 800 women from all over the country, and in the second to collaborate in the dissemination of its findings in 2022. Thanks to this support, and some additional contributions from the UK research funding councils, we were able to strengthen the foundations of the CEV and enable it to fulfil its mandate against considerable odds. This has been one of the great satisfactions of MEMPAZ.

Another was that we were able to bring members of all our partners organizations together to share experiences and learn from one another. We were hosted by our partners in Pueblo Bello in 2019, in the magnificent Sierra Nevada, and were able to share in the formal inauguration of the newly constructed Indigenous Library and Memory House. The women of Ruta Pacífica performed their play in the open-air, leading us down into the river to share in their memories of the violence, pain and recovery that had shaped their lives. The young people of Simunurwa talked us through their photographs and how they hoped to capture the changes and the everyday resistance that had taken place in their community. Our colleagues from Rodeemos el Diálogo led us through some of the exercises they had been trialling at schools in Cali and Bogotá to help children reflect on the violence of the past. Andrés Guerra from the Centro de Memoria in Valledupar led us in a song-writing and performing workshop where we sang of hopes, fears and dreams. Josefina Perdomo and her team from Caquetá explained the work they had done with internal migrants using food and memory to conjure images of home. We ate together, talked through several days and nights, danced and shared confidences and dreamed of future collaborations. On the final evening, our new friends from Simunurwa invited us to an intimate closing ceremony, wishing us well on our journeys home and tying string bracelets around each of our wrists as symbols of the positive and negative energies that the encounter had harnessed.

At the time, the Pueblo Bello meeting was imagined as the first of several such events. As the pandemic was embedded in our lives, it became clear that it would remain a crucial memory in itself – a rare opportunity for the entire MEMPAZ community to come together physically. The memory of this gathering became itself a beacon of hope, a reminder of what can be possible or as some would say, *una luz de esperanza*. The tears we shed and the hugs we shared became not ‘only’ a memory, but rather a continued motivation, a call to action and a stimulus to further work. During the pandemic, the MEMPAZ community tried to sustain itself through solidarity and mutual support through email, Whatsapp, Zoom meetings and Telegram. Many communications began or ended with
some formulation of ‘our thoughts are with you’. In May 2022, we were able to come together again, this time in Cali, where we presented the final memory pieces with each other. By organizing a Festival of Memory, Art and Resistance, we were able to share these new perspectives on history with all of the partner groups, and with the local community in Cali. In March 2023, we began to disseminate our findings in the UK, with a theatre performance, food workshop, film screening, peace brunch and gig in Bristol (films of these events are at MEMPAZ 2023b).

Changing history from the margins

Remembered from the margins, Colombia’s armed conflict is an even more painful and traumatic history than that contained in the history books and NGO reports. Our partners’ memory pieces are shaped by the tastes of forced migration, the sounds of protest and the sights of landscapes that became battlefields. They are emotionally charged, bearing the weight of the places where crimes were committed and mobilized by the survivors’ struggles for justice. The CEV’s final report set out in forensic detail the massacres, disappearances, threats and traumas of half-a-century of warfare in some of the most marginalized and forgotten parts of the country. As a result of our collaboration with the CEV’s Gender Working Group, that report contains conclusions drawn from over 2000 interviews with women and members of the LGBTQ communities who shared their testimonies with researchers, which may not otherwise have appeared. The understanding of the past will therefore be strengthened by having gender history at its heart. But as Deas (2017, 20) observed, ‘although archives are central to historical investigation . . . many things cannot be found in them’.

Our partners who lived on the frontline of the conflict shared stories of violent incursions on their lands, threats and attacks from military, paramilitary and guerrilla groups, forced displacement in search of safety and livelihoods, imposed silences and embodied pain and bitterness, along with processes of healing and recovery. A version of the facts of the matter is set out in the Truth Commission’s report (2022) and catalogued in its archive for future researchers. No one will ever be able to deny the tragic and catastrophic magnitude of the violence of Colombia’s armed conflict, the pain that it inflicted across society, and the patterns and causes that underpinned it (though its opponents have already begun to try, see Valerle 2020).
The history of Colombia’s armed conflict now goes beyond the 8 million people forced from their homes, the 121,768 disappeared, the 450,654 murdered (CEV 2022, 127). It is a conflict that continues to be remembered, re-imagined and called into the present in order to bring about a more just and more equal future. We are proud to have participated in the reconstruction of a fragmented history upon more diverse and more inclusive foundations. In the words of Sánchez (2021, 19), the history of Colombia is now being written again and to crystallize in a new shape, or at least to be represented not only in narrative structures but also in a proliferation of places, monuments and symbols which can often be seen in everyday public spaces, both urban and rural, as well as in the roads, the rivers, rocks and trees. The songs, dances, stitchings and chants of the peasant, indigenous and Afro-descended communities are filled with memory, of languages and proposals for a new national conscience. These are emotional and moving histories whose goal is social transformation. Our participants convinced us of the value of their tears and laughter in sharing their stories. MEMPAZ started and ended as an idealistic leap of faith. These Colombians believe that better and fuller knowledge of the past can make a difference in the future. That might mean at the local level, schoolchildren growing up with the education not to fall for narratives of hate or revenge, or at the international level a belief that if only ‘the world’ had understood better what was happening, it might have used its influence and stopped the violence sooner. That means the immediate legal regulation of the global narcotics trade and the end of the War on Drugs, support for the end of impunity for human rights violations and financial corruption. It also means stopping to listen to marginalized voices, whether they are found in the archives, online or on the street.

By bringing memories in from the margins, we have shown the significance of foregrounding place in both the researching, the telling and the analysis of history. We concur with Robert Karl’s analysis in Forgotten Peace (Karl 2017, 224) that a focus on violence ‘risks suppressing alternative expressions of memory from the provinces and countryside, which cannot count on the influence that lettered interventions possess in public life’. In its original incarnation, the Truth Commission had proposed to have 20 Casas de Memoria dotted around the national territory as safe spaces to where people could come and share their testimonies with researchers. Government cuts after 2018 combined with the pandemic to drastically reduce the number and effectiveness of these memory houses. This perhaps made MEMPAZ’s dispersed
methodologies more useful. By working directly with Ruta Pacifica, we were able to ensure that 800 women were able to share their testimonies with the Truth Commission, whose voices may not otherwise have been heard. This was possible because the Truth Commission shared our concern to put gender at the centre of its research and analysis, and because we shared their commitment to the territoriality of knowledge, meaning the recognition that truths and histories make better sense when located in the places that they emerge from. All of our meetings with participants took place on their own terms and in many cases in their own homes or localities. Places and landscapes were at the centre of all of the stories we became part of. In Cáceres and Caucasia, participants from Ruta Pacífica produced a play revolving around the way the corpses of their loved ones had been thrown into the River Cauca by paramilitary gangs. In the performance of the play in front of all of our partners in Pueblo Bello, they led their audience down to a nearby stream and the performance reached a tragic crescendo with both performers and audience stood up to their knees in the water (see images at Ruta Pacífica 2023). The water then became a source of solace and potential renewal. The river of memories became a sacred vessel for the past.

The massive forced-displacement that marked this period of Colombian history meant that memories of the violence have been itinerant too. Our partners from MUMIDAVI in Caquetá insisted the stories of hope that they created out of shared cooking and eating with forcibly displaced migrants could only happen if full respect was shown to the local environment. That meant using clearings in the forest as a Memory Wood and eating in the open air to avoid the limits that indoor spaces could place on the memories of people who lived and worked outside. Discussing the past in formal indoor settings – such as a traditional university building in a big city – could therefore be inappropriate and even counterproductive to the goal of eliciting testimonies and remembrances of the past. Place was central to this history. The communications collective of the Arhuaco community put the landscape centre-stage in their photographs, often to the extent of rendering the armed conflict invisible. The sacred mountains captured by drone and camera footage told a longer story of humankind’s impact upon the natural environment.

The international, bilateral funding of this project of course shaped these findings in ways are sometimes invisible. Colonial ideologies of governance and administration left their mark on the memory pieces and the histories they could tell: sometimes hesitant, delayed or
uncompromising and often angry. The bureaucracy that was experienced as faceless by the researchers in the UK was felt as colonial and violent by the partners in Colombia. This has not been a one-man exploration, a patriarchal storyteller setting out from Bristol’s slave-trading and statue-dumping harbour and decoding a country’s pains. Instead, it has been a shared endeavour in which we have climbed hills together, clung to 4 × 4 vehicles as they negotiated hairpin mountain roads, overcome fears to fly to new places, perched on mototaxis, danced together, drunk coffee and juice alongside one another and listened. There has been a lot of listening. Our inputs, for what they are worth, are the products of this listening and an attempt to render the conflict in the terms of those who felt it most acutely. The distances have been long, and the administrative processes problematic. Our desire to work through trust and horizontality made us see the coloniality that underpinned our research economies. We have become aware of the ways that the colonial underpinnings of the global knowledge economy shaped the histories that we were able to produce. Even within the continuing colonial logic of our institutional logos on the covers of published books, videos uploaded to Youtube and music to SoundCloud, our partners have revealed the memories from the margins that provide the heft of a people’s history of the armed conflict in Colombia: one of pain felt through and with the natural landscape; one of loss and impunity; and one of bravery and a refusal to forget the horrors of the past and to employ them to inform the present and transform the future.

Historians of Colombia have long known that an urban-centric history of the armed conflict would be pointless, missing out the location of much of the violence. Efforts to bring memories from the margins have employed a range of methodologies going beyond archival trawling and testimonial interviews, resulting in a richer, felt history. In future, further institutional change will be needed within universities and research councils to more effectively facilitate these types of collaborations. That means improving the language skills and knowledge-base of decision-makers and gate-keepers; embedding respect for local partners within the institutional research culture beyond lip-service; and making concrete changes to the financial and contractual underpinnings that make it easier, not harder, for local partners to participate. The same will be true of post-conflict research: for all the funding calls, workshops, seminars, podcasts and congresses being organized by researchers like ourselves in universities and cities, the most interesting ways of rethinking this painful history are being done on the margins by the people who
were most deeply affected by the conflict – and who very much need this history not to be repeated. We can now see that they were part of the history, and that the future must belong to them.

Notes

1. The University of Bristol was awarded £403,688 of UK taxpayers’ money administered through the Newton Fund and labelled as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) meaning that this money was being counted as part of the UK government’s (since ditched) commitment to spending 0.7% of GDP on ‘development’ elsewhere in the world. The Universidad Nacional de Colombia received in the region of £160,000 towards its costs, though the different accounting practices in the two countries meant that few of the parameters were comparable.

2. To clarify: this analysis does not make or imply any criticism of any University of Bristol employees who often went well beyond their duties to make these processes work for the benefit of all the partners. We are enormously grateful for all their hard work in making MEMPAZ a reality despite everything.

3. The authors look forward to publishing a follow-up piece explaining how these lessons have been learned and systems improved – at present this is a work-in-progress.

4. In summer 2022 the UK government unexpectedly allowed Colombians to enter the UK without prior application for a visa, and we secured funding to bring many of our partners to Bristol for a final event.

Disclosure statement

In Colombia, the authors have worked closely with the Biblioteca Nacional and the Colectivo de Comunicación Arhuaco, the Comisión del Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No-Repetición, MUMIDAVI, Rodeemos el Diálogo, the Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres, and the Red Colombiana de Lugares de Memoria. Nevertheless, the analysis presented in this essay does not represent the views of any of those organizations.

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