

*The Palace of Justice Holocaust, or The Plaza de Bolívar Battle:*  
An Anthropological Contribution to the Comparative Analysis of Memorialization of  
Political Violence in Colombia

Inauguraldissertation  
zur Erlangung des Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie  
im Fachbereich Philosophie- und Geschichtswissenschaften  
der Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität  
zu Frankfurt am Main

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Erscheinungsjahr:  
2022

*To the memory of my grandparents Isabel and Chucho, Anita and Genaro,  
whose stories opened my eyes to the history of Colombians,  
so full of sorrow and hope, so beautiful and painful at the same time.*

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## Acknowledgments

The research project whose main results are presented in this dissertation was supported by many in America and Europe. Professor Olga Restrepo Forero, from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, invited me in 2010 to participate in *Ensamblado en Colombia*, an interdisciplinary project where I performed, together with my colleague and friend Gaby Gómez, an initial exploration that later developed into my doctoral research project. Professor Doctor Iris Gareis, my advisor at the *Institut für Ethnologie* of Goethe University Frankfurt, oriented me since the initial stages of the research and made my academic integration in Germany easier with practical advice and intercultural empathy. She, together with Professor Catherine Whittaker from the same institute, made important observations and proposed corrections of the final draft of this work. The *Promotionskolleg für Ethnologie, Geschichte und Philosophie* of the Faculty of Philosophy and History at Goethe University supported my fieldwork in Colombia in 2011, the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation and the Federal Ministry of Research and Education of Germany supported my research and the exchange with colleagues in America and Europe between 2011 and 2014 with a doctoral scholarship, and the Latin American Studies Association honored me with a travel grant that made my participation in its 32<sup>nd</sup> congress, held in May of 2014 in Chicago, possible.

I am indebted to professors Hernando Hernández Quintero, Jorge Augusto Lozano and María Estela Peña from the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences at the Universidad de Ibagué, who shared with me their memories about the assault and counterassault on the Palace of Justice of the Republic of Colombia deployed by guerrillas and state agents in November of 1985, their professors and friends murdered during these events, and their personal and professional opinions about the case. I spent an important part of my fieldwork time in Colombia with relatives of people disappeared from the Palace of Justice and their supporters, who allowed me to know

## *Acknowledgments*

them personally, to take part in their spaces of mourning, struggle, commemoration, and amusement, and taught to me that even among unending sorrow there is always space for laughing and being optimist about mankind. I especially thank Pilar Navarrete, who for many years divided her time between the search for her husband Héctor Jaime “Jimmy” Beltrán, the struggle for feeding and educating their four children, and the solidarity with other victims of state crimes. Pilar has been one of my closest interlocutors during these years, and our conversations about life, her struggle, our hopes, and sorrows have shaped both my analysis and the chapter that this research opened in my own life. Like Pilar, her daughters and grandchildren are among the protagonists of this work. Among other relatives of persons disappeared from the Palace of Justice, I want to thank Socorro, Jorge, and Pedro Franco Pineda—siblings of Irma Franco Pineda—, Maritza Casallas Lizarazo—daughter of Gloria Estela Lizarazo—, Inés and Carmen Castiblanco—sisters of Ana Rosa Castiblanco—, Sandra Beltrán—sister of Bernardo Beltrán—, *don* Héctor Beltrán—father of Héctor Jaime “Jimmy” Beltrán—, and Débora Anaya Esguerra and Martha Barragán—daughter and cousin of Norma Esguerra. All of them honored me with their trust and attention and taught me about the history of their struggle, their sorrows, and hopes. I had contact that is more distant with other relatives like Milena León—daughter of Luz Mary Portela León—, Elizabeth Suspes—niece of David Suspes Celis—, Cecilia Cabrera, Alejandra and César Rodríguez—, wife, daughter and brother of Carlos Rodríguez—and Juan Francisco Lanao—son of Gloria Anzola—, to whom I am also indebted for their trust and help.

During the sessions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, held in Brasilia, in November 2013, I had the opportunity to speak with Ana María Bidegain and her daughters, whose husband and father, Justice Carlos Horacio Urán, was rescued from the Palace of Justice, tortured, and executed by State forces in 1985. Ana María

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attended the hearings and bore witness to the assassination of her husband and the suffering she and their four daughters endured during the 30 year-long aftermath of Carlos Horacio's execution. What I learned from them during the sessions and in our brief conversations helped me, as much as my contact with other relatives of victims of the counterassault, to better understand the impact of state crimes on their lives and the deepness of the love and courage which nurture their struggles for truth and justice. During the same sessions, I met Yolanda Santodomingo, who bore witness to the forced disappearance and tortures she suffered after being rescued from the Palace of Justice by the Colombian Army. Through our conversations, started in Brazil and continued in Colombia, Yolanda helped me to understand the experience of the horrifying crimes perpetrated against her by state agents, and the moral sources of her courageous decision to bear witness and claim justice despite the permanent harassment, psychological torture, and dangers she is still subjected to. Angie Fernández, member of one of the legal teams who represent these victims before local and international tribunals, taught me about the legal processes and the impact of her work in other dimensions of her life, helping me to cope better with situations in which fieldwork negatively impacted my private life in Colombia. I am indebted to Angie, her fellow lawyer Jomary Ortegón, Helena Urán Bidegain and Gustavo Rojas Páez for their support during a short period in which I was subjected to non-official harassment during my fieldwork period of 2013, while some old friends panicked and turned away, and a colleague who works on the Colombian military's self-exculpating narratives labeled me as "paranoid" and severed professional and personal ties with me.

Professor Elvira Sánchez-Blake from Michigan State University—a writer and witness of the Palace of Justice events from her privileged position as journalist at the presidential palace—, father Alberto Franco—member of the Comisión Intereclesial de

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Justicia y Paz–, the artists Josefina Jacquin–sister of the M-19 leader Alfonso Jacquin, evacuated from the Palace of Justice and subjected to forced disappearance by state forces–, Doris Salcedo and Beatriz González, the writer Fernando González, and the journalist Maureen Maya helped me to better understand how struggles for memory and justice can be held in diverse scenarios, and how individuals and groups can make sense of political violence and keep hope for the future alive without forgetting nor disguising past and present injustices and sufferings. Together with them, several journalists and people working in diverse institutions discretely contributed to my work, leaking documents, informing me about hidden relations of state agents and activists, and giving me hints which helped me to conduct the research in a context that happens to be more dangerous than it seems. Making their names and specific contributions public would expose them to professional and personal risk, which is why I limit myself to publicly expressing my gratitude to all of them here.

During the years I devoted to the research project that gave place to this dissertation, I have held several conversations and working sessions with colleagues from different countries who also research about the impact of political violence on people’s lives and culture. Although the defects of this work should be found in my own limitations, the experiences and analysis shared by them, as much as their comments about my work, were fundamental for refining my perspective, and for accessing works and persons who helped me further. Some of them are Professors José Emilio Burucúa from the Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín (Argentina), Ana Guglielmucci from the Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina), Patrizia Tolle from the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, Myriam Jimeno and Andrés Salcedo, as much as the members of their research team Angélica María Garzón, Albano Calvo, and Andrés Cancimance from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia; Professors Francisco Taborda from the Universidad Nacional de San Luis

## *Acknowledgments*

(Argentina), Roberta Villalón, Richard Stahler-Sholk and Emelio Betances, from St. John's University, East Michigan University and Gettysburg College (United States), Carlos Uribe from the Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), my colleagues Elifcan Karaçan and Pilar Mejía from the Technical University of Berlin and the Max-Planck Institute for European Legal History in Frankfurt, and my teachers Vered Hollander-Goldfarb from the Conservative Yeshiva of Jerusalem, Rabbi Juan Mejía from Oklahoma City (United States) and Rabbi Mendel Gurewitz from Offenbach (Germany).

An important part of the academic exchanges on which my work relied were made possible by colleagues who offered me the possibility of presenting partial results in lectures and colloquia held in diverse institutions and countries. Among them are Markus Hawel from the Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung in Berlin, Dorotheé Delacroix, Ariela Epstein, Abigail Mira and Clara Duterme, from the University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès, Jonas Wolff from the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, and Pilar Mendoza and Stefan Peters from the German Colombian Peace Institute – CAPAZ in Giessen. In Colombia, these exchanges were made possible by Professors Raúl Cuadros from Uniminuto, Marco Taborda from the Escuela Superior de Administración Pública, César Fonseca from the Universidad del Tolima, Angelika Rettberg from the Universidad de los Andes, and Beira Aguilar from the Universidad del Rosario.

During these past years, part of my social circle became a kind of extended research team. I am particularly indebted to Jan Schneider, Patricia Coba and Isabel Guerrero, who enthusiastically supported my research since the beginning and have been sharp interlocutors until this day.



## Introduction

November is a month of mourning for many Colombians of diverse social classes and groups. Every year during the first days of the month, the media put into circulation visual and phonographic records, testimonies and anecdotes that bring back into public consciousness the so-called Palace of Justice Holocaust: a series of violent events that started on November 6, 1985, with a hostage-taking perpetrated by a guerrilla group in the seat of the Judiciary, and that ended twenty-seven hours later with the completion of a counterassault deployed by state forces. The events, taking place in downtown Bogotá in front of press crews and onlookers (Figure 1), caused the destruction of the Palace of Justice building and the decease or disappearance of more than one hundred persons, including the Chief Justice and other members of the nation's high courts (Gómez *et al.*, 2010). Thus, partially under the influx of that technologically mediated *déjà vu*, but also as an effect of the dead weight of the calendar on individual lives, people who were old enough in 1985 to experience these events in some way or the other find themselves, in Colombia or wherever they reside, speaking about them again during the days that surround each anniversary. As part of that yearly collective "return to the past", public squares, streets, churches, universities, tribunals, and other spaces are transformed into memorial stages on which survivors, people related to those killed or disappeared, activists, and the general public gather to share or listen to accounts of the events, remember and honor victims and heroes, repudiate perpetrators, and express hopes and demands for truth and justice. Nevertheless, although most of them make use of a shared set of categories to reflect about the same episode, sometimes the contents of their own lists of victims, heroes, perpetrators, truths, and expected acts of justice are remarkably different.

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Figure 1. Unknown author, 1985. Colombian army tanks surrounding the nation's Palace of Justice in downtown Bogotá in the afternoon of November 6. Date and source of original publication unknown.

One week later, the memorial subject changes and the media substitute the archive materials about the Palace of Justice events with others about the volcanic avalanche that covered the city of Armero in the night of November 13, 1985, killing more than 22,000 of its 29,000 inhabitants (Schuster and Highland, 2001; Figure 2). However, that disaster occupies a less preponderant space in public life and the media, and the memorial events are mostly limited to initiatives by survivors and politicians who gather in the places of the dispersion of the *armerita* diaspora throughout the country, or among the ruins, tombs, and rocks that cover the place where Armero once stood. These memorial events also constitute stages on which general accounts and personal memories are shared and transmitted across generations, where victims and heroes are mourned and honored, and complaints and hopes are made public (García, 2016). But they are fundamentally different from those that use to take place in other locations one week before, because although in the case of the Armero catastrophe the responsibility of state agents for the outcome has been established as well (Rojas, 2013),

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the understanding that what happened was the result of the forces of nature or destiny circulates widely among survivors, relatives of victims and the general public (Suárez, 2009; Ospina, 2013).<sup>1</sup> That is why the first of these collective actors focus their complaints on the scarcity of support provided by the state when they faced the desperate need of reconstructing their lives after the avalanche, instead of pointing out to state agents as responsible for what happened (Ramírez *et al.*, 2017).



Figure 2. Justo Velásquez, 1985. Armero, Tolima, in the morning of November 14, covered by the volcanic avalanche of the night before. *Vice Latinoamérica*, November 2, 2005.

The fact that the anniversary of the Palace of Justice events is followed one week later by that of the Armero catastrophe, gives place each year to a displacement of attention

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<sup>1</sup> In the early aftermath of the disaster, some sectors of the establishment and victims attributed responsibility to the government (see, e.g., Cano, 1985; Samper, 1985). During the second half of the decade of 1980, survivors and indirect victims filed almost 1,000 claims against the state, accusing it of negligence for failing to implement measures recommended by experts that could have prevented the high number of casualties. Regardless of the abundant technical evidence that substantiated these claims, the state was acquitted by local tribunals in all instances (García, 2016: 49). Contrary to what has happened in the Palace of Justice case (see chapter 4), so far these claims have not been brought to international tribunals.

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in the media, the public discussion and everyday conversations that echoes the way in which—as the popular saying in Colombia goes— “Armero buried the Palace” (Figure 3). Back in 1985, the public discussion started after the end of the counterassault on November 7 about the responsibility of state agents for the enormous death toll of the operation, the flagrant human rights violations perpetrated by them against guerrillas and civilians, and the whereabouts of those who could not be found dead or alive, was displaced from November 14 on, first by the news about the avalanche, and later by the fates of its victims, the measures implemented to manage the emergency, and intense debates about the capability of the government to protect the Colombian people from political foes and natural disasters (Zaiderman and Ramírez, 2010). Nevertheless, the memorial and legal struggles undertaken by a wide range of social actors since that early aftermath in relation to the Palace of Justice events, and the question of the attribution of responsibilities for their catastrophic outcome, have prevailed over the chronologic and thematic superposition by the Armero avalanche happened in 1985 and actualized on each anniversary to a certain degree. Thus, what some call “the holocaust” and others “the battle” has been constructed along thirty-five years of cultural creation and political struggle as one of the most important objects of public concern in Colombia, and inscribed in collective memory as a breakpoint in local history.

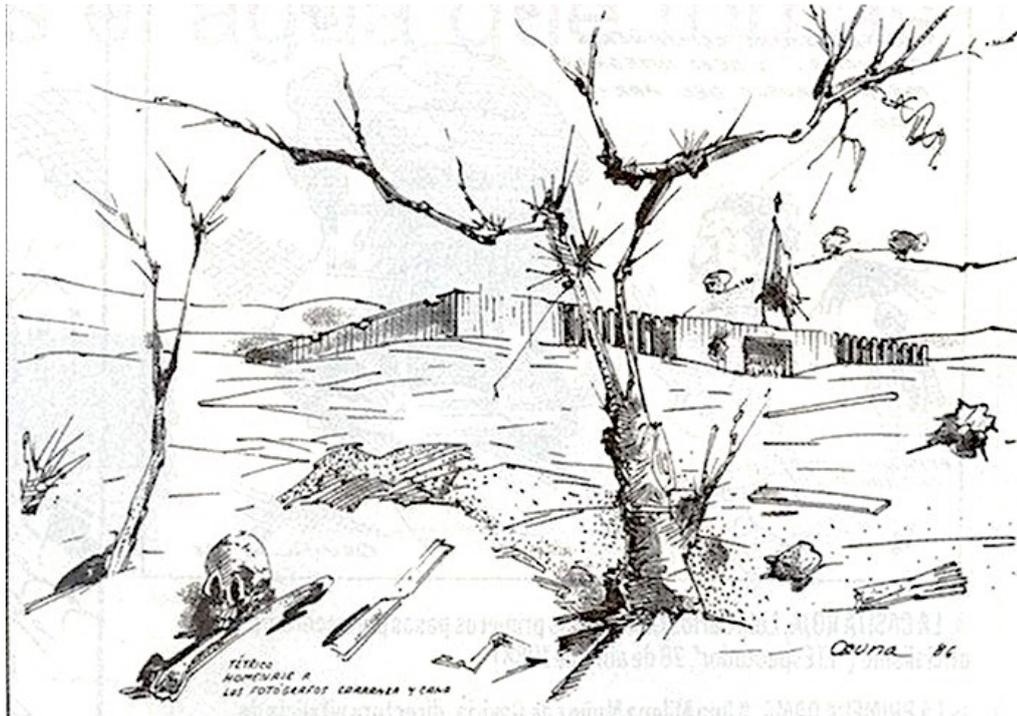


Figure 3. Hector Osuna. “Tétrico homenaje a los fotógrafos [Francisco] Carranza y [Fernando] Cano” (“Grim homage to the photographers Carranza and Cano”), *El Espectador*, November of 1986. Carranza and Cano covered the Palace of Justice events and the Armero disaster for *El Espectador* and were alive when the cartoon was published.

## I Object and Aims of this Work

Two of the three main subjects of this work are the cultural background and contents of the representations through which the exceptionality of the Palace of Justice events, certainly not the only nor the most brutal episode of political violence happened in Colombia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been constructed and inscribed in material and immaterial culture along almost four decades. Given that the beginnings of that phenomenon took place in the second half of the decade of 1980, immediately after the events and just before the emergence of a local political and intellectual field of memory in the decade of 1990 (Orjuela, 2007; Cancimance, 2013), it would be easy to characterize it as an early symptom of a so-called “memory boom”, imagined by intellectuals and activists as the onset of memory struggles (Orjuela, *op. cit.*; Ramos

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and Aldana, 2017) in what has been mistakenly called “a country without memory” (Schuster, 2010).

In this work, I defend the thesis that although the memory struggles waged around the subject of the Palace of Justice events have been historically and ideologically framed by the human rights movement that emerged in Colombia in the late 1970s (Marín, 2016), they express a local, preexistent tradition of counterhegemonic memorialization of political violence that can be traced back at least until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That tradition constitutes the third and most important subject of this work for three reasons. First, because its consideration puts the representations of the Palace of Justice events here considered into historical perspective, and in the case of the metaphor of “holocaust” applied to these events, makes it possible to trace its usage in other representations of political violence previous to the Nazi judeocide—as Arno Mayer (1988: 313-314) has defined what others call “the Holocaust” or “the Shoah”—, and therefore independent from the symbolic universe developed around it in the last 75 years. Second, because analyzing the specific memory struggles that make part of that local tradition constitutes a way of tackling a subject that has been ignored by other researchers so far, and therefore deepens the field of action of memory studies about Colombia. Third, because the materials and observations resulting from these undertakings prove the falsity of the thesis defended by authors who negate the existence of a social field of memorialization in Colombia prior to the decade of 1990, and therefore offer the possibility of inducing a change of intellectual paradigm that would broaden our general understanding of the history of memorialization of political violence in that society.

## II Methodological and Theoretical Background<sup>2</sup>

Given the ethos and training provided by my education as a social anthropologist and the interest in the circulation of diverse narrative and pictorial representations of the Palace of Justice events that originated my research project, classical anthropological fieldwork and the search for the actor's perspective have played a major role in it.<sup>3</sup> Most of the multi-sited fieldwork that supports this work took place between May of 2010 and May of 2014 in America and Europe,<sup>4</sup> where I performed participant observation in work and leisure gatherings of memory entrepreneurs,<sup>5</sup> secular and religious commemorations, conferences and discussion rounds, attended lectures, theater plays, film projections and court hearings, observed and documented permanent and temporary exhibitions in streets, galleries and museums, and interviewed victims, activists and witnesses who frequently opened to me not only their biographies and perspectives, but also their archives. That choice for anthropological fieldwork is, nevertheless, much more than a consequence of my professional training. It reflects my opinion that, as has been observed by Doug

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<sup>2</sup> Part of the contents of this section were published in an earlier stage of elaboration in the journal *Latin American Perspectives* (Leal, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> I started working on the subject in May of 2010, nine months before being admitted as *Doktorand* at Goethe University's Institut für Ethnologie in February of the following year, in the context of the project *Ensamblado en Colombia*, a multidisciplinary enterprise intended to problematize a wide range of subjects of Colombian reality. That early stage of the investigation was partially conducted with Gaby Gómez, and its main results were published in an article coauthored with her (Leal and Gómez, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> "Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (Marcus, 1995: 105).

<sup>5</sup> In this work I follow the approach proposed by Elizabeth Jelin, who underlines the role of agency, initiative, and innovation in processes of collective memorialization. According to her characterization, a memory entrepreneur is a social agent "who engages personally in a project but also engages others, giving place to participation and an organized task of collective nature [...]. [A memory entrepreneur] is an initiator of projects, of new ideas and expressions, of creativity more than repetitions" (2002: 48, my translation).

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McAdam, “speeches, writings, statements, or other formal ideological pronouncements [are not the only ways by which politically opposed meanings are constructed or made public, because] actions *do* speak louder than words” (1996: 341).

As usual in anthropological research, my fieldwork was not shaped by a strictly pre-defined plan but by a dynamic, intentional articulation of diverse approaches that were adjusted in diverse moments and locations according to the circumstances posed by each specific context. Additionally, my transhumance through several geographical and Internet-based spaces was guided by my awareness of the fact that the existence of the memory struggles and processes of cultural creation I researched about extend far beyond the frontiers of Colombia.<sup>6</sup> The transnational nature of the social field of memorialization of the Palace of Justice events became evident in the early stages of the research, when I started noticing that those who integrate it wage memory struggles both in Colombia and abroad, frequently making use of the Internet to reach broad audiences beyond their places and countries of residence. Thus, during the first half of the decade of 2010 I combined in the most efficient way possible formal fieldwork journeys with the opportunities offered by my attendance to conferences, in order to reach as many memory entrepreneurs as possible.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The relevance of anthropological multi-sited fieldwork for the study of phenomena of diverse nature has been addressed extensively by other authors (see, e.g., Appadurai, 1988; Norman, 2000; Gupta and Fergusson, 2004 and Robben, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Colombia: May of 2010 to February of 2011 (Ibagué, Armero and Bogotá); November of 2011 (Bogotá), 2012 (Bogotá and Medellín) and 2013 (Bogotá and Santa Marta). Malmö, Sweden: exhibition of the installation *Plegaria Muda* and lecture by the artist Doris Salcedo (Moderna Museet), May of 2011. Porto, Portugal: VII Conference of the Consejo Europeo de Investigaciones Sociales de América Latina, June of 2013. Brasília, Brazil: hearings of the Inter American Court of Human Rights in the case “Rodríguez Vera y otros (desaparecidos del Palacio de Justicia) vs. Colombia”, November of 2013. Chicago, United States: XXXII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association - LASA, May of 2014. Only the academic conferences in which fieldwork was actively performed are mentioned. The fieldwork period of November of 2011 in Colombia was supported by the *Promotionskolleg für Ethnologie, Geschichte und Philosophie* at Goethe University Frankfurt with a travel stipend. The fieldwork periods of 2012 and 2013 in Latin America were supported by Germany’s Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation with

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The search for documental sources in Colombia took place mostly during the initial stage in 2010, and later during my fieldwork seasons of 2011, 2012 and 2013. It was fundamentally based in the exploration of the collections of public libraries in the cities of Ibagué and Bogotá, the press archives of the Hemeroteca Nacional de Colombia, and the acquisition of additional publications in second-hand bookstores. The Internet-based counterpart of that work was focused during the same period on monitoring and documenting texts and images published on Internet sites where the Palace of Justice events used to be thematized centrally or eventually. Finally, I devoted part of my effort to the construction of a corpus of pictorial representations of the events, in which the reformulation of motifs and images<sup>8</sup> proceeding from other sources or contexts can be identified.<sup>9</sup>

As chapters 2 to 4 will show, the combination of classical, multi-sited anthropological fieldwork and documental research that nurtured the empirical contents of this work gave place to a preponderant presence of women's voices in it. Probably, as a result of my familiarity with the Latin American social field of memorialization of politically motivated violence and struggle for justice and reparation, in which women dominate the landscape, that preponderance in my own research remained unnoticed until its last stage, when I reviewed this work with an "editorial eye". For that reason, this dissertation's contribution to the study of the role played by women in that social field is limited to the documentation of their voices,

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a doctoral scholarship granted from September of 2011 to September of 2014. The participation in the LASA congress of 2014 was supported by LASA with a travel stipend.

<sup>8</sup> *Motifs* are "pure forms, [...] certain configurations of line and colour, or certain [tridimensional objects that constitute] representations of natural *objects*" (Panofsky, 1972 [1939]: 5, italics in the original). *Images* are motifs or combinations of motifs transformed into "carriers of a *secondary* or *conventional* meaning" through the association of themes or concepts to them (*ibid.*: 61).

<sup>9</sup> That exercise has been inspired by the works of authors like Aby Warburg (2005 [1932]), Erwin Panofsky (1972 [1939]), Ernst Gombrich (2000), Silvina Vidal (2010) and José Emilio Burucúa and Nicolás Kwiatkowski (2009, 2014).

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and the forms in which they have shaped the collective memory of politically motivated violence in Colombia since the decade of 1940, sometimes from the stages offered by legitimate culture, and sometimes at the microsocial level of collective organization and underground memorialization.<sup>10</sup>

In its early stages, this work was aimed to focus on classical anthropological problems such as the impact of kinship and rituals in the social life and identities of memory entrepreneurs, the ways through which they construct and maintain hierarchies and group boundaries, and the strategies on which they rely to advance their agendas. Nevertheless, my understanding and posterior experience of the security risks faced on a regular basis by many of these agents<sup>11</sup> increased my initial

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<sup>10</sup> The roles played by women in social movements in Latin America has attracted considerable attention from researchers in the last decades (see, e.g., Power, 2002; Herrera, 2008; Alfonso and Beristáin, 2013; Rousseau and Morales, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> My fieldwork period of 2013 in Colombia and Brazil was marked by a qualitative progress of my integration to the social life of the most visible group of relatives of persons disappeared during the counterassault on the Palace of Justice, and diverse attempts of intimidation by unidentified agents in Colombia. The harassment started when I returned to Colombia after having attended, together with direct and indirect victims of the Palace of Justice events and human rights lawyers, the hearings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held on November 12 and 13 in Brasilia, Brazil. They extended until I returned to Germany in the first week of December and consisted of almost daily close contacts with agents who let me know that I was being monitored and in a state of vulnerability. The most relevant of these contacts were an episode in which I was questioned systematically about my personal data and work by the “taxi driver” who brought me from the residence of a survivor of forced disappearance and torture to the airport in the city of Santa Marta, a visit by unknown persons who rang my doorbell aggressively at 3:00 a.m. in a gated community without having been announced nor registered at the gate, and several phone calls in which new attempts to interview me were made, or the authors asked me to pass on the phone to victims of the Palace of Justice events I have never had contact with.

The situation caused a mix of indignation and curiosity among most of the memory entrepreneurs I had close contact with, and those related to the Palace of Justice case shared with me their own experiences or mentioned the assassination of their lawyer Eduardo Umaña Mendoza in 1998 and the exile of René Guarín, brother of one of the persons disappeared during the counterassault, who was forced by death threats to leave the country in 2009. These exchanges, together with my familiarity with the intimidation tactics I was being subjected to, derived from a similar situation experienced by me in 1999, when I was a politically engaged student at the Universidad del Tolima in Ibagué, allowed me to understand that the situation posed a relatively low risk and therefore it was not necessary to interrupt my fieldwork and return to Germany earlier than originally planned.

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concerns about the harmful effects that such a work could have on the lives of its protagonists (Leal, 2013b). The ethical considerations derived from that reckoning led me to abandon my initial plans and reorient the dissertation project, focusing more than originally planned on the historical and cultural dimension of the representational universe elaborated and continuously re-elaborated by those memory entrepreneurs whose biographies and patterns of organization and tactics I decided not to expose.

As the following pages will show, I adopted a twofold approach that combines social anthropology and cultural history with the purpose of preserving within that new context the anthropological perspective this work was originally intended to have. That election is also grounded on the certainty that our understanding of the ways in which victims, spectators, and perpetrators experience and represent political violence—a developing trend that has enriched the field of research on violence in Colombia—<sup>12</sup> can be deepened by considering the connections between diverse fields of culture that violence gives place to, such as religious and historical thinking,<sup>13</sup> or expressive patterns and representational traditions traditionally associated to

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It must be mentioned, however, that my risk assessment was also influenced by my understanding that my condition of doctoral student at a German university who held a scholarship from a German federal ministry and a political foundation offered considerable protection from forms of politically motivated violence such as torture, forced disappearance or assassination.

Given that the memorial and legal struggles waged by the group of memory entrepreneurs I was more closely related to during that period targeted fundamentally former members of the Army considered responsible for human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault and its aftermath, it is highly likely that the harassment suffered by me was deployed by sectors related to that force. The existence of an illegal operation of surveillance and harassment of agents considered hostile to the state conducted by the Army, which was made public by a team of journalists seven weeks after my return to Germany reinforces that hypothesis (Semana, 2014). I will return in chapter 2 to the subject of the harassment suffered by agents related to the Palace of Justice since 1985.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Jimeno and Roldán, 1996; Forero, 2010; Cuervo, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Rojas (2002) has addressed the subject from a mostly literary perspective in her work about violence and regimes of representation in nineteenth-century Colombia.

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legitimate and popular culture.<sup>14</sup> I devote several sections of chapters 2, 3 and 4 to that exercise.

The analytical path set by that approach has brought me to three main theses that will be substantiated in the following chapters. First, that the Palace of Justice events were what Nancy Foner calls “a dispersed tragedy”,<sup>15</sup> and as such they transformed the lives of people from several social sectors, stimulating them to undertake a wide range of activities in diverse fields of culture that led to the construction of a cultural trauma<sup>16</sup> among a vast sector of Colombian society. Second, that the meanings and accounts that constitute the blood and bone of that trauma express a wide range of local representational traditions that can be traced back at least until the decade of 1920 and therefore pre-exist a so-called “memory boom”, whose onset has been dated to the

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<sup>14</sup> That approach coincides with Wulf Kantsteiner’s proposal of furthering the traditionally too descriptive “collective memory studies by focusing on the communications among memory makers, memory users, and the visual and discursive objects and traditions of representations” (2002: 197).

<sup>15</sup> In a work about the widespread and longstanding traumatic impact of the September 11 events on the inhabitants of New York City, Foner underlines the impact of the live covering of the attacks and their immediate consequences and points out that the event “could be said to be a dispersed tragedy in that clusters of victims were located throughout the five boroughs and surrounding suburbs” (2005: 11). Her observations are relevant for an analysis of the Palace of Justice events, insofar as factors such as the media coverage of the counterassault and the broad range of socioeconomic, professional, and regional backgrounds of the victims caused a deep impact in a great variety of social groups across the Colombian society. I will return to this subject in chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>16</sup> “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. [...] Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity. Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander, 2012: 6, 15). In specialized literature, “social trauma” and “cultural trauma” are used both as interchangeable and as distinct concepts (see, e.g., Ortega, 2011; Hamburger, 2021 and Alexander, 2012 and Woods, 2019, respectively). In this work, I follow the second approach, since it makes it possible to distinguish between highly disruptive events that impact social structure, and their longstanding cultural consequences. I will return to the concept of cultural trauma, which constitutes the core of my approach, several times in the following chapters, but particularly in chapter 4.

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end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Orjuela, 2007; Ramos and Aldana, 2017). Third, that analyzing the memories of political violence that have been constructed within these representational traditions and at the same time have actualized them during at least one century, offers the opportunity of exploring a great variety of understandings of the general causes and characteristics of the longstanding Colombian social-armed conflict. Therefore, analyzing memorial plurality constitutes a way of giving account of cultural and political diversity.

### **III Structure of this Work**

In general terms, the following four chapters are organized chronologically and from general to particular. Given that partial results of my investigation were published in papers and articles in Colombia and abroad between 2011 and 2018, they contain, like this introduction, elements of these works that have been reformulated or developed in this new context. These inclusions have been explicitly marked in footnotes like the one introduced at the beginning of the precedent section, and all their sources have been mentioned in the list of references.<sup>17</sup>

Chapter 1 deals with the intellectual landscape of the studies on violence and memory in Colombia and the universe of specialized works—both scientific and non-scientific—about the Palace of Justice events that constitute great part of the empirical and theoretical corpus upon which I have constructed my analysis.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of this work in the context of my analysis of two examples of memory struggles waged between the decades of 1940 and 1960 in different realms of culture by equally different kinds of memory entrepreneurs. The historical-anthropological analyses presented in it substantiate my thesis about

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<sup>17</sup> All these works were published under the name “Sigifredo Leal”, which corresponded to my legal name until its official substitution by my Hebrew name in 2020.

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the existence of a social field of memorialization of political violence in Colombia long before the onset of the so-called memory-boom and give account of the cultural roots of the processes of meaning construction about the Palace of Justice events addressed in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the antecedents of the assault on the Palace of Justice by the M-19 guerrilla, the series of combats and operations that followed them, their immediate aftermath, and the diverse narrative and pictorial ways in which these events have been represented since November of 1985. It retakes elements of the conceptual framework and historical analyses presented in the previous chapter to situate the Palace of Justice events and their political and cultural consequences in the broader context of the longstanding Colombian political-armed conflict and traditions of memorialization.

Given the place occupied in chapters 1 to 3 by the consideration of particular manifestations of the Colombian conflict in diverse historical moments and the anthropological nature of this work, historical description is intertwined in them with anthropological analyses of the ways in which the exercise and experience of political violence can be intersected by historically consolidated structures of domination such as sexism, racism and unequal distribution of economic and symbolic capital.

Finally, chapter 4 is devoted to the anatomy of the cultural trauma constructed around the Palace of Justice events. It focuses on the diverse, sometimes counterposed representations of these events, their causes, effects, perpetrators, and victims, constructed since 1985 by agents belonging to various sectors of Colombian society. The chapter is, therefore, a hinge between the historical events and representational traditions considered in chapters 1, 2 and 3, and the still developing processes of conflictive memorialization and struggle for justice that constitute the core of what is

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commonly known as “the Palace of Justice case”. It is followed by the conclusions, which close the argumentative part of this work.

## **Chapter 1. Engaged Citizens and Specialists: Emic and Etic Perspectives about Political Violence in Colombia**

This chapter is focused on the general background of this work: the intellectual field of studies on political violence and memory emerged in Colombia at the end of the decade of 1950 and the beginning of that of 1990 respectively. The first part is devoted to the evolution of the field of academic and political reflection on the Colombian social-armed conflict between the decade of 1960 and the present, from initial searches for causal explanations to current trends oriented to document and analyze diverse causes, actors, expressions, experiences, and representations of violence. The second focuses on the Palace of Justice events and their consequences as objects of specialized concern. The exposition honors the fact that, as other authors have pointed out (Manz, 1995; Guber, 2010; Naidorf and Perrotta, 2015), in the Latin American context the borders between academic activity and politically engaged exercise of citizenship are frequently diffuse, presenting works according to their thematic continuities instead of drawing a line between two areas of intellectual production that are tightly intertwined on the field.

Given that the corpus of specialized works on the causes, nature and effects of violence in Colombia is a universe in permanent expansion that has been turned into an object of research itself, the chapter does not aim to present an exhaustive review of the works produced in about seventy years from diverse disciplines, but a panoramic view on historical developments, trends and subjects.

### **I Social Research on Violence: A Universe in Expansion**

Contemporary research on violence and its effects in Colombia presents a wide panorama of problems and an ever-expanding corpus of works, grounded on almost

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seven decades of local and international scientific activity.<sup>18</sup> As Andrés Cancimance has pointed out, between the foundational moment marked by the publication of the seminal study titled *La violencia en Colombia* in 1962 (Guzmán, 1962) and the present, an “academic field defined by a marked division of labor and the recognition of the key role played by interdisciplinarity” has developed (2013: 19, my translation). During that period, as a result of the evolution of the conflict, the dynamics of local production of knowledge and changes taking place in the social sciences around the world, research on the subject has moved from a macro-social approach and the search for the origins of the diverse processes of armed confrontation generically known as “violence”<sup>19</sup> to the analysis of its expressions, regional diversity, cultural effects, and the ways in which it is experienced, explained, resisted, and memorialized at individual, collective or institutional levels. As part of this displacement, since the end of the decade of 1980 a consensus has been reached about the importance of recognizing the complexity of a problem that should not be imagined as a single phenomenon (“violence”) but as a complex, multicausal constellation of “violences”,

the plural expression emphasizing the diversity and changing forms of violence. [Thus, violence] has been characterized by its “multivariety,” having socioeconomic, political, cultural, regional, and lately, drug-related dimensions. A government commission referred to the situation [in 1987] as a “superimposition” of violent acts whose forms included the organization of private armies; the private settlement of accounts; an increase in the number of so-called self-defense groups, incidents of terrorism, and death squads; and the organization of “cleanup” operations against juveniles, petty criminals, prostitutes, vagrants, and homosexuals. The commission distinguished at least ten different types of violence: criminal violence against the state and private citizens;

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<sup>18</sup> The enormous dimensions of that corpus have turned the elaboration of surveys on the state-of-the-art of the research on specific subjects into a frequent enterprise (see, e.g., Jiménez et al., 2012; Niño, 2014; Galeano, 2017). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the works mentioned are intended to be representative of historical developments, as much as of trends and subjects that can be traced in that corpus, but the selection is not aimed to be exhaustive.

<sup>19</sup> Guzmán *et al*, 1962; Ramsey, 1973; Henderson, 1984; Pécaut, 1987.

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guerrilla violence against the state and private citizens; state violence against guerrillas, social movements and ethnic minorities; private, nonorganized violence; private, organized violence; and private, family violence. (Rojas, 2002: xxiii)

Beside the subjects listed by Cristina Rojas or mentioned in precedent parts of this work, researchers from diverse disciplines have addressed in the last three decades a wide spectrum of usually intertwined problems related to several dimensions of the social-armed conflict and its effects. They have tackled, for instance, the socio-economic background of the belligerent acts waged by landlords and paramilitary organizations against peasants,<sup>20</sup> the world visions and self-representations of military, paramilitary and guerrilla combatants,<sup>21</sup> political processes and legal measures intended to make the demobilization of illegal actors possible,<sup>22</sup> the impact of politically motivated violence on the lives and cultural production of victims,<sup>23</sup> or the representations of the conflict constructed by armed actors, politicians and the media,<sup>24</sup> among several other subjects.<sup>25</sup>

The local emergence of an intellectual field of memory in the decade of 1990 under the influx of regional processes started in Argentina and Uruguay in the previous

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<sup>20</sup> Medina, 2005; Grajales, 2011; Álvaro, 2013; Hristov, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Forero, 2010 and Velásquez, 2012; Estrada 2001 and Espinosa, 2012; Ibarra, 2007 and Jiménez, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Cubides, 2005; Laplante and Theidon, 2006; CCJ, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Reconstruction of life trajectories: Tovar, 2006; Zorio, 2011 and Franco, 2013. Return to regions after episodes of violent displacement: Hernández, 2010; Garzón, 2014; Meertens, 2016. Practices of peaceful resistance: Zuluaga, 2012; Cancimance, 2014; Plata and Figueroa, 2017. Memorialization of episodes of violence and their fatal victims: Losonczy, 2003; Diettes, 2010; Jimeno *et al.*, 2010; GMH, 2013; Cuervo, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Anrup, 1999 and Cortés *et al.*, 2018; Carvajal, 2007 and Olave, 2012; Barón, 2001 and Silva, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Beside the abovementioned surveys about the state of the research on specific topics, the works of Juana Ramírez (2010) and Mary Sandoval (2014) offer comprehensive descriptions of the wide range of topics considered by scientists from diverse disciplines. Sandoval also considers the impact of the exponential increase of that production on the scientific field.

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decade contributed to further diversify the studies in the area.<sup>26</sup> The subjects considered include, for instance, individual and collective memorialization by agents and victims of the social-armed conflict,<sup>27</sup> memorialization in the fields of popular and legitimate culture,<sup>28</sup> dynamics of confrontation and cooperation between memory entrepreneurs and state agents,<sup>29</sup> and processes of institutionalization of remembrance mediated by state-sponsored and independent agencies.<sup>30</sup> Remarkably, comparative studies of memories elaborated by victims and perpetrators about the same events are absent from that landscape.<sup>31</sup> My work is aimed to contribute to fill that gap and to show the relevance of comprehensive approaches to memorialization.

Finally, increasing interest by state agents and independent memory entrepreneurs in the construction of widely accepted narratives about specific events or dimensions of the conflict has led to the elaboration of reports by truth commissions or specialized teams during the last three decades. The reports authored by truth commissions,<sup>32</sup> which include one about the Palace of Justice events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010), have been the result of state-sponsored and independent initiatives and follow the pattern of attempting reconstructions of events based on testimonies and technical evidence,

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<sup>26</sup> On the historical development and expansion of the political and intellectual field of memory in Latin America see the works of Victoria Daona (2016) and Claudia Feld (2016).

<sup>27</sup> Castro, 2014 and Thoene *et al.*, 2020; Rojas, 2015 and Rodríguez, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Castro, 2018 and Larios, 2019; Nieves, 2014 and Ortega, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Sánchez, 2013; Vera, 2015; Ramírez *et al.*, 2017; Aguilar, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Vélez, 2017; Guglielmucci, 2015, 2018; Torres, 2019; Zuluaga, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> That gap is probably an effect of the blind spots and taboos derived from the partisan ethos inherent to political engagement in social sciences, that in Colombia and other Latin American countries constitutes the hegemonic perspective about the ethical imperatives entailed by the profession (see, e.g., Manz, 1995; Guber, 2010; Naidorf and Perrotta, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> At least ten truth commissions have tackled specific cases or dimensions of the social-armed conflict between 1991 and the present (CVMMC, 2013 and Kalach, 2016).

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attributing responsibilities and formulating agendas oriented by the principles of historical truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition typical of these organs.<sup>33</sup>

The reports authored by specialized teams, most of which have been produced from the beginning of the decade of 2010 on, continue a local tradition of state-sponsored production of comprehensive analyses started in the decade of 1950 (Cartagena, 2016). The vast majority of them have been produced by scientific teams appointed by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH)—an independent agency funded by the national government—,<sup>34</sup> and therefore they capitalize the interdisciplinary expertise and knowledge developed mostly from within universities and non-governmental organizations along more than half a century of independent research, deriving an important part of their legitimacy from the reputation of the local tradition of studies on violence. Given the institutional mission of the CNMH, these reports have a much more academic orientation than those elaborated by truth commissions, although they are related to them by their explicit commitment to contribute to the construction of objective and comprehensive narratives about the social-armed conflict. Hence, they generally present descriptions and analyses of the conflict and its consequences at diverse levels, such as its historical and structural causes, the dynamics and expressions of the violence perpetrated by state agents, paramilitary and guerrilla groups against each other and the civil population, and individual and collective practices of resistance, reconstruction of the social fabric and

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<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Hayner, 1994 and Castillejo, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> The creation of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) was stipulated by the Law 1448 of 2011, known as *Ley de víctimas*, with the mission of “collecting and recovering all documental materials, oral testimonies and any other means [*sic.*] related to the violations [of the rights of the victims of the internal armed conflict happened since January 1 of 1985]”. Despite the chronological limits imposed by the law, the reports elaborated by the CNMH have addressed the history of the conflict since the late 1940s in the context of the analysis of its historical background (CNMH, 2013).

memorialization developed by victims.<sup>35</sup> The reception of these works has been positive, their accuracy being widely recognized across the political spectrum, with the notable exception of the armed forces and far right sectors associated to extensive landownership (Monsalve, 2013; Alarcón, 2020). In the last decade, these groups have themselves ventured into the intellectual field of memory with works intended to frame their members as victims of the social-armed conflict through the documentation of episodes of violence suffered by them with the purpose of contesting testimonies and analyses published by the CNMH<sup>36</sup> that relate them to widespread human rights violations perpetrated in the context of counterinsurgent warfare and massive land grab operations.<sup>37</sup>

## **II The Palace of Justice Events and their Consequences as Objects of Specialized Concern**

The construction of the Palace of Justice events as an object of public interest in Colombia's recent history is at the same time a cause and an effect of the attention devoted to them by specialized authors from diverse disciplines and areas of culture since 1985. I mentioned "specialized concern" in the title of this section because although I strictly distinguish scientific from non-scientific works for analytic

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<sup>35</sup> According to my own estimation based on the information available on the CNMH website by the end of November of 2020, between 2008 and that point the institution published more than 130 reports, including one that addresses the dynamics and effects of the social-armed conflict between the decades of 1950 and 2010 (CNMH, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., 2009, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> During the first half of the decade of 2010, the umbrella organization of ranchers Federación Colombiana de Ganaderos published two reports about violent acts perpetrated by guerrilla organizations against its affiliates (Fundagan, 2009, 2013). In 2015, the Ministry of Defense created the Dirección de Memoria Histórica y Contexto of the armed forces, whose institutional mission is to lead the construction of a historical, institutional narrative about the participation of state agents in the conflict. So far, its publications combine testimonial literature about the suffering of state agents derived from their participation in the conflict (Castiblanco *et al.*, 2017; Socha and Velandia, 2017), historical research (PNC, 2018), and guidelines for the construction of historical, institutional memories (FTCO, 2016; CC, 2017).

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purposes,<sup>38</sup> in the following paragraphs I will present the universe of works devoted to these events organized by genres, with the purpose of giving account of the broader context of cultural production that frames scientific works, including mine.<sup>39</sup> Like in the case of the reports elaborated by the teams appointed by the CNMH, most of the works mentioned in this section underline the responsibility of members of the armed forces for human rights violations perpetrated against civilians and guerrilla members during the counterassault on the Palace of Justice. Following the pattern mentioned at the end of the preceding section, these accusations, as well as the broader narratives about the events which they are a part of, have provoked the emergence of counter-narratives through which a prominent leader of the counterassault and his supporters have engaged in struggles for the definition of what happened and the attribution of responsibilities for its outcome.

The first two comprehensive works about the Palace of Justice events were published in June and August of 1986 and underline the responsibility of state agents for human rights violations perpetrated by state agents against civilians and guerrilla members. The first is a report submitted to the President of the Republic by Jaime Serrano and Carlos Upegui, two judges appointed by him in November of 1985 as leaders of a special investigative tribunal on the events (Serrano and Upegui, 1986).<sup>40</sup> The second contains the text of a complaint put by attorney general Carlos Jiménez before the House of Representatives, demanding the impeachment of President

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<sup>38</sup> That distinction is also applied to the lists of references, where scientific and documental sources are presented in separate sections.

<sup>39</sup> For practical reasons, press articles and opinion pieces have been excluded from this subsection but will be quoted when relevant.

<sup>40</sup> The document expresses the already mentioned tradition of expert production of reports about political violence by petition of the Executive started in the decade of 1950. It was republished in 2005 by the Higher Council of the Judiciary in a commemorative volume titled *Libro blanco. 20 años del Holocausto del Palacio de Justicia* (CSJ, 2005).

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Betancur and his Minister of Defense, general Miguel Vega, for multiple violations of national laws and international treaties associated to the counterassault (Jiménez, 1986). As I will explain in chapter 3, Jiménez's complaint was the first case in which a high-level state agent made others responsible for crimes committed during the counterassault, and therefore constitutes a precedent to the report published in 2010 by the truth commission appointed in 2005 by the Supreme Court of Justice (Gómez *et al.*, 2010). The three reports, together with several sentences handed down by local and international tribunals,<sup>41</sup> are recognized as works of reference by memory entrepreneurs with diverse professional backgrounds,<sup>42</sup> and are an expression of the power of jurists to produce authorized accounts of political violence in Colombia through the articulation of legal discourse, testimonies, and technical evidence.

The year 1986 was also the starting point of a series of works of investigative journalism that extends until the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The works that integrate that corpus are either journalistic pamphlets based on the combination of information proceeding from secondary sources and—to a lesser extent—testimonies collected directly,<sup>43</sup> or investigative books<sup>44</sup> and documentaries<sup>45</sup> of superior quality based on the field and archive research of their authors. For practical reasons, the press reports published on the anniversaries of the events, or whenever judicial proceedings or forensic findings brought to light new information, will be mentioned in this work only when specific pieces are relevant for the analysis. Nevertheless, it is important to

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<sup>41</sup> JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012, 2014; Corte IDH, 2014, among others.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Maya, 2006g; Castro, 2008; Parejo, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Hernández, 1986; Laverde, 1986; Mantilla, 1986; Peña, 1986; López, 1987; Correa, 2005; Maya and Petro, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Salgado and Rojas, 1986; Carrigan, 1993; Jimeno, 1989; Echeverry and Hansen, 2005; Castro, 2008, Pérez, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Villamarín and Vanegas, 2008; Gibson and Salazar, 2011.

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consider that the books listed in the two precedent footnotes are just a pale editorial expression of the sustained interest of journalists in the subject.<sup>46</sup>

The testimonial corpus includes accounts by officers that commanded the counterassault (Samudio, 1986; Plazas, 2000, 2011), the only member of the guerrilla commando who managed to survive the counterassault and flee the country (Behar, 1988), a civil survivor (Arrieta, 2007), and members of the Betancur government (Castro, 2009, 2011; Parejo, 2010). It is also integrated by two testimonial theater plays based on the experiences of suffering and struggle of relatives of Cristina Guarín (Torres, 1994), Héctor Jaime Beltrán and Ana Rosa Castiblanco (Castiblanco *et al.*, 2018), three of the seven employees of the canteen who disappeared during the counterassault. A cinematographic adaptation of the first of these plays (Arias *et al.*, 2015) was released five weeks before the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events.

Literature offers a mixed panorama, in which testimonial fiction<sup>47</sup> coexists with historical fiction,<sup>48</sup> a genre that is also represented in cinema (Cuervo, 2015) and television.<sup>49</sup> Other literary works include poems by siblings of Justices deceased in the events, published around their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in printed format (Medellín, 2010) and

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<sup>46</sup> The preponderant space occupied by press articles, opinion pieces and news reports on the list of documental sources offers a glimpse of the profuse press coverage on the subject between 1985 and the present.

<sup>47</sup> *El presidente ya no es presidente* (Sánchez-Blake, 2009) is based on her own experience as reporter at the Presidential Palace's press office on November 6 and 7, 1985. The novel *Vivir sin los otros. Los desaparecidos del Palacio de Justicia* (González, 2010) is a fictionalized account of the experience of Pilar Navarrete, whose husband Héctor Jaime "Jimmy" Beltrán disappeared during the counterassault. The graphic novel *Los Once* (Jiménez, *et al.* 2014) is an anthropo-zoomorphic allegory of the events focused on the fate of eleven persons disappeared during the counterassault, based on testimonial literature and the report published by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Jaramillo, 1990; Gil, 1992; Polanía, 1995; Jaramillo, 2010; Zuleta, 2010; Mendoza, 2011; Forero, 2012; Orrantia, 2016. The literary representation of the Palace of Justice events has been addressed by Laura Valbuena (2015), although with a slightly different classification of works.

<sup>49</sup> Through individual episodes of series that address the Colombian social and political situation in the decade of 1980 (De Hoyos, 2012; Salazar and Ferrand, 2012; Brancato *et al.*, 2015).

*Chapter 1. Engaged Citizens and Specialists: Emic and Etic Perspectives about Political Violence in Colombia*

as part of a cantata (Zambrano, 2010). The events have also been addressed, although less frequently, in visual<sup>50</sup> and environmental art (Salcedo, 2002).

The scientific corpus reflects the diversity of approaches and dynamics already described regarding the broader field of studies on violence and memory. Thus, since the decade of 1990 researchers have tackled issues such as the causes of the events,<sup>51</sup> the juridical characterization of the conducts of guerrilla members and state agents (Daza, 2017; Paúl, 2018), the forensic analysis of remains of victims buried in mass graves by the army in 1985 (Rodríguez, 2010), how the events have been represented by the press until the present,<sup>52</sup> the experiences and trajectories of direct and indirect victims (Romero, 2015; Gómez, 2018), and the construction and circulation of popular,<sup>53</sup> specialized,<sup>54</sup> and institutional representations of the events.<sup>55</sup> Like in the case of the broader field of memory studies, that variety of approaches and subjects contrasts with the absence of comparative studies of the representations elaborated by actors who occupy opposite sides of the memorial field. As far as I know, this work constitutes the first attempt to close that gap.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> González, 1986, 1987; Zalamea, 1993, 1994; Jacquin, 2011; Aristizábal, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Vélez and Atehortúa, 1993; Atehortúa, 2005; Bejarano, 2010; Macías, 2016; Vega, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Fernández, 1990; Acuña, 2015; García, 2018; Cantillo *et al.*, 2019; Mejía, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Penagos, 2019, Córdoba and Umaña, 2006, Vela, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Atehortúa, 2010; Castillo, 2012; Valbuena, 2015; García, 2018; Granada, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Maya, 2007; Lleras, 2008; Leal and Gómez, 2013; Rincón, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Leal, 2011b, 2012, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b, 2018.

## Chapter 2. A Colombian “Memory Boom”: Reconfiguration of an Old Social Field

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of my approach to the subject of collective memorialization of political violence in Colombia in the context of my criticism of what I call “the intellectual-centric illusion” of local and foreign researchers about the field of memory in Colombia: their perception that the social and political field of memorialization only emerged as late as 1996, together with the intellectual field of memory studies (Orjuela, 2007: 3).<sup>57</sup> The first part of this chapter contains a brief recapitulation of the analysis that forms part of the common sense of local researchers and activists about their “invention of memory” in Colombia. In the second part, I focus on substantiating my thesis that the existence of a social field of public memorialization of political violence can be traced to several decades before the emergence of the already mentioned field.<sup>58</sup> To this aim, I analyze two instances of counterhegemonic memory struggles waged independently of each other by the painter Débora Arango and the priest Fidel Blandón between 1948 and the first half of the decade of 1950. Consequently, I argue that “the intellectual-centric illusion” consists of seeing the origins of the social field of memory in what actually was its

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<sup>57</sup> The main theses presented in this chapter were addressed in an intervention titled “Maña vieja no es resabio: violencia política, cultura legítima y memoria en Colombia (1948-2011)”, held in October of 2018 at the international seminar *Memory and Truth in Colombia*. The event was hosted by the Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, and co-organized with the Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz – CAPAZ, and the German Academic Exchange Service – DAAD.

<sup>58</sup> A similar thesis has been proposed by Catalina Martínez, who places the emergence of the field of public memorialization of political violence at the end of the decade of 1950 (2012: 26). Unfortunately, her periodization does not stand further analysis, since it relies on ignoring well known, older counterhegemonic memory struggles such as those waged by parliamentary representative Jorge Eliécer Gaitán with regard to a massacre perpetrated by members of the army against employees of the United Fruit Company on strike in 1928 (Braun, 1987: 115-116), and by the painter Débora Arango in the late 1940s about the violence unleashed by the assassination of Gaitán in 1948 (Schuster, 2011).

reorganization within the historical and ideological framework established by the emergence of an *intellectual* field in the decade of 1990.

The cases considered in this chapter also serve the purpose of giving account of the political and representational traditions that constitute the background of the processes of cultural creation and political confrontation which form the core of chapter 4. By exposing these roots, I aim to frame these struggles within the broader historical and cultural contexts they belong to, as expressions of a longstanding–yet so far scarcely analyzed–local tradition of counterhegemonic memorialization of political violence.

I am aware of the fact that by embedding my analytical device in a chapter devoted to theoretical discussion and historical-anthropological analysis instead of exposing it in a separate section I divert from a widespread convention and take the risk of being blamed for that. Nevertheless, I assume that risk because I am convinced that, no matter how impressive the names listed under a solemn title may be, the ultimate ground on which–what Aaron Cicourel (2007) calls “the ecological validity” of a scientific approach–can be tested is its concrete application to the analysis of empirical reality. For obvious reasons, ultimate judgement in that respect must be passed by the expert reader who will assess the quality of this work.

## I The Intellectual-centric Illusion

Despite its long history in the international context,<sup>59</sup> the intellectual field of memory studies is relatively new in Colombia, where, according to Camila Orjuela, the first academic works were published in 1996 following a process of public and systematic reflection started one year before by human rights activists and researchers (2007: 3). Her work, based on an exhaustive review of civil initiatives and academic and

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<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Olick and Robbins, 1998; Roediger and Wertsch, 2008; Tamm, 2013.

aesthetic works that tackled the issue between 1995 and 2006, presents a detailed inventory and a sharp analysis of the main thematic and analytic trends observed in that corpus. The periodization proposed by her, complemented and updated by Andrés Cancimance (2013), is appealing and useful to trace the beginnings of that local intellectual field. Furthermore, both authors offer an insight into the related processes of organization and mobilization undertaken by diverse agents who integrate the human rights movement and provide valuable information on the relation between the dynamics of the Colombian conflict and the development of the academic field of memory. They show, for instance, how that development was limited by the radicalization of state-sponsored violence during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Cancimance, 2013: 21), but also stimulated by the multiple legal and political effects of a process intended to demobilize paramilitary armies that was launched by President Álvaro Uribe in 2002 (Orjuela, 2007: 3).<sup>60</sup>

The analyses by Orjuela and Cancimance are valuable contributions to a necessary history of the intellectual field of memory studies in Colombia, where, like in other countries, academic activity and political engagement are tightly intertwined.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, understanding the history of memorialization in Colombian society makes it necessary to distinguish between both authors’ accurate analyses of the emergence of an intellectual field of memory studies and the broader question of the emergence of a social field of collective memorialization. The same distinction should be made with regard to other authors who have substantially contributed to our understanding of the production of official narratives about La Violencia—as the

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<sup>60</sup> The same dynamics are described by Leidy Galeano (2017) in an inventory of studies on collective memory published between 2005 and 2015. Galeano’s work is illustrative of the development of the academic production on the subject, but it does not propose a periodization, and it regrettably ignores the works by Cancimance and Orjuela.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., Bourgois, 1991; Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Guber, 2010 and Ross *et al.*, 2010.

bipartisan civil war that spanned between 1948 and 1958 is known by specialists and laypeople–, but have erroneously argued that the period is not inscribed in collective imagination (Schuster, 2010: 31), that counter-hegemonic memories about it have been limited to the realm of elite culture (Sánchez, 2004: §47; Schuster, 2010: 32), that its horrors are seen by their victims as part of a shameful past which must be confined to silence and non-representation (Sánchez, 2004: §47), or even that “Colombia is a country without memory” (Schuster, 2010: 37).<sup>62</sup>

In the first place, it must be considered that addressing the question of whether a field of memory of political violence emerged in Colombia in 1996 or before makes it necessary to displace the focus from the realm of intellectual activity to that of social practices. Within that context, the sub-fields of intellectual elaboration, historic memory, etc., must be understood as “regions” of that broader social space, each one having its own history and protagonists. Second, it must be kept in mind that what defines a social field is not the cultural production per se, but a combination of factors that include social structures, struggle, and agency:

[a] field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. [...] Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies. (Bourdieu, 1998: 40-41)

Third, we must consider not only the works and initiatives where explicit mentions to memory as a subject of action and analysis are recognizable, but also those intended

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<sup>62</sup> Juan Vélez (2003) and Nicolás Rodríguez (2008) have criticized these perspectives, too, and mentioned the existence of active memorialization of political violence in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rodríguez has pointed out that the “memory of La Violencia as a bipartisan confrontation is in fact nurtured by many other memories. There is no *memory* of La Violencia, there are *memories* of it” (2008: 37-38, my translation, italics added).

to memorialize politically motivated violence, even if they do not clearly allude to the nowadays popular “duty to remember the horrors of the past or the present in order to avoid their repetition” (Todorov, 2000: 58-59), nor exhibit the jargon related to the modern, legitimate field of memory. Such a comprehensive analysis makes it necessary to use a broad, operative definition of “memory”, useful to consider these diverse elements as part of the same universe. That is to say that the chosen notion must make it possible to understand the memorial content of initiatives and works developed outside the cultural and chronological margins of what we nowadays recognize as the field of memory, and to analyze them within the contexts set by their own social conditions of production. Considering that it is not possible to deploy that multi-dimensional approach using common and relatively restricted concepts such as “historic memory” or “public memory”,<sup>63</sup> I propose to address the problem using the more dialectical and comprehensive approach of collective memory, understood as

a process related to the past but different from history, dependent on inter-subjective and collective relationships, whose main social function is the transmission of values and lessons from one generation to another, and which is conditioned by the technologies used in each moment to record and transmit knowledge. It is related to the narrative and the ways of constructing truth in a particular society, and it is expressed in diverse languages, among which images occupy a fundamental place. (Feld, 2002: 2, my translation)

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<sup>63</sup> Schuster’s work on the “amnesic Colombia” (2010) constitutes a good example of the epistemological obstacles posed by the application of these restricted concepts to the practices of memorialization of political violence that preceded the emergence of the intellectual field of memorialization. Although he recognizes the existence of “diverse actors who struggled for a critical and multidimensional version of history” about La Violencia (*ibid.*: 32) and mentions that diverse narratives about it are preserved in the “communicative memory of small social groups, derived mostly from oral tradition” (*ibid.*: 37), he paradoxically concludes that Colombia is a country “without memory” (*ibidem*). He supports that counter-evident conclusion on the accurate observation that these struggles and the preservation of collective memories at the microsocial level have not led to the construction of officially consecrated narratives coherent with his definition of “historic memory” (*ibid.*: 37, all citations have been translated by me).

In the following pages, I consider two instances of memory struggles that can be identified and valued as such when the perspective proposed by me is used to analyze the records of cultural production and political life developed in Colombia between 1948 and the first half of the decade of 1950. I have selected them for three reasons. First, because they express counterhegemonic memory struggles waged by agents who had fundamentally diverse understandings of the causes of La Violencia, and therefore give account of the diversity typical to the field of memorialization that existed prior to the emergence of the intellectual field in the decade of 1990. Second, because they constitute early examples of memorial uses of images and testimonies that can also be identified in the context of the memory struggles waged about the Palace of Justice between 1985 and today. Third, because they exemplify the role played by Christian meaning frames and pictorial traditions in the construction of representations of political violence in the decade of 1950, and as such constitute antecedents to the cultural power of two elements that have also shaped numerous representations elaborated about the Palace of Justice events from 1985 onwards.

## **II Counterhegemonic Memorialization of Political Violence Before the So-called “Memory Boom”**

The outbreak of the memory struggles considered in this section was provoked by the works of the painter Débora Arango and the priest Fidel Blandón. They took place in a period of intense confrontation about the meanings of political violence in Colombia that remains scarcely explored from the perspective of memory studies. Although in their day the outcome of these struggles was adverse to their initiators, and the representations proposed by them were condemned to total or partial ostracism,<sup>64</sup> they

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<sup>64</sup> Álvaro Medina (1999: 22, 25) mentions several cases of censorship and persecution that led writers to internal or external exiles. Among the cases considered by him is that of Fidel Blandón for being the author of the testimonial work *Lo que el cielo no perdona*, published for the first time in 1954.

are worth to be considered for at least two practical reasons. First, as examples of memorial struggles waged prior to the emergence of the intellectual field of memory, that has been dated to 1996. Second, because the meaning frames and symbolic language used by their authors have reemerged continuously in later years, as I will show in chapters 3 and 4 regarding the memorialization of the Palace of Justice events.

Considering the intention of their authors of shaping the ways in which the local politically violent reality of the decades of 1940 and 1950 would be inscribed in history, the cultural products considered here can be characterized as sites of memory as they were defined by Pierre Nora.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, they are counterhegemonic ones that express acts of clear defiance of official versions or silences consecrated from the establishment about that reality. As the following sections show, the open struggles between memory communities provoked by the conflictive reception of these works give account of the existence of a field of memory—that is of a social space where struggles for the

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Débora Arango was also censored and subjected to persecution and prolonged ostracism during La Violencia (1948-1958) and the Frente Nacional, the bipartisan coalition that put an end to it (1958-1974). I return to both cases in the following pages.

The cultural production and political life of artists who contested hegemonic narratives on political violence in Colombia during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the reception of their work have been considered by other authors in different analytic contexts. See for instance the works of Londoño (1997a, 1997b), Princenthal (2000), Blair (2005), Malagón (2008) and Schuster (2011).

<sup>65</sup> “*Lieux de mémoire* [also called ‘sites of memory’ by Nora] are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word—material, symbolic and functional. [...] To begin with, there must be a will to remember. [...] [T]he most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop the time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial [...], all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs [...]” (Nora, 1989: 18-19). He points out that sites of memory can vary from “natural, concretely experienced [...] to the most intellectually elaborated ones”, and include those portable, topographic, monumental, architectural, ritual (like ceremonies) or sacred (like sanctuaries or sepulchers), “those dedicated to preserving an incommunicable experience that would disappear along with those who shared it [and] those whose purpose is pedagogical” (1989: 22-23). The notion is, therefore, not related to the materiality of space as the name “site” suggests, but to the memorial value given by social agents to concrete or abstract, natural or cultural objects.

construction of accounts about the past were waged—long before the emergence of the intellectual field of memory in Colombia. They offer, therefore, a glimpse on a promising area of research.

### *Débora Arango: Painting as Memorial Work*

The work and public life of Débora Arango (1907-2005) presents the earliest and more prolonged example of contentious memory struggles among those that I will consider in this chapter. Born and raised in a Catholic, but intellectually and politically liberal family from Medellín, she studied in her native city with María Rabaccia (1923-1932), Eladio Vélez (1932), at the Institute of Fine Arts (1933-1935), and with Pedro Nel Gómez (1935-1938), and spent her first academic period abroad between 1945 and 1946 in Mexico.<sup>66</sup> Her early oeuvre, produced under the influence of expressionism, americanism, and the Mexican muralist movement, combines the treatment of costumbrista themes, female nudes, and the—in one sense also costumbrista—depiction of structural violence suffered by impoverished and marginalized people (BRC: 1996), among them particularly prostitutes, a preferred target of the Catholic and patriarchal society criticized by her.<sup>67</sup> The assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948 and El Bogotazo<sup>68</sup> marked a breakpoint in her life and opened a new stage in her work

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<sup>66</sup> Rabaccia was an Italian nun who ran the school for ladies which Arango attended. Vélez (1897-1967) and Gómez (1899-1984) were professional artists from Medellín, educated at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence, who returned to their native city in the first years of the decade of 1930. A review of Débora Arango’s general and artistic education was published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Débora Arango: exposición retrospectiva*, held in the Luis Ángel Arango library of the Bank of the Republic of Colombia (Bogotá) between April and September 1996 (BRC, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> Schuster has pointed out that in “a few oil paintings, this early feminist shows men as compulsive animals, and at the same time denounces the hypocrisy of the state and the Church, that treated the ‘problem’ of prostitution with the only aim to subjugate women through a moralizing discourse” (2011: 36, my translation). Criticism of structural violence in Arango’s oeuvre has also been considered by Londoño (1997a: 135-137).

<sup>68</sup> The assassination of Gaitán in downtown Bogotá provoked an explosion of mass violence across the country. The riots started in Bogotá but spread rapidly to other cities and towns across the country

with the irruption of the theme of political violence and her subsequent engagement in public disputes over the definition of the meaning of past and present political reality.<sup>69</sup> Works like *Masacre del 9 de abril*, painted in 1948 while she listened to the radio-broadcasted reports on El Bogotazo<sup>70</sup> (Londoño, 1997a: 139, Schuster, 2011: 38), *El tren de la muerte* (1948), *Maternidad y violencia* (n.d.), or *La república* (ca. 1958) highlight the victimization of people by state agents, contest the official attribution of the roles of perpetrators and victims performed by politicians and the Catholic hierarchy, and denounce the contradiction between their public image and their deeds.

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with the news broadcast by radio journalists and by *gaitanistas* who occupied radio stations and called Liberals to take revenge against the government and the Conservative party (Braun, 1987: 255-256, 324). Although the revolt reached the national scale within hours, most of the destruction took place in Bogotá, where the death toll rose to around 2,600, the mob ransacked shops, destroyed public and ecclesiastical buildings, and reduced great part of the city center to ruins.

<sup>69</sup> On the condition of El Bogotazo as a re-foundational moment in Arango’s oeuvre see the work of Londoño (1997a). Almost four decades later, the Palace of Justice events marked a breakpoint in the biographies and oeuvres of other Colombian artists like Beatriz González (1938–), Doris Salcedo (1958–), and Elvira Sánchez-Blake (1968–). I will return to the subject in chapter 4.

<sup>70</sup> The key role played by the radio-broadcasted reports on El Bogotazo in the construction of accounts about that event by its contemporaries has been considered by Braun (1987: 255). In chapter 4, I will consider the relation between mass media coverage and construction of individual and collective accounts of political violence in the aftermath of the Palace of Justice events.

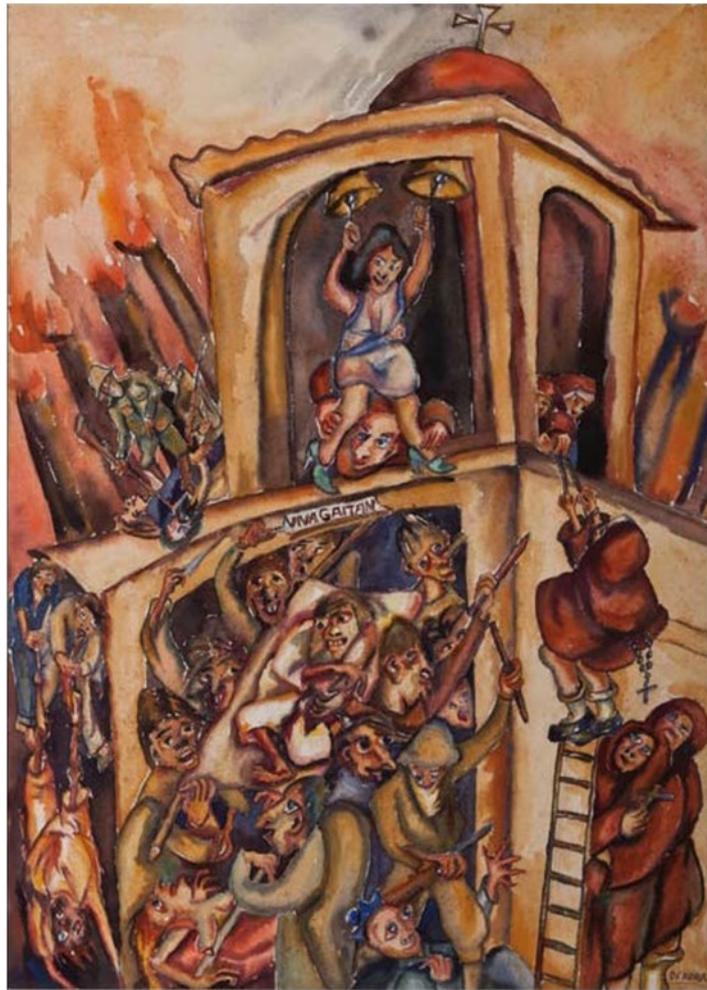


Figure 4. Débora Arango, 1948. *Masacre del 9 de Abril*. Watercolor, 77 x 75 cm. Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín.

*Masacre del 9 de abril* (Figure 4), for instance, underlines the active role of women in El Bogotazo, and contests the representation of state forces as heroic saviors of the Republic attacked by the mob, depicting them as perpetrators.<sup>71</sup> In a comment on that work, made around fifty years after its completion, Arango spoke about her counter-hegemonic struggle for the definition of collective meanings on political violence:

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<sup>71</sup> According to Herbert Braun, women—particularly prostitutes and market vendors—played a central role in the revolt, the latter conforming groups, raising flags and leading attacks on buildings. He also points out that the reaction of state forces went beyond the repression of the riot and included beating up people who wore mourning clothes during the days following Gaitán’s assassination (1987: 319, 257).

## Chapter 2. A Colombian “Memory Boom”: Reconfiguration of an Old Social Field

In a mural you can express much more than in a painting. Look, when Gaitán was killed there was no television, of course, and I started hearing on the radio all that was happening in Bogotá: how Gaitán was murdered, the women in the church towers setting the bells to toll, the nuns leaving the convents... I painted while they described. Without noticing, I ended up making a sketch for a fresco and I continuously repeated to myself: “Aw! May I someday transform this into a mural! Through it, many people would understand the meaning of this absurd violence”. I never achieved that [...]. (Laverde, 2004: 41, my translation.)

*Maternidad y violencia* and *El tren de la muerte* do not contain explicit depictions of state agents, but present allegories of the organized, overwhelming state-sponsored violence deployed against peasants during La Violencia. In *El tren de la muerte* these allegories take the form of a freight train that transports piled-up bodies and is marked with blood-red handprints, and in *Maternidad y violencia* those of firing weapons, war planes, a rifle, and a helmet, that share the pictorial space with a starving pregnant woman (Figure 5).<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Londoño has described the female figure from *Maternidad y violencia* as carrying a baby (1997b: 130). Nevertheless, a formal analysis of the work proves that opinion to be wrong. As Figure 5 shows, the personification of maternity that occupies the center of the scene does not carry anything: it merely touches the fingertips of one hand with those of the other. Between her hands and abdomen runs a strip of the white fabric that partially covers the rest of her body.



Figure 5. Débora Arango, 1948. *El tren de la muerte*. Watercolor 78 x 56 cm. / N.d., *Maternidad y violencia*, oil on canvas, 22,5 x 96 cm. Both works are part of the collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín.

Like *Masacre del 9 de abril*, *El tren de la muerte* was inspired by Arango’s indirect experience of political violence:

it emerged from a visit she made [during La Violencia] to [the small city of] Puerto Berrío [in her native department of Antioquia]. She arrived at the Magdalena Hotel and saw a group of men who were brought to the town in something like a raid. She saw from the balcony how they were packed on a train, and what Débora did was to sit down and convert that vision of a particular reality into a work of art (Semana, 2006, my translation).

Finally, *La república* presents a naked woman lying on the Colombian flag, while two vultures devour her under the sight of five zoomorphic figures, wrapped in the same flag, a white harpy and a dark anthropo-zoomorphic character that holds the harpy by the wings and dominates the composition. The scene is flanked by two lines of five

uniformly combed and dressed male figures that, instead of looking at the suffering woman and the vultures, look at the harpy and the character holding it, saluting them with the extended arm and hand, typical to the Nazi and Fascist movements (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Débora Arango, ca. 1958. *La república*. Watercolor, 77 x 56 cm. Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín.

According to Santiago Londoño, the anthropo-zoomorphic characters represent the protagonists of the change of government that took place in 1958, when a military junta transferred power to the recently elected Liberal President Alberto Lleras<sup>73</sup> as part of

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<sup>73</sup> Therefore, *La república* can be dated to after August of 1958.

the implementation of the Frente Nacional, whose foundational agreements were signed by him and the Conservative leader Laureano Gómez:<sup>74</sup>

in the middle, the military junta black beasts cover themselves with the tricolor, while in the upper half a fierce and strabismic monster, symbolizing Laureano Gómez holds and stretches with its claws the wings of a dove, which exhibits Alberto Lleras Camargo’s head. (1997a: 140, my translation)

The political force of the representation of President Lleras as a white harpy lies in the symbolic liminality of that figure as it is placed in *La república*. Its white body and the position under the powerful being that looks downwards evoke the Holy Spirit as it is traditionally represented in Catholic art. The allusion is not accidental, because in a predominantly Catholic context like the Colombian in 1958, the importance of the Spirit’s Seven Gifts (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord) for succeeding in the enterprise of re-establishing peace and order could have been self-understood. But the motif of the harpy itself also evokes the voracity and shrewdness associated to that other mythological being in Western societies since Antiquity,<sup>75</sup> while at the same time its white animal body can also be

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<sup>74</sup> Gómez, strongman of the Conservative party, was the most prominent leader of the Colombian far right, and a well-known supporter of the German Nazi government and its local organizations during the decades of 1930 and 1940. Between 1941 and 1945 he led several unsuccessful attempts to seize power through coups d’état, backed by local Nazis and the Third Reich government (Galvis, 1995). He was elected president in 1950 and exercised power until 1953, first personally and later from Spain through the puppet government of Roberto Urdaneta, until the latter was overthrown by Gustavo Rojas’s coup d’état. According to Oquist (1978: 59), the first year of Gómez’s government was marked by the highest inter-annual rate of fatal victims during La Violencia (50.253 persons). Arango’s representation of Gómez as a monster in *La república* recalls the nickname he was given by Liberal politicians: “el monstruo” [the monster] (Henderson, 1984: 169).

<sup>75</sup> Harpies have been represented since Greek Antiquity in various ways that combine human and bird attributes. According to David Brumble, Greek tradition after Hesiod considered them to be “maidens who are covered with feathers of birds, have sharp claws, and [...] are figures of greed” (1998: 147). Although in Antiquity they were usually represented as having human breasts, in the Middle Ages they were believed to exist in the deserts of India in the form of “a great bird, cruel beyond belief, which has the face of a man and is a bird of prey” (1998: 148).

understood as that of a dove, symbol of the peace promised by the Frente Nacional. Thus, through the articulation of three different representational regimes, Arango produced a symbolically dense satiric allegory of the 1958 presidential election and at the same time a sharp critique of the public presentation of Lleras as savior of the Republic.

The vultures that devour the personification of the Republic are also ambiguous, powerful figures that contest the official image of the Liberal and Conservative parties and the attempts by their leaders under the Frente Nacional to obliterate their responsibility for the crimes perpetrated during La Violencia, a chapter purportedly closed by the series of bipartisan agreements that founded the coalition.<sup>76</sup> Their ambiguity is derived from the fact that the animals can simultaneously be seen as symbols of the two ruling parties and—in a more literal way—as images of the so-called *chulos* or *pájaros* [vultures or birds]: the Conservative militants organized in squads who scoured through the country during La Violencia, spreading terror and death with the support of the state forces (Sánchez and Meertens, 1983: 29).

But Arango’s symbolic record of the gruesome reality covered by the agreements that shaped the Frente Nacional’s memorial program goes beyond the satirical representation of the government elected in 1958. As a comparison of a laudatory cartoon published in the press in July of 1957 and *La república* shows, Arango called into question through her work the very *raison d’être* of the Frente Nacional: its messianic promise of pacification and concord (Figure 7).

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<sup>76</sup> See, e.g.: Acevedo, 2003; Sánchez, 2004, § 45; De Gamboa, 2007; Fals, 2009.



Figure 7. Hernando Turriago (called “Chapete”), 1957, *Una luz para Colombia* [A light for Colombia]. *El Tiempo*, July 31, p. 4; Débora Arango, ca. 1958, *La república*. The text in the sun of the cartoon alludes to the Sitges pact, which completed the foundation of the Frente Nacional. The cartoon’s caption (“Cesó la horrible noche” [“the horrible night is over”]) quotes Colombia’s national anthem.

Thus, in *La república* Arango articulated an act of resistance against official narratives on the political situation established by the Frente Nacional, making use of a representational formula traditionally employed by religious artists to evoke the grace and heavenly communion attributed to Catholic deities. Within that context, the expressive and political force of her composition derives from her substitution of the Catholic deities and their beatific interaction with monstrous images of politicians and a gruesome scene.

Considered within the context of the Catholic visual culture that frames it, *La república* recalls conventional representations of the Trinity and the Holy Family where The Father, the Holy Spirit symbolized by a dove, and the Son are organized from top to bottom with Joseph and Mary flanking the Son, and groups of joyful angels occupying the vertical margins or their proximity (Figure 8). But given its actual

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contents, the mythological and representational traditions that frame it, and the historical reality it alludes to, the work reveals itself as a manifesto against the situation of a society devastated by a bipartisan violence scarcely covered by the messianic and patriotic rhetoric of its—ironically enough—also bipartisan rulers.



Figure 8. Claudio Coello, second half of the 17th century. *Holy family*. Oil on canvas, 248 x 169 cm. Museum of Fine Arts of Budapest. / Anonymous, Cusco School (ca. 1700 – 1730). *Double Trinity with Saint Augustine and Saint Catherine of Siena*. Oil on canvas, 60 x 42 cm. Museo de Arte de Lima. / Débora Arango, ca. 1958. *La república*.

The story told by *La república* is, therefore, neither that of purity and beatitude told by the pictorial representations of the Holy Trinity and the Holy Family, nor that of the peaceful reconstruction of democracy promised by the Frente Nacional. It is the story of the destruction of the Republic by Liberals and Conservatives under the gaze of the armed forces, the President and sinister, powerful politicians who contributed to present the head of state as a wise guarantor for concord and peace, all of them escorted by disciplined followers who avoided to look at the dreadful scene while saluting the “saviors of the fatherland”. Therefore, *La república* is at the same time a satirical allegory and a memory site about the unofficial political situation at the beginning of the Frente Nacional. It is a portrait of the forces that opened a period in which the willingness to silence the memories of the responsibilities of bipartisan politicians and elites for the bloodshed known as La Violencia turned out to be the

counter-face of generalized political repression, expansion of military rule over civilians, and severe restriction of civil rights.<sup>77</sup> As Elsa Blair has accurately pointed out, “in her works, Débora Arango captures those ugly things that are not told in the history taught in schools, precisely because there should not have remained any memory about them” (2005: 162, my translation).<sup>78</sup>

Arango’s political engagement resulted, among other things, in censorship, ostracism and public hostility deployed by the most conservative sectors of the Catholic church,<sup>79</sup> members of the elites and Conservative politicians. All of them started targeting her style and work in the decade of 1930<sup>80</sup> and radicalized their

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<sup>77</sup> Patricia Perdomo (2010, 2012) has analyzed the dynamics of political repression between La Violencia and the Frente Nacional, particularly regarding the continued use of the state of siege to restrict civil rights and apply criminal military law to civilians.

<sup>78</sup> A similar role has been played by Beatriz González regarding the Palace of Justice events (see chapter 4).

<sup>79</sup> As in other contexts of political reality, the Catholic church did not follow a unified line regarding Arango’s work. While some priests and hierarchs considered her pictures immoral and tried to make her stop working on certain themes or to render the exhibition of her works impossible (Londoño, 1997: 135-136), others supported her, pointing out that the “artistic nude has nothing to do with pornography” (BRC, 1996: 6), and that “art has nothing to do with morality” (Peláez, 1985: online, without pagination). These opinions were incorporated by Arango as part of her preferred responses to the moral imprecations against her work (Londoño, 1997: 132; *El Diario*, 1939: 5-7). In other sections of this chapter, I will return to the subject of the diversity of political attitudes regarding the counterhegemonic memorialization of the conflict.

<sup>80</sup> Laureano Gómez was one of the most violent persecutors of Arango since the beginning of her career. In 1937, he published an article against expressionism—a movement whose influence was already evident in Arango’s work and that of other modern artists—, that reproduced the Nazi characterization of the style as degenerate (Gómez, 1937). In 1938, fragments of that article were reproduced together with excerpts from Adolf Hitler’s speeches on art and culture in the catalog of the local version of the exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, organized by the Third Reich ministry of propaganda. The exhibition was presented in Medellín under the title *Arte degenerado* (Ospina, 2009). *El Siglo*, a newspaper owned by Gómez, became an important agitation scenario against Arango’s work (Medina, 1999: 23), with the publication of several articles that defined it for instance as “infamous[ , showing] a pronounced, lecherous sense and a feeling of social subversion” (anonymous, 1940, cited by Rosas, 2007: 43, my translation). In 1940, the then senator Gómez forced the Minister of Education, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, to close an exhibition of Arango’s work in the Colón Theater of Bogotá. Gómez and other politicians, whose opinions were analyzed by Rosas in a work about the moral reception of Arango’s oeuvre, defined it as “degenerate”, “pernicious” and even “pornographic” (2008: 5, 7-8).

attacks after 1948, when she incorporated political violence as a main subject. From then on, the increasing violence against her expressed itself not only in almost complete ostracism, but also in insults and threats against her and her family (BRC, 1996; Londoño, 1997a, 1997b). Nevertheless, she continued producing a vast oeuvre that includes several representations of political violence and members of the establishment and expresses her “open disdain for the political class [sic], [a feature] that also explains why the censors not only attacked her nudes, but also her representations of La Violencia” (Schuster, 2011: 38, my translation). In 1961, the constant persecution and isolation, together with events taking place in her private life, finally led her to take the same path as many others, who have engaged in counterhegemonic political and memorial struggles in Colombia since 1948: that of exile.<sup>81</sup> She moved to her family’s country house in the town of Envigado, near Medellín, and retired from public life until the end of the Frente Nacional.

Despite censorship, persecution and other forms of violence deployed against her, Débora Arango and her work survived La Violencia and the Frente Nacional. She started being rehabilitated in 1974, at the end of that period, when the artist and her work re-emerged in an exhibition held in the Museum of Modern Art of Bogotá,<sup>82</sup> and which was followed by several other exhibitions in Bogotá and Medellín. That process was sealed in 1984, when she received the Prize to the Arts and Letters of the department of Antioquia, her native region, which consecrated her as “pioneer of

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<sup>81</sup> Álvaro Medina comments the exile of writers and journalists to Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and France in his work on artistic production during La Violencia (1999: 22). The information on internal exiles is scarce but can be traced in biographies like the ones commented in this chapter.

<sup>82</sup> *Arte y política*, held between October and November of 1974. In 1975, a retrospective exhibition with around 100 works was presented in the Biblioteca Piloto de Medellín, but despite the positive reception by the public, it was ignored by the press and Arango’s old detractors attacked her and her family with new insults and threats. In 1981, she was included as the only woman in the exhibition *Diez maestros antioqueños*, together with traditionally recognized artists like her former teachers Eladio Vélez and Pedro Nel Gómez (BRC, 1996).

modern art in Colombia” (Schuster, 2011). In the introduction to a retrospective exhibition in the same year in the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín,<sup>83</sup> she was presented in the way that would identify her from then on: “her modernity lies in her persistence against everything that work and time continuously present to her, thus vanquishing the limitations of a not always fair social milieu, and the limitations that a woman must face in that profession merely for being woman” (Rabinovich, 1984: 2). The next year, speaking in an interview about her late rehabilitation, she said: “If all this had come to me before, I would have done much more. I was very inhibited. I painted everything as if I was hiding myself. They never gave me an opportunity. Not even one!” (Peláez, 1985: online, without pagination, my translation). Her rehabilitation was completed within the context of revalorization of non-hegemonic memorialization of political violence enabled by the already mentioned *Ley de víctimas* (Law 1448 of 2011), with the introduction on April 29 of 2016 of a new 2000 pesos banknote (0.65 USD at the moment of its introduction) that bears her image.

### ***Fidel Blandón’s Lo que el cielo no perdona: Testimonial Literature and Exemplary Memory***

The publication and effects of the testimonial book *Lo que el cielo no perdona* [“What Heaven does not Forgive”] by Fidel Blandón Berrío (1954, under the pseudonym of “Ernesto León Herrera”) offer another example of counterhegemonic memory struggles, waged from a different area of culture during La Violencia (see the cover of the second edition in Figure 9). Although its author defined the book as a “documental testimony [...] rather than a historical novel” (Blandón, 1954: 27, my translation), since its publication, the work was catalogued by publishers and critics as a novel and has remained included until today in the group of at least fifty novels on violence which,

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<sup>83</sup> *Exposición Retrospectiva 1937-1984.*

according to Jonathan Tittler (cited by Jimeno, 2013: 79), were published between 1948 and 1960.

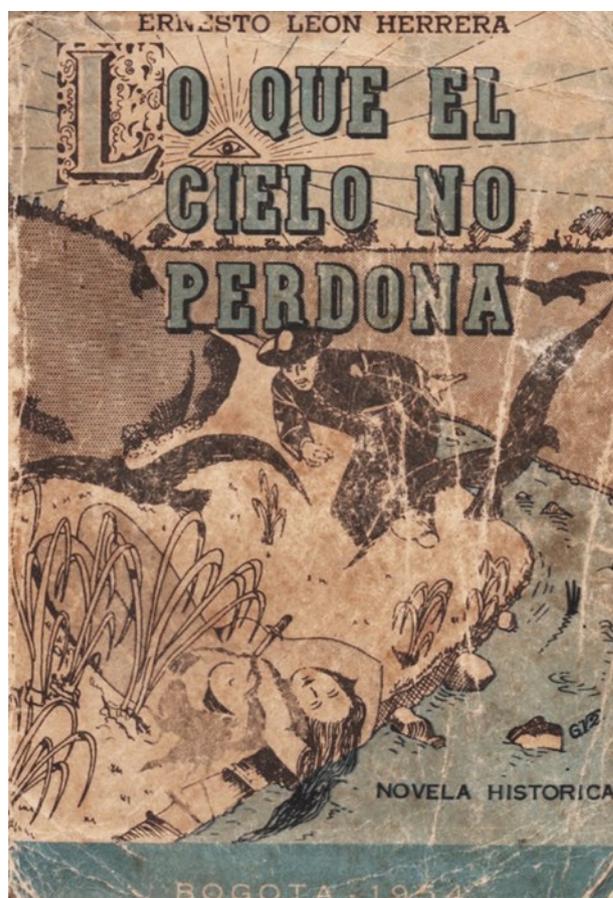


Figure 9. Ernesto León Herrera (pseudonym of Fidel Blandón Berrío), *Lo que el cielo no perdona*. Second edition, 1954. Bogotá: Argra.

Several authors have considered this literary corpus, including Blandón’s work, in the context of analyses of the history of Colombian literature and pointed out that most of the works that founded the genre known as “Novels on Violence” lack literary quality.<sup>84</sup> According to them, due to the conditions in which that foundational corpus was produced, these works lack literary value but have great testimonial importance, and, given that combination of attributes, they formed a milestone in local literary

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<sup>84</sup> “Novelas de violencia” in Spanish. See, e.g., Mena, 1978; García Márquez in González, 1979; Restrepo, 1985; Osorio, 2006, cited by Jimeno, 2013: 80.

history and founded a cultural tradition (Escobar, 2000). Although it would be useful to analyze the academic discussion about the origin and impact of novels on violence in Colombia in order to understand the ways in which limits between legitimate and illegitimate culture are established in the field of literature, I will not consider the opinion of professional writers and literary historians in depth in this section, an undertaking that is certainly important for colleagues interested in literary studies, but that is relatively unimportant for my work.

What is fundamental from the social anthropological perspective that underlies my research, is Blandón’s position in the political arena set by La Violencia, and how his political commitment affected his biography and Colombian society. The analysis of his position as a politically engaged witness and writer, both during his priesthood and afterwards, and of the place occupied by his testimonial work in the canon of accounts on La Violencia, offer a hint to the memory struggles waged by him and others against the versions and silences consecrated by the establishment during that period.

Fidel Blandón Berrío (year of birth unknown) witnessed La Violencia from 1950 on as a parish priest in Juntas de Uramita and other towns of the central-western region of the department of Antioquia (Figure 10), where, according to his account, militants of the Conservative party and policemen perpetrated several crimes against the liberal population. The few biographic reviews available<sup>85</sup> mention that his commitment to

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<sup>85</sup> The information about Blandón’s biography stems from the works of Casadiegos (2008) and Rodríguez (2008). The first is an inaugural lecture given by the author when he was appointed member of the Academy of History of Ocaña, in the department of Norte de Santander, the second a graduate dissertation presented at the program of Political Science of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá. Both sources contain identical paragraphs, configuring a case of plagiarism. Casadiegos’s work is richer in details taken from documental and oral sources, while Rodríguez quotes his prologue to an edition of *Lo que el cielo no perdona* (p. 100), two elements that support the hypothesis that the plagiarism was performed by the latter. A relatively recent article (Gil, 2018) comments the same aspects of Blandón’s biography without filling the gaps left by the first two authors.

pastoral work among victims who took refuge in the mountains and organized self-defense groups caused his stigmatization as a “bandit priest” (“cura bandolero”)<sup>86</sup> and attacks from the Conservative party and the Catholic hierarchy. His position within the Church deteriorated rapidly and led to his dismissal from his parish in September of 1952, in the context of a purge that also included the expulsion of his mentor, the bishop of the diocese of Antioquia, Luis Andrade Valderrama, who went into exile in the United States (Blandón, 1953; Gil, 2018).



Figure 10. Department of Antioquia. The region where the events reported in *Lo que el cielo no perdona* took place are marked in dark gray. The square in the upper right corner shows the location of Antioquia in the Colombian territory.

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<sup>86</sup> Theisen (1974) and Catoggio (2013) have pointed out that the stigmatization and persecution of ecclesial agents by Catholic hierarchs and conservative politicians for their engagement in pastoral and political work with victims of state-sponsored violence is an old phenomenon in Latin America, that expresses the articulation of national and regional violent realities with the internal life of the Church. The work of Levine (1981) addresses the problem regarding Colombia and Venezuela during the decades of 1960 and 1970.

In the case of the counterhegemonic memorialization and struggle for accountability for the human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault of the Palace of Justice, the harassment by conservative sectors has targeted father Javier Giraldo (SJ) and the members of the Congregación Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz (Puentes, 2010; MRN, 2011).

Blandón remained in Juntas de Uramita after his dismissal and continued supporting the liberal refugees with clandestine shipments of food, clothes and medicaments sent to their camps in the mountains (Casadiegos, 2008), but the escalating hostility of local Conservatives forced him to move to Medellín, Antioquia’s capital. There, he established contact with refugees from Juntas de Uramita and its surroundings, who lived in miserable conditions, collected donations for them and organized eleven shelters (Blandón, 1953), laundries and libraries (Casadiegos, *op. cit.*) that served around 700 people in Medellín and other localities (Blandón, *op. cit.*).

During that period, Blandón coordinated the first documented experience of collective, organized return of communities displaced by political violence in Colombia, which nevertheless has remained unnoticed by researchers on the topic (see, e.g., Garzón, 2014; Munévar, 2016). Probably in the second half of 1953, during the first months of the Gustavo Rojas Pinilla dictatorship (1953-1957), he led the survivors of the destruction of the village of Peque,<sup>87</sup> who marched back to their town, escorted by the Army (Yepes 1953, cited by Casadiegos, 2008).<sup>88</sup> Once there, they

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<sup>87</sup> Peque was devastated at the end of 1951 by state forces following orders of the governor of Antioquia, Dionisio Arango Ferrer. Rodríguez quotes bishop Miguel Ángel Builes, a passionate supporter of the Spanish falangist movement, who recorded in his diary on November 3 that Arango asked for his permission to devastate the town for being “a nest of Protestantism and an operational center of banditry” and assured that the “vases and sacred ornaments” of the local church would be preserved. Builes approved the plan explaining Arango that “War is war!... And war tactic demands you to do it. Therefore, you may well proceed”. In a previous entry of September 11, he recorded that a Colonel, whose surname was Gómez, asked for his opinion about the eventual assassination of so-called “bandit priests”, and he answered by telling “the story of Franco, Generalissimo of Spain, who had to execute several Basque priests because they betrayed the Church and Spain, taking sides with the Spanish communists” (2008: 97, 96, my translation). Builes was declared “servant of God” by Pope John Paul II in 1990, as the first step in the process towards his canonization (OMP, 2013: 11). The second step was taken by Pope Francis, who declared him “venerable” in 2018 (Tamayo, 2018).

<sup>88</sup> My attempts to date the operation have been unsuccessful. The event has not attracted academic attention and, according to Eduardo Soto, municipal librarian of Peque, it is neither inscribed in local collective memory nor in the few works produced about local history (telephonic interview, June 2015). Two of the three documental references I have accessed do not date it (Blandón, 1953;

rebuilt their houses, reestablished their agricultural fields and reconstructed their social life, until the community was hit again forty-eight years later, in 2001, by a new wave of state-sponsored violence (Higuita *et. al.*, 2011).<sup>89</sup> The success of that undertaking seemed to anticipate that Blandón’s situation would improve under Rojas’s dictatorship, but he continued being harassed by a sector of the Catholic church, the military and the Conservative party, the same actors that—as I mentioned in the preceding section—also targeted Débora Arango during that period (Blandón, 1953; Casadiegos, 2008). Finally, between the end of 1952 and 1953, he moved to Bogotá, left priesthood and changed his name later to “Antonio Gutiérrez”, starting a new stage of his life, marked by official and para-official harassment and exiles that lasted for the rest of his life (Casadiegos *op. cit.*; Rodríguez, 2008).

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Casadiegos, 2008), and the third—an informal account of local history published by three high-school students in a blog—dates it to 1952 (Higuita *et al.*, 2011), but three observations support the hypothesis that it did not take place before the second half of 1953, after Gustavo Rojas Pinilla’s coup d’état occurred on June 13. First, the fact that the town was destroyed by state forces during Laureano Gomez’s government, while the march was escorted by the Army, expresses a transformation of the role played by these forces that might have resulted from Rojas’s rise to power. Second, a mention made by Blandón in a letter to Pioquinto Rengifo, military governor of Antioquia, which dates the return to between his dismissal as parish priest from Junta de Uramita in September 1952 and December 13, 1953, when the letter was signed (Blandón, 1953). Third, the following statement by Blandón, made in the same letter: “I achieved afterwards, as your Honor knows, that most of these people returned to their lands and the ruins of their properties under the protection of the Armed Forces”, which alludes to the fact that Rengifo—who assumed the government of Antioquia on June 18, 1953—, was aware of that undertaking, apparently coordinated between the priest and the state forces.

The lack of documental evidence about that initiative expresses the scarce information available about Blandón’s biography. Both topics deserve specific research.

<sup>89</sup> During the first half of June of 2001, the state-sponsored paramilitary Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) took control of Peque, killed ten persons, kidnapped fifty-four, tortured five and displaced 8.432, 77% of its 10.886 inhabitants (Ibáñez and Moya, 2007: 31). After that episode, and despite the lack of support from the Colombian state, the population returned once more, recovered the territory, and reconstructed the community (Verdad Abierta, 2014). The history of displacements and returns experienced by the inhabitants of Peque offers a hint on the impact of different waves of violence on the same community in diverse moments of the Colombian social-armed conflict and on the continued, collective resistance of its victims.

Blandón published *Lo que el cielo no perdona* under the pseudonym of Ernesto León Herrera on June 13, 1954, the day of the first anniversary of Rojas Pinilla’s coup d’état (León, 1954: 299),<sup>90</sup> initially seen by him and many others with optimism.<sup>91</sup> As I pointed out at the beginning of this section, despite his explicit non-literary aims, the work was included since its publication in the canon of “early novels on violence”, whose lack of literary quality has been widely criticized. But Blandón’s own definition and the structure of the work contradict that characterization, still widely accepted (Nieves, 2014: 17), although already in 1978 another approach to the subject of the “early novels on violence” was proposed:

[I]t should also be considered that the censorship imposed by the government on the press and all media during the epoch of la violencia [without capitals in the original] probably provoked all that diffusion of testimonial literature, *whose main aim was to communicate the political reality of the country*, not to recreate it as literature. (Mena, 1978: 96, my translation, italics added.)

In this work I follow that approach, which does not stress the conventional classifications made by publishers and intellectuals, but the social conditions of production of the works and the preeminently testimonial, non-literary aims of their authors. Therefore, I take distance from the extended academic, intellectual-centric

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<sup>90</sup> According to a letter by Blandón dated in May of 1954, which was included in the second edition of *Lo que el cielo no perdona*, he was exiled in Venezuela when the work was published for the first time (Blandón, 1954: 25-28). Between 1954 and 2010, the work was published eight times, five of them during the first two years. According to the catalogues of the National Library of Colombia, the National University of Colombia, and the University of Texas at Austin, the first three of these editions have the same number of pages (334), which probably expresses the fact that they were reprints, not new editions. Considering its number of pages (349), the fourth edition could have been the first to include additional contents. The fifth edition appeared in 1955 and included additional photographs and notes on the reception by the public. It also made public the real name of the author for the first time. According to Jimeno (2013: 81), a sixth edition was printed by an unspecified publishing house in 1981. The seventh and eighth editions were published by Planeta and Uniediciones in 1996 and 2010. In this work, I consider fundamentally the second edition, printed in August of 1954, and the notes to the fifth edition from 1955.

<sup>91</sup> See, e.g., Londoño, 1997: 139; Atehortúa, 2010b; Schuster, 2011: 38-39.

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definition of *Lo que el cielo no perdona* as a novel and consider it as the testimonial work that its author presented to the public.

The book is, in the first place, a compilation of thematically and geographically related testimonial chronicles about political violence in the north-western region of the department of Antioquia. Therefore, it must be recognized as part of the “testimonial boom” taking place in Colombia during the first half of the decade of 1950 (Blandón, 1954: 27; García Márquez in González, 1979: 13; Mena, 1978: 9), and excluded from the literary cannon in which it has been included as a spurious novel until today. That change of perspective would make it possible to rehabilitate it as a pioneer memorial work written, published and extendedly read four decades before the beginning of the modern Colombian “memory boom”, and to frame it together with Débora Arango’s oeuvre as part of a universe of cultural products that express the counter-hegemonic memory struggles waged by diverse agents during La Violencia.

Blandón’s testimonial aims are affirmed not only in the characterization proposed by himself in the first pages of *Lo que el cielo no perdona*. They are also expressed in his self-presentation as witness of many of the events recorded, the pictures of which are included as proof of the truthfulness of his accounts (Figure 11), and his explanation of the research techniques he used: direct observation, interviews, and documental research (León, 1954: 29-31, 61, 121). Moreover, that testimonial nature is revealed by the structure of the first five editions, in which the chronicles occupy the second of three parts, and are preceded and followed by mostly documental sections. In the first and second editions, these parts occupy 70 pages, 23% of the entire book, and present press articles, private and open letters, a presidential speech, excerpts from the encyclical *Sapientiae Christianae* by pope Leo XIII, and a map of the region where the events mentioned had happened.

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The first part introduces the series of chronicles, the author’s aims and the fellow priests and bishops to whom he dedicated the book. Four press articles provide information about the public opposition of priests and bishops to state-sponsored violence and the harassment they suffered from the state and within the Church. A prologue by Gonzalo Gutiérrez presents the work as a “novelistic essay” and a “historical documentary” which exceeds several other books published until that moment (in León, 1954: 21, 23). A “letter to the [fictive] author”, signed by Blandón himself, closes the section, defining it as a tribute to dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla and “the glorious military forces”, and a documental testimony “instead of a historic novel”, published in a moment when such kind of works “for national reconciliation [were in vogue]” (in León, 1954: 27, 28). Thus, already in the first pages Blandón classified his work as part of a growing testimonial corpus produced by several authors during the first half of the decade of 1950, giving account of the existence of a social field of memory configured at least forty years before the emergence of the intellectual field, dated by Orjuela and Cancimance to 1995. That characterization was reinforced in chapters 6 and 13, where Blandón expressed his intention to bear witness of the crimes perpetrated during La Violencia with the purpose of preventing their repetition (1954: 96, 288), stressing in that way his will to surpass the mere record of events and to offer an account that could be used as a principle of action to shape the present and the future. Considering that standpoint from a perspective inaugurated by Todorov several decades later (2000: 31), we can say that Blandón, both in the letter to himself and in chapters 6 and 13, declared his will to go beyond the construction of literal memories about La Violencia and to contribute to that of exemplary memories.

The second part of the book is composed by an introductory article, seventeen chronicles and a patriotic poem by Carlos Castro Saavedra—a renowned poet from Antioquia—that thematizes La Violencia and expresses hope for a better future. In the

introductory article, Blandón presents an account of the events of April 9 of 1948 that contests the one presented by Débora Arango in *Masacre del 9 de abril*, a political contrast that gives account of the internal diversity that has characterizes the field of counter-hegemonic memorialization of political violence until today. Thus, while Arango pictorially expressed her empathy with the crowd and depicted the military as perpetrators of the massacre mentioned in the title of her painting (Figure 4), Blandón recounted that

[t]he theories of the revolution on the march<sup>92</sup> and of the proletarian demands struck the social medulla, and that communistoid virus provoked a destructive effect. Fortunately, the people, marred by its inclination to robbery and alcohol, were not able even to make a revolution, and the politicians disoriented them with their disorganized harangues, providing time for the glorious Military Forces to save the situation and the Fatherland, defending the principle of authority and government. (León, 1954: 34, my translation.)

The counterposed accounts by Arango and Blandón about the role played by the state forces during the April 9 events are, nevertheless, more than records of memory struggles waged during La Violencia. They are expressions of a set of binary oppositions that have organized the public discussion on politically violent reality in different moments of Colombian history at least since the beginning of La Violencia: that of the definition of the violent intervention of state forces against individuals or groups who confront the status quo as legitimate or criminal. I will return to that subject in chapter 4, where I analyze the ways in which more than three decades after the completion of *Masacre del 9 de abril* and the publication of *Lo que el cielo no perdona*,

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<sup>92</sup> “Revolución en marcha”, the government program of liberal President Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934-1938). The stigmatization of López’s government as “communistoid” by Blandón, who also opposed Laureano Gómez’s Conservative government (1959-1953) offers a hint on Blandón’s politically conservative stance, and on the complexity of the Colombian political landscape of that period. It also shows that Nicolás Rodríguez’s characterization of the author as “liberal-leaning” for his opposition to the Conservative government of Gómez and his taking of sides with the victims of Conservative violence (2008: 4) is wrong.

the structural elements of that controversy became one of the main features of the public discussion about the Palace of Justice events.

The disagreement about the then recent past expressed in the works by Arango and Blandón is remarkable also for two other reasons. First, because it is framed by the counter-hegemonic memory struggles waged by the artist and the writer independently from each other. Second, because in spite of their opposed attitudes towards the army and the status quo, both of them suffered harassment and other forms of violence as a result of the political contents of their works and were forced into exile and condemned to ostracism. In that respect, their fates offer an early example of another longstanding feature of Colombian political reality: that of the implacable response of the agents of the establishment against those who individually or collectively challenge the status quo.<sup>93</sup>

The introductory article to *Lo que el cielo no perdona* is, like the rest of the work, full of expressions of Blandón’s anticommunism (León, 1954: 37, 43, 44, 293), Catholic nationalism (*ibid.*: 31-32, 110-111, 150-151), elitist, sometimes paternalist attitudes towards victims of political violence (*ibid.*: 33, 34, 95), criticism of the Conservative bias of part of the Catholic church (*ibid.*: 46, 48-53, 195-197, 201-205, 272-276) and support of the military, depicted by him as righteous (*ibid.*: 51, 58, 79, 84, 287-299) in contraposition to a sectarian and criminal police (*ibid.*: 63, 80-82, 244-245, 258-269). The second chapter describes the antecedents of the organization of self-defense guerrilla

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<sup>93</sup> There is some information available about violence perpetrated against people pursuing counter-hegemonic objectives during the Rojas dictatorship (1953-1958, see, e.g., López, 1996 and Atehortúa, 2010b), but the panorama differs regarding other periods of La Violencia. The historical importance of the topic makes it necessary to broaden the limited information available about the harassment of writers and journalists forced into exile (see, e.g., Medina, 1999). The situation is different with regard to other periods of the social-armed conflict. According to the Escuela Nacional Sindical, between 1986 and 2013 3,000 trade-unionists were assassinated, mostly by paramilitary forces (Haugaard, n.d.: 3). In 2019, Colombia was ranked 130th out of 180 countries by Reporters Without Borders, below Angola, Mali, and Afghanistan, due to the increasing violence suffered by journalists (RWB, 2020).

groups by liberal peasants in central-western Antioquia. That political context is presented as a combination of disenfranchisement of Liberals by the Conservative government, sectarian agitation by Conservative politicians and priests, disorganized reactions of Liberal politicians, and humiliations, sexual crimes, lynchings, massacres and destruction of property of Liberals by Conservatives.

Throughout the work, but particularly in the two initial chapters, Blandón accuses Conservative politicians and priests of using “Falangist” methods of political disenfranchisement, electoral fraud and extended violence (*ibid.*: 37, 51, 56, 80, 272).<sup>94</sup> That description of politically violent reality in Colombia through categories originally associated to the Spanish civil war, expresses an attempt to comprehend the local context through analogy with foreign realities that, as I will show in chapter 3, has also been performed profusely with regard to the Palace of Justice events. The other fifteen chapters of *Lo que el cielo no perdona* give account of a similar number of events that have happened in the midst of La Violencia, defined by Blandón as a *hecatomb* (Herrera, 1954: 51),<sup>95</sup> some of them illustrated with pictures from his own archive (Figure 11).<sup>96</sup> Although Liberals are usually presented as victims or noble and heroic

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<sup>94</sup> References to the Spanish civil war, used to understand La Violencia, also appear in the already mentioned diary of the fundamentalist bishop Builes (cited by Rodríguez, 2008: 96), and in a letter addressed by the liberal guerrilla leader Juan Franco to the military governor of Antioquia in 1953. Franco goes further and tells that Falangist instructors brought from Spain trained the official and para-official forces in Antioquia (cited by León, 1954: 80). The subject of the impact of the Spanish civil war in Colombia has already been addressed (Hernández, 2000, 2004; Guerrero, 2014), but the possible military cooperation between the Spanish and Colombian forces remains to be explored. Mesa (2009) has analyzed Franco’s letters as records of the daily life among liberal guerrillas during La Violencia and the impact of religious thinking in their practices and understanding of the conflict.

<sup>95</sup> The attribution of sacrificial meaning to the suffering provoked by political violence is a constant in the cultural products examined in this work. I will return to the subject in chapters 3 and 4, where I will consider the uses of the category “holocaust” to name and represent the Palace of Justice events.

<sup>96</sup> It is not known if Blandón’s archive on La Violencia in central-western Antioquia, integrated by pictures, notes, letters, press articles and official documents (León, 1954: 26, 27, 61), has been preserved. The whereabouts of another archive collected *in situ* by a priest, known as “Guzmán Campos collection” are also unknown (Valencia, 2012b: 67-68).

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resistance fighters (Gil, 2018), Blandón also criticizes their cruelty and arbitrariness, and eventually presents them as perpetrators of crimes against innocent Conservatives or fellow Liberals (León, 1954: 82-91, 145, 160-165, 173-174). Nevertheless, that criticism is framed by his general attribution of the roles of perpetrators and victims to Conservatives and Liberals, respectively.



Figure 11. Pictures included in the second (top) and fifth (all) editions of *Lo que el cielo no perdona* (1954, 1955). The captions are as follows, from left to right, top to bottom: "In this picture appears a policeman holding the head of the deserter Penagos and laughing cheerfully, while the rest make fun of the dead, saluting and insulting him." / "Here appear the heads of two young men beheaded at the 'El Sábalo' bridge. After exhibiting them, they will play an exciting soccer game for the amusement of the fans. What an atrocity!" / "Following the blood marks, the priest could find this arm in order to bury it with the rest of the corpse." / "On the ruins of mister Manuel

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Guerra’s residence, in Peque, this group of orphans, human ruins and moral rubble, is a scream that cries for justice from God and charity from men.”

Blandón’s chronicles, like other works analyzed by Jimeno (2013), not only present detailed descriptions of the dynamics of bipartisan violence in Colombia’s rural areas. The numerous references to the Bible, the sacraments, and Christian virtues they contain (cf., Herrera, 1954: 36, 94, 96, 107, 129, 150, 161, 198), express, like the reformulation of the image of the Holy Family and the Trinity made by Débora Arango in *La república*, the importance of Christian meaning frames in the construction of representations about political violence in that period. At the same time, the detailed description of his activity among victims of political violence and Liberal guerrillas and the animosities provoked by them at the interior of the Church, give account of the role priests played at the microsocial level as political agents and memory entrepreneurs, who occupied diverse positions across the political spectrum. In the following pages, I will continue showing how these meaning frames and agents have formed part of similar processes in later moments of the Colombian political-armed conflict in general, and in the aftermath of the Palace of Justice events in particular.

The immediate reception of *Lo que el cielo no perdona* also confirms the existence of a social field of memory, in which Blandón and many others struggle alongside or against each other for the definition of the meaning of past and present political violence in the decade of 1950. According to several press articles from 1954, cited in the notes to its fifth edition (Blandón, 1955: X-XII), the work was positively received as truthful and moralizing by editorialists and critics in Liberal newspapers such as *El Tiempo*. But, at the same time, it was criticized in Conservative ones like *El Siglo* as a distorted account of La Violencia, based on the obliteration of the crimes perpetrated by Liberals. In 1955, the Conservative response went beyond criticism in editorial pieces and took the form of a testimonial counter-narrative intended to refute

Blandón’s account. In that year, the narratives on La Violencia that were made public in *Lo que el cielo no perdona* and *Viento seco*, a testimonial novel by Daniel Caicedo about events that took place in Southwestern Colombia (1953), were publicly challenged by *De Caín a Pilatos, o Lo que el cielo no perdonó. Refutación a Viento seco y Lo que el cielo no perdona*. [“From Cain to Pilate, or What Heaven did not forgive. Refutation to *Viento Seco* and *Lo que el Cielo no Perdona*”]. The book was published by the Conservative Juan Manuel Saldarriaga under the programmatic pseudonym of “Testis Fidelis” [“Truthful Witness”], and according to Marta Lora (2011: 137), presents profuse documental evidence that supports a narrative in which Liberals occupy the place of cruel bandits who spread terror across the country and tried to seize power.

Like Blandón, Saldarriaga dedicated his work to the ruling military and presented them as saviors of the fatherland who stood on the *right side* of confrontation. Nevertheless, their consensus on the messianic content of Rojas’s coup d’état is just the other side of their disagreement on the role played by the military under the deposed Gómez/Urdeneta government: while Blandón told the story of the legitimate disobedience by the military with regard to the government’s policy of brutality against the Liberal civil population,<sup>97</sup> Saldarriaga told that of their unconditional defense of the government against the attempts of Liberal bandits to overthrow it. Thus, the memory struggles waged by Blandón and Saldarriaga in the mid-1950s involved not only disputes about the classification of political actors as victims or perpetrators, but also about the role played by the army and its agents as key actors of the Colombian social-armed conflict. Several decades later, in the second half of the

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<sup>97</sup> In diverse parts of *Lo que el cielo no perdona*, but particularly in the letter to himself, chapter 18 and the appendix, Blandón represents the military and dictator Rojas as heroes who carried out the tasks imposed on them by the people and God (Herrera, 1954: 28, 289-299). He portrays Rojas as a messiah “who received from Colombia’s Divine Lord the sublime mission to rescue the nation and give peace back to it” (*ibid.*: 291, my translation).

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decade of 1980, both subjects re-emerged as core elements of the public discussion about the Palace of Justice events (Leal and Gómez, 2013; Leal, 2015a, 2015b).

The existence among both actors of a consensus about the contents of La Violencia and its impact on the lives of impoverished people, despite their opposed understandings of political reality and the role played by the Army, was not accidental. In the same vein as the optimistic representation of the military and the coup d'état painted by Débora Arango in *La salida de Laureano* (Figure 12), it expressed the support the coup that overthrew the Conservative Laureano Gómez in 1953 initially received from across the political spectrum (Londoño, 1997: 139; Atehortúa, 2010b; Schuster, 2011: 38-39).



Figure 12. Débora Arango, 1953. *La salida de Laureano*. Oil on canvas, 102 x 142 cm. Unknown location.

But the optimism about the dictatorship vanished after its first year of government, when its pacification plans, based on the demobilization of guerrillas made effective during the second half of 1953, proved to be only one side of an aggressive approach

towards guerrillas and political contenders. Thus, from the first months of the second half of 1954 until his overthrow in 1957, Rojas combined a populist rhetoric and economic reconstruction with an increasing restriction of civil rights, press censorship, and extended violence against remaining guerrillas and the civil population living in their areas of influence (López, 1996; Rodríguez, 2006; López, 2010, Trejos, 2011).

Within that context, Blandón’s memorial entrepreneurship suffered a decisive turn. Despite the almost servile celebration of Rojas and the military forces in power, he presented in this book, *Lo que el cielo no perdona* was confiscated in August of 1954, a few days after the publication of its second edition (La Patria, 1954; El Tiempo, 1954). However, its circulation was permitted again soon after and it continued to be published until the fifth edition appeared in 1955, when the work was finally prohibited (Villamarín, 2001). Although Paola Villamarín (*ibid.*) and Fernando Casadiegos (2008) suggest that it was illegally published despite the censorship, the work remained officially unpublished until 1981, when its sixth edition appeared (Jimeno, 2013: 81).

Blandón returned to Colombia during the second half of the decade of 1950, after an exile in Venezuela from which he watched the publication of the first edition of the book. He worked as a schoolteacher under the name of Antonio Gutiérrez Berrío in diverse cities and towns in the northeastern department of Norte de Santander, on the border with Venezuela, moving once and again when former fellow priests or nuns identified and denounced him, and official and clerical harassment started anew. After a series of internal exiles caused by periodic denunciations and attacks, in 1971 he settled in the city of Facatativá, near Bogotá, where he finally reached anonymity. Fidel Blandón Berrío died as the teacher Antonio Gutiérrez Berrío on December 3, 1981, the same year in which *Lo que el cielo no perdona* was legally published again for the first time since 1955.

Despite the censorship and official boycott suffered by Blandón and his work, during the approximate one year of legal reproduction and circulation of *Lo que el cielo no perdona* and the following twenty-six years of illegal underground circulation, the book continued to be read as a truthful account of La Violencia and was included in the popular and specialized canons of memorial works on the period (Jimeno, 2013).

### III The Quest for Representational Hegemony

As I have already pointed out, besides its utility as a way to broaden our understanding of the history of the field of memory in Colombia, the consideration of the memory struggles set into motion by Débora Arango and Fidel Blandón is useful to trace the representational traditions that have shaped the memory struggles about the Palace of Justice events since 1985. At the same time, the fact that they found their way into mainstream understandings of La Violencia gives account of the fact that the censorship, exercised against them with a certain degree of success in the decade of 1950, did not obliterate them, but displaced them from the public stage into the realm of underground memories.<sup>98</sup>

In chapter 4 I will show that, like in the case of the conflictive reception of the memorial works by Débora Arango and Fidel Blandón in the decades of 1940 and 1950, in the aftermath of the Palace of Justice events, the pivotal point of the memorialization process is the act of “reading” political violence and classifying its protagonists. That process is known as *framing* by analysts of social movements, and its main feature is that, through it, social agents construct representations of

the “world out there” by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of actions within [their] own past or present environment. [...] But the

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<sup>98</sup> Michael Pollak uses the term to refer the memories of “the excluded, the marginalized and the minorities [...] that are constitutive part of minority and dominated cultures and confront the ‘official memory’” (2006: 18).

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framing of a condition, happening, or sequence of events as unjust, inexcusable, or immoral is not sufficient to predict the direction and nature of collective action. Some sense of blame or causality must be specified as well as a corresponding sense of responsibility for corrective action.

(Snow and Benford, 1992: 137.)

Thus, during the long aftermath of the Palace of Justice events, like in the works produced by Débora Arango and Fidel Blandón during La Violencia, framing the politically violent past and present—and eventually *naming* them—is the key issue of the memorial battlefield. As I have already shown with regard to Arango’s and Blandón’s works, and will do in the following chapter regarding the memorialization of the Palace of Justice events, to frame politically violent processes and episodes—that is to produce narratives or images about them—demands classifying social actors into diverse categories such as instigators, perpetrators, victims, witnesses, saviors (guardians of the order or civilization, defenders of the innocent, heroes of the fatherland, courageous decision makers), criminals or righteous persons. But the process does not end with the production of representations: it extends to the struggle for making them public and convincing the widest possible audience that they are truthful accounts of what happened or is happening. These struggles are, in short, quests for representational hegemony.

## **Chapter 3. From “the Peace Quadrennium” to the Carnage**

This chapter deals with the antecedents of the assault and counterassault on the Palace of Justice, the events themselves, and their immediate aftermath. It follows the pattern of chapter 2, consisting of a chronological presentation of subjects articulated to references to historical or cultural continuities between these subjects and events, characters or phenomena from related contexts or later moments of the processes of memorialization that I am concerned with. That multilayered structure becomes particularly evident in the second part of this chapter, where the reconstruction of the events and their immediate aftermath is interwoven with descriptions and analyses of representations of these events constructed between 1985 and today. In that way, the chapter offers a detailed description of the social and cultural conditions of production of the representational universe analyzed in the fourth and last chapter of this work.

### **I A Thirty-nine-month-long “Peace Quadrennium”**

In 1982, the Colombian society entered the 36<sup>th</sup> year of the social and armed conflict, in a regional context marked by widespread leftist guerrilla warfare waged all across Latin America, and attempts of national establishments to retain power either through the combination of negotiation and counter-insurgent tactics applied by democratically elected governments in countries like Colombia, Peru and Mexico, or through the almost exclusively military responses deployed by the dictatorial governments of Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Paraguay and Uruguay, among others (Cornell and Roberts, 1990; Zirnite and Brophy, 1997; Gill, 2004; Loveman, 2011). At the same time, politics and civil-military relations in the region were deeply influenced by the bipolar political landscape and mentalities established by the Cold War and the National Security Doctrine adopted by the United States in 1947, that was transmitted

through diplomacy and military cooperation to Latin American governments, state forces and paramilitary groups (Landau, 1988).

Within that context, at the beginning of the year, the Conservative Belisario Betancur launched his presidential campaign for the period of 1982-1986, putting a government of bipartisan unity and eventual peace negotiations with guerrilla organizations at the center of his agenda (Parra, 1982).<sup>99</sup> The appropriateness of that decision was confirmed by the end of May, when he was elected with 46.8% of the votes in an election marked by an unprecedented participation rate of 49.76%.<sup>100</sup> When he took office two months later, he proclaimed that he and his government would be inscribed in History for devoting their “skill and strength to explore new solutions to the problems that beset[ted] the weak” (Betancur, 1982a: 4-5, my translation), hinting at a counter-insurgent strategy that privileged social reforms over the traditionally militarist National Security Doctrine (Landau, 1988; Gill, 2004).

In September, just a few weeks after his inauguration, Betancur appointed forty representatives of diverse social sectors to an “advisory committee for peace” [“Comisión de paz asesora del gobierno nacional”], whose official task was “to reinforce social and public peace” across the country through the formulation and implementation of development projects and the organization of civil society (Decree

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<sup>99</sup> In 1982, Colombia was a country of 26 million inhabitants (CIA, 1983: 44), in which six significant guerrilla organizations with a combined manpower of around 2,700 operated: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC, Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN, Movimiento 19 de Abril – M19, Ejército Popular de Liberación – EPL, and Autodefensa Obrera – ADO, (Verdad Abierta, 2008; Ugarriza and Pabón, 2016). The FARC, EPL and ADO were of Marxist inspiration, the ELN was influenced by the Theology of Liberation and the Cuban revolution, and the M-19 by Latin American *caudillismo*. Given the subject of my research, in this work I focus almost exclusively on the history and operations of the M-19.

<sup>100</sup> The average participation rate in presidential elections during the period of 1978 – 2010 has been 45.99% (Liendo *et al.*, 2013: 22). Participation in the 1982 election has been surpassed only in 1998 and 2018, when it reached 59.02% and 53.04% (*ibid.*; El Tiempo, 2018). It is noteworthy that the three elections were marked by public debate about presidential initiatives that could be taken to solve the social and armed conflict.

2711, 1982: § 1). In October, he reacted to denunciations about the participation of state agents in the paramilitary organization MAS,<sup>101</sup> ordering an investigation whose results confirmed the rumors and displeased the commanders of the security forces (Betancur, 1982b; Marín, 2017). These measures were immediately followed by the obtention, in November, of congressional approval for a general amnesty for political crimes that had been issued immediately after Betancur’s inauguration (Law 35, 1982).

Betancur’s peace agenda appeared clearly formulated on November 20 in a radio- and television-broadcast speech in which he presented the recently adopted amnesty.<sup>102</sup> He uttered the word “*paz*” [peace] thirty-two times in fifteen minutes, described the amnesty as a “big gate” for the Colombian people—meaning guerrillas—to enter into the democratic system, announced a series of measures aimed at combatting “the impersonal agents of subversion”—namely unemployment, illiteracy, insufficient access to credit, and deficit of housing and infrastructure—and defined his presidential term as “the peace quadrennium” (Betancur, 1982c).

The positive reception of his pacification plan among guerrilla organizations gave place, in 1983, to the establishment of peace negotiations with several organizations,<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Acronym of “Muerte a secuestradores” [“Death to kidnappers”]. The organization was founded in December of 1981 by the leaders of the Cali and Medellín cartels with the support of other drug barons such as Carlos Leder and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, in response to the kidnapping of Martha Nieves Ochoa, a member of the family that ruled the Cali cartel, by the M-19 in November of that year (Verdad Abierta, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> According to the Minister of Defense of that time, a total of 973 members of guerrilla organizations made use of the amnesty, and 366 of them were liberated from detention centers where they served sentences (Landazábal, 1985: 49). The total of 1,500 political prisoners liberated from detention centers reflects that criminalization of political activity went far beyond the adherence to guerrilla organizations and covered activities such as trade-unionism and other forms of non-violent political activity (Marín, 2017).

<sup>103</sup> On March 30, the La Uribe agreement was signed with the FARC. It included a ceasefire and the creation of the “Unión Patriótica” [Patriotic Union, also known as UP], a movement intended to facilitate the transition to legal political activity. On August 24, the Corinto / El Hobo agreement was signed with the M-19 and the EPL, and later ratified by the ELN and ADO (Padilla, 2017). It included

including the M-19.<sup>104</sup> All of these initiatives failed before the end of the presidential term in August of 1986,<sup>105</sup> and the failure of the process with the M-19 led to its desperate assault on the Palace of Justice. However, in 1983 the situation seemed to herald the beginning of negotiated pacification (Arias, 2008).

At the level of the establishment, Betancur’s peace agenda was less successful and, from the onset, caused the animosity of the armed forces, politicians and local elites related to legal and illegal economic activities. On the one hand, several of Betancur’s initiatives restricted the legal range of action of the state forces, which until then had deployed a brutal counter-insurgent strategy based on detention, incarceration, torture, and prosecution of civilians by military courts (Reyes, 1986; ICJ and ACJCS, 1992; Jiménez, 2009). On the other hand, these groups perceived the shift as a new stage of a “subversive operation”, launched at two levels in 1979 (Semana, 1985a). The first of them was supposed to be the activity of local and international agents and organizations that demanded the implementation of limits to official repression and accountability for human rights violations perpetrated by state agents (Jiménez, 2009; Marín, 2017). The second level implied the subversive activity of judges and Justices who admitted complaints against members of the army accused of illegal detention

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a ceasefire, too, and a negotiation process named *Diálogo Nacional* [National Dialogue], that was opened to civil society organizations.

<sup>104</sup> The organization emerged in 1974 as the armed branch of the populist movement *Alianza Nacional Popular – Anapo*, founded in 1961 by the former dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1900-1975), who, as I have explained in chapter 2, ruled between 1953 and 1957 and was responsible for the prohibition of Fidel Blandón’s *Lo que el cielo no perdona*. Although initially the M-19 adopted the Anapo’s nationalist agenda, it was expelled from the movement in 1975 due to its ideological radicalization towards “Latin-American-style socialism” (León, 2012: 254-255).

<sup>105</sup> The UP remained active beyond the frustrated peace process and enjoyed wide political support, which took the form of several electoral victories at the local, regional, and parliamentary levels. Its militants were subjected to an extermination campaign by paramilitary organizations and state agents that, according to different estimations, left between 3,000 and 6,000 direct victims between 1985 and 2010 (Gómez, 2013: 188). That plan has been defined as a political genocide by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH, 1993: 255).

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and torture of persons considered to be members of guerrilla organizations (Semana, 1985b; Riveros, 1985; ICJ, 1985).

The situation worsened in February of 1983, when Attorney General Carlos Jiménez Gómez informed about the opening of proceedings against 163 members of the MAS paramilitary group, among them 59 active-duty state agents, 3 retired staff officers and 44 civilian employees of the state forces, for criminal association, kidnapping, murder, and other crimes (El Tiempo, 1983a; Jiménez, 1986: 118-119). The announcement caused uproar among officers, politicians, and representatives of diverse branches of the economy, who rejected it as part of a smear campaign against the armed forces (El Tiempo, 1983a; 1983e; Landazábal, 1985; Semana, 1985b), accused Jiménez Gómez of criminal conduct and insanity (El Tiempo, 1983c; 1983d), and even threatened to resist the prosecution of the accused with a coup d'état (Navas, 1983). Betancur reacted by avoiding the polemic and supporting Jiménez, pointing out that the eventual participation of state agents in the MAS did not delegitimize the state forces they belonged to, and assuring that the right to due process and defense of the accused would be guaranteed (El Tiempo, 1983b). His negation to support the offensive implemented by the armed forces and their allies against Jiménez deepened the fracture with these sectors, and since then, until the definitive failure of his peace effort in November of 1985, each progress of his pacification-through-negotiation agenda was matched by further deteriorations of the relations.

The confluence of Betancur's reformist agenda and his negative to support state agents accused of human rights violations caused, in the long term, the sustained opposition of the right wing of the political spectrum, whose members saw him as a pusillanimous politician in the best of the cases, and as a secret agent of international communism committed to the subversion of the status quo in the worst of them. That situation was epitomized by the diffusion of the nickname “Lenisario” in those circles,

combining Vladimir Lenin’s last name and Betancur’s name (Ibarz, 1988; Maya 2006j: 137). At the end of the day, the fierce reaction of the armed forces and their allies proved to be effective, as the proceedings against state agents for their participation in the MAS were stopped (HRW, 1996: 17-19), and the inaction of the judicial system allowed them to continue combining legal activities within the framework imposed by Betancur’s government and illegal counter-insurgent tactics implemented through paramilitary organizations (Velásquez, 2011).<sup>106</sup>

On another flank of the internal front, Betancur’s antinarcotics policy, which included the possibility of extraditing drug barons to the United States, provoked aggressive reactions from that sector, which included death threats against members of the Judiciary (Serrano and Upegui, 1986) and the assassination of the Minister of Justice, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, in April of 1984.<sup>107</sup>

By the first half of 1985, Betancur’s government faced the opposition of the armed forces, elites, and politicians against the so-called dictatorship of peace (Semana, 1985b), violent resistance of drug barons, and deteriorating relations with the guerrilla organizations due to the permanent sabotage of the peace negotiations by the state

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<sup>106</sup> According to the Inter-American Commission of Jurists, state forces and local elites reacted to the modification of the legal framework of repression introduced by Betancur with the consolidation of para-state repression and dirty war. “While in 1980 there were approximately 6,800 political detentions, 92 assassinations and 6 disappearances, in 1983—during the peace process—only 1,325 detentions were registered but the number of disappearances topped to 100 and there were 600 political assassinations. In addition, the majority of repressive actions were carried out, not by official authorities, but by ostensibly private paramilitary groups. In 1983 these groups were responsible for approximately 70% of the country’s disappearances and political assassinations” (ICJ and ACJCS, 1992: 7).

<sup>107</sup> Lara Bonilla’s firm stance against drug barons put him at the center of the conflict with them and their proxies in the establishment. Failed attempts to remove him through political scandals provoked the radicalization of tensions and led to open confrontations with Pablo Escobar, leader of the Medellín cartel who by that time was member of Colombia’s parliament for a movement associated to the Liberal party. Lara Bonilla’s assassination by a gunman commissioned by Escobar is considered to have been the first of several “exemplary crimes” through which drug traffickers intended to shape Colombian politics between the decade of 1980 and 1990 (Duncan, 2013).

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forces. Within that context, his attempts to cover his lack of control over the armed forces’ presumed responsibility for operations that boycotted his own peace effort destroyed his credibility (Jiménez Ricárdez, 1986: 91), and ultimately caused the failure of the peace processes with the M-19 and other organizations around mid-1985 (Restrepo, 1986: 273; Maya, 2006c: 122).

That highly polarized context also negatively impacted the members of the Judiciary, who faced animosities of the armed forces and violent resistance of drug barons. At the beginning of 1985, the situation deteriorated, when the Administrative Court of the department of Cundinamarca and the Council of State condemned the Ministry of Defense to pay compensation to two victims of illegal detention and torture perpetrated by members of the army.<sup>108</sup> The tribunal also demanded the criminal prosecution of former President Julio César Turbay, his Minister of Defense Luis Carlos Camacho, his attorney general Guillermo González and Betancur’s Minister of Defense Miguel Vega for failing to prevent the continued perpetration of human rights violations known to them (CE, 1985: 22, 63-63; Semana, 1985a; ICJ, 1985).<sup>109</sup>

Like in 1983, the accused and their supporters rejected the charges (El Tiempo, 1985b), but this time they limited their attacks to declarations made “off the record” in partisan meetings in which members of the Judiciary were described as “allies of the subversion” (Maya, 2006j: 145). Nevertheless, their direct reaction included an

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<sup>108</sup> The victims were the student Ernest Sendoya in the first case and the physician Olga López and her five-year-old daughter in the second one (Riveros, 1985). Both were suspected of being M-19 militants. López’s daughter was detained and tortured with the purpose of forcing her mother to confess her alleged participation in the organization.

<sup>109</sup> The sentences attracted public attention because of the implication of former President Turbay and other high-ranking state agents, but they were not isolated developments nor were they the only cause of the animosity of the state forces against the Judiciary. According to Carlos Betancur, the sentence pertaining to the human rights violations perpetrated against Olga López and her daughter was handed down in a period in which the Council of State “handed down five to six sentences per week against the Ministry of Defense or the National Police” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 60).

anonymous letter titled “Requiem for the State Council”, that described the members of that tribunal as “puppets of foreign powers” and stated that the sentence was the result of “communist manipulation” (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 8). The “Requiem” was followed by similar letters through which drug traffickers tried to force Justices to block Betancur’s attempts to make the extradition of Colombian citizens to the United States possible, and by mid-1985, the Judiciary found itself facing the enmity of two of the most violent sectors of Colombian society.

At the end of the first half of the year, the political situation deteriorated even further, when the supreme commander of the M-19, Carlos Pizarro, declared the end of a never fully implemented ceasefire with the government and announced a return to hostilities (Plazas, 1985). At the beginning of September, while the M-19 prepared the assault on the Palace of Justice in downtown Bogotá with the intention of submitting President Betancur to a “popular trial” for the failure of the negotiations, the situation of the Judiciary worsened for additional reasons.

At that time, the members of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice started receiving death threats from drug barons who were menaced by the eventual judicial approval of Law 27 of 1980 that allowed the extradition of Colombian citizens to the United States (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 5-8).<sup>110</sup> On the one hand, the contents of the menaces showed that the drug barons possessed enough human and technological resources to collect information about the Justices, the cases they were working on, and their families. On the other hand, they showed that the assassination of Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla was not the last resource regional drug barons were ready to use against state agents, and that Justices could eventually be

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<sup>110</sup> Opposition against the extradition of Colombian citizens has also been part of the nationalist agendas of armed and non-armed left-leaning organizations since the beginning of the decade of 1980 (M-19, 1985: 5; Blair, 2005: 60-61).

killed for the same reason. The threats conveyed the message that, to avoid sharing the fate of Lara Bonilla and to protect their families, the Justices should declare the extradition law unconstitutional. In mid-October, these threats extended to members of the Council of State who were notified that “the time had come for them to pay for the villainies committed against the military” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 60).

Contrary to the expectations of the authors of the threats, the Justices affected did not surrendering to the pressure but made them public through the press instead and dealt with them as matters of public security (*ibid.*: 58-59). Consequently, the National Security Council decided on September 30 to reinforce the vigilance over the Palace of Justice and to appoint bodyguards for the protection of the menaced Justices and their families (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 8-14; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 61-64).

In October, information about the assault that was planned by the M-19 was leaked through an anonymous letter sent to the Ministry of Defense, which contained the information that the assault would take place on October 17, during a visit of French President François Mitterrand (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 17). The immediate reinforcement of the vigilance at the Palace of Justice and its perimeter made the assault impossible and forced the M-19 to postpone it (Carrigan, 1993: 86-87; Echeverry and Hansen, 2005: 28). On October 18, the information about the plan and the reinforcement of the security measures had jumped to the press (Peña, 1986: 26-30), installing the possible assault in public discussion.

In spite of that widespread awareness of the M-19 plan, on the morning of November 6, employees and regular visitors were surprised by the absence of the metal detectors and policemen deployed at the facility until the previous days.<sup>111</sup> On

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<sup>111</sup> In the aftermath of the events, members of the state forces declared that the security measures had been upheld on request of the Chief Justice, but testimonial and forensic evidence contradicts these affirmations (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 25-33; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 64-68).

that day, shortly before noon, the M-19 took advantage of these diminished security measures and launched the long expected assault, starting a 27-hour long, TV- and radio-broadcast conflagration that caused more than 100 casualties, led to the total destruction of the building, and laid the ground for what is probably the most widespread cultural trauma in Colombia’s modern history.

## II From a Political-Armed Show to an Unprecedented Carnage

The *Operación Antonio Nariño por los derechos del hombre* [Operation Antonio Nariño for the Rights of Man],<sup>112</sup> was conceived to be a spectacular one. Following the pattern set by a successful hostage-taking performed in 1980,<sup>113</sup> the guerrilla expected that the media resonance caused by the kidnapping of prominent hostages in the seat of the nation’s Judiciary would compensate its military inferiority with regard to the state forces and force the government to accept its demands. But in 1985, the M-19 was far more ambitious, and unlike five years earlier, when they used people’s lives as bargain chips to obtain ransom money, this time the M-19 aimed to stage a public, media-broadcast trial against President Betancur for his alleged betrayal of the peace

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<sup>112</sup> By choosing that name, the M-19 leadership aimed to relate the operation to Antonio Nariño, the independence hero (1765 – 1824), who in 1794 had translated for the first time in Hispanic America the French *Declaration of the rights of man and of the Citizen*. The name also alluded to the M-19’s nationalist character and its pretension to base the public trial against President Betancur on natural law, accusing him of betraying “the yearnings for peace and national concord of the majorities of Colombia” (Otero *et al.*, 1985: 1).

<sup>113</sup> On February 27 of 1980, an M-19 commando assaulted the Embassy of the Dominican Republic in Bogotá during a cocktail held on the anniversary of the Dominican independence (Behar, 1986: 193), kidnapping the 60 persons who were in the building, among them 17 ambassadors (Diez *et al.*, 1980). The so-called *Operación paz y libertad* [“Operation Peace and Liberty”] was intended to obtain the payment of a 50-million-dollar ransom, the liberation of 311 imprisoned M-19 members, and the emigration of the commando members. The hostage-taking ended after 61 days without the liberation of imprisoned guerrilla fighters, but the M-19 obtained one million dollars (Behar, 1986: 195) and the commando was allowed to emigrate to Cuba. The results were seen by the M-19 leadership as a victory (Ahumada, 2007: 98-99), and grounded its false appreciation about the eventual outcome of the assault on the Palace of Justice (Vélez and Atehortúa, 1993: 114).

### Chapter 3. From “the Peace Quadrennium” to the Carnage

agreements signed with the group in 1984 (Otero *et al.*, 1985: 1). Within that scheme, the members of the Supreme Court of Justice were supposed to be at the same time a deterrent against a massive counterassault by the state forces, and the judges of a trial in which “the people” would be the prosecutor (Otero *et al.*, 1985b: 166-167).<sup>114</sup>

The operation was expected to develop in three stages. First, the seizure of the courthouse, located on the northern side of the Plaza de Bolívar, Colombia’s most important public square, in downtown Bogotá, around 200 meters away from the Nariño palace, seat of the President (Figure 13). A commando was expected to take control of the building, kidnap Justices and other persons of interest, and present a “claim” to the Supreme Court of Justice exposing the reasons of the action and the justification of the trial. Simultaneously, an audio-recorded statement would be made public through the media, calling “the people” to participate in the trial as prosecutor through its “professional, civic, sportive, labor [and] community organizations” (Otero *et al.*, 1985: 7, my translation). Second, the implementation of the trial itself. Third, the liberation of the hostages and retreat of the commando either to the Cauca mountains in southern Colombia or to a foreign country. According to the only survivor of the commando (Behar, 1988: 81), the trial was envisioned by the M-19 as its first “act of government” and the first step of its rise to power.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> In this section I follow the reconstruction proposed by the Comisión de la Verdad Sobre los Hechos del Palacio de Justicia [“Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events”] (Gómez *et al.*, 2010). Although some pieces of evidence have emerged after the publication of that report, they have confirmed the Commission’s main conclusions, and the document is still a valuable source based on a comprehensive analysis of the bibliography available until 2009, and on the most extensive series of in-depth interviews of direct and indirect witnesses performed until the present.

<sup>115</sup> Regardless of that documental and testimonial evidence, in the aftermath of the events M-19 leaders have declared that their aim was to consult the opinion of the Justices about the constitutionality of the agreements signed with the government in 1984 (M-19, 1985a), and to reactivate the failed peace process (Petro, 2006f: 152). These acts of concealment and reinvention of the purposes of the operation give indirect account of the opinions of their authors about the initial plan.



Figure 13. Plaza de Bolívar and its surroundings. a. Simón Bolívar statue, b. Primatial Cathedral of Colombia, c. Monstrance's Chapel, d. Cardinal's Palace, e. National Capitol, f. Nariño Palace (in the picture only its northern gardens), g. Liévano Palace, h. Palace of Justice, i. "Casa del Florero" museum. Satellite picture by Google Earth.

The M-19 commando consisted of twenty-five men and ten women, organized in four teams. The first team was integrated by seven persons who sneaked in peacefully through the main door between 10:30 and 11:00 a.m., posing as lawyers and students who wanted to check files, do research in the library, or visit Justices. They were able to introduce weapons because one or two days before, the metal detectors installed as part of the already mentioned extraordinary security measures had been removed (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 112). The other three teams consisted of twenty-eight people who arrived at 11:30 a.m. in three vehicles and occupied the parking garage located on one of the inferior levels of the facility. The group was supposed to consist of forty-one persons, but the late arrival of a fifth team that also carried weapons and explosives left its six members out (*ibid.*: 112). Upon their arrival, they killed two poorly armed

watchmen from a private security company before they could even react and exchanged fire with an indeterminate number of bodyguards recently assigned to Justices, who managed to kill two and wound five of the team members (*ibid.*: 113). Hence, just a few minutes after the beginning of the assault, the commando was operating at only 68% of its expected capacity.

The early reduction of the M-19’s military capability rendered the accomplishment of the first objectives of the operation impossible: the commando could not achieve full control of the Palace of Justice nor manage to take all its occupants as hostages. Nevertheless, the architecture of the facility (Figure 14) gave the assailants a certain advantage,<sup>116</sup> since it allowed them to barricade themselves and to secure the control of approximately ninety of the more than 300 persons who were inside at the moment (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 150; Petro, 2006f: 154-155).<sup>117</sup> Given the unexpected curtailment of its military power, the commando appointed the minimum of members necessary to the defense of the two entrances and deployed the rest on the first, second and third floors, where they took positions and divided the hostages into two groups.

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<sup>116</sup> “The facility [...] was an impregnable fortress. The concrete shield visible from the outside was a wall separated by a few meters from the inner building, accessible only through two entrances: one on the Plaza de Bolívar and other leading to the underground levels on *Carrera Octava*. The fortified nature of the facility made access through the windows impossible and, together with the fact that there were only two entrances, gave enormous military advantage to anybody positioned inside” (Semana, 1985c, quoted by Maya, 2007a: 26. My translation, italics added). According to the local classification, streets that run parallel to the East – West axis are called *calles*. Those that follow the South – North axis are called *carreras*.

<sup>117</sup> A distinction must be drawn between the around 300 persons trapped by the assault and the crossfire between the M-19 and the state forces, and the approximately ninety hostages effectively taken by the commando. The erroneous definition of all non-combatants trapped in the Palace of Justice as hostages has appeared in my previous publications (see, e.g., Leal, 2011b, 2015a, 2015b; Leal and Gómez, 2013), as well as in the works of other authors considered here (see, e.g., Serrano and Upegui, 1986; Behar, 1988; Carrigan, 1993; Gómez *et al.*, 2010).

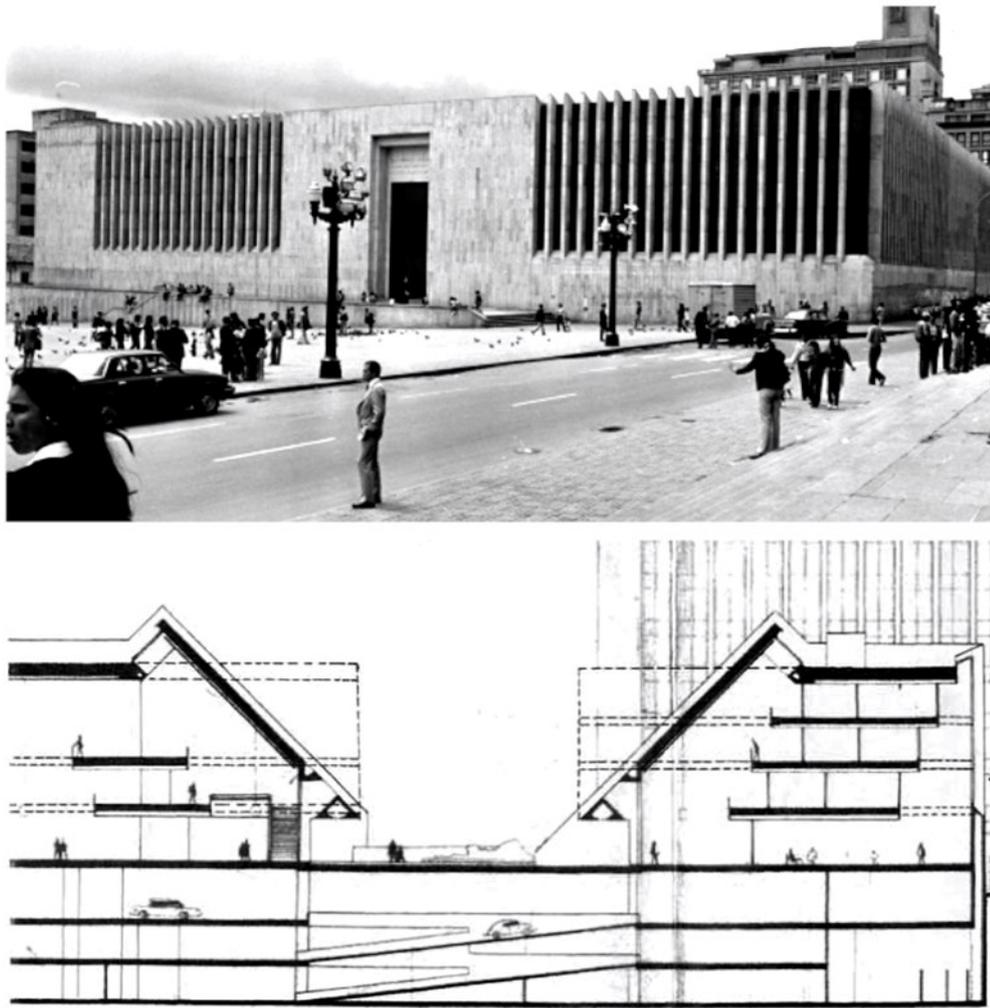


Figure 14. Façade of the Palace of Justice seen from *Carrera Séptima* (*El Tiempo*, 1985), and longitudinal section of the building’s North-South axis (1962). Due to the natural inclination of the terrain, the entrance and the ground floor were at the level of *Carrera Séptima*, while the first of the three parking levels located below them was at the level of *Carrera Octava*. The longitudinal section, reproduced by Tania Maya (2007a: 28), was elaborated by the studio Cruz & Londoño as part of the design of the facility.

Meanwhile, the building was put under siege by troops of the *Guardia Presidencial* battalion of the army together with agents of the police and the secret service, known as Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS), mobilized from different points of the city center where they were fulfilling their regular duties. Within a few minutes, the facility was surrounded by state agents who were deployed in the Plaza de Bolívar, nearby streets and in buildings from which snipers constantly fired at the courthouse,

trying to inflict additional casualties on the commando and to keep up the pressure while awaiting the arrival of other units.

At 12:15 p.m., just forty-five minutes after the beginning of the assault (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 123), people inside the facility and its surroundings were surprised by the arrival of armored cars that occupied positions in the Plaza de Bolívar (Figure 15). The vehicles and the infantry troops that escorted them operated under the command of Colonel Alfonso Plazas, and initially reinforced the siege, but later led the retake of the facility (JTP, 2010: 10).<sup>118</sup> At that time, Colonel Plazas was a 41-year-old officer who seemed to have a promising future and enjoyed the double privilege of being the commander of the Cavalry School of the army and the son in law of the Minister of Defense, general Miguel Vega Uribe. Due to the combination of his role as commander of the vanguard of the counterassault, the status conferred to him by his kinship with the Minister of Defense, and his permanent contact with the media teams deployed around the Plaza de Bolívar, he has been inscribed in history and collective memory as one of the most prominent figures of the operation.<sup>119</sup>

The prompt arrival of the tactical units commanded by Plazas not only surprised guerrillas, hostages, and spectators. That immediate, coordinated reaction, together

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<sup>118</sup> The counterassault involved “the participation of over 2,000 troops from eleven different army battalions, two military police units, and forces from all of the military and police intelligence and counter-intelligence forces” (Carrigan, 1993: 115).

<sup>119</sup> Plazas’s contact with the press violated the army’s Combat Intelligence Manual, which assigned that task to brigade commanders (JTP, 2010: 260-261). Therefore, by giving interviews he overstepped his competences as commander of armored tactic units and usurped the management of public relations from general Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales, commander of the XIII brigade of the army in charge of the operation (see the brigade’s organizational chart in Appendix 1). The fact that he was able to proceed in that way might have been related to his status as son-in-law of the Minister of Defense, general Miguel Vega Uribe.

During the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, statements given by Plazas, Arias and other officers before local tribunals in the context of legal proceedings held against them for human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault exposed old animosities derived from what diverse officers considered to be the instrumentalization by Plazas of his kinship with Vega (JTP, 2010: 47-50, 273; TSDJB, 2012: 522; TSDJB, 2014: 537).

with the observation that on the day of the assault the Palace of Justice lacked the protection normally provided by the police, gave place, already in November of 1985, to the so-called “mousetrap hypothesis”, according to which the state forces left the Palace of Justice unprotected with the intention of luring the M-19 into a trap and inflicting a spectacular military defeat on it.<sup>120</sup> That explanation has been rejected by army officers until today (Samudio, 1986: 15; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 106),<sup>121</sup> but was confirmed in June of 2013 by the discovery of a secret military report that shows that on November 6, 1985, officers of the XIII Brigade of the army informed the troops about the M-19 plan and put them in state of alert at 10:45 a.m., forty-five minutes before the beginning of the assault (FMC–EN, 1985: 221).<sup>122</sup> Therefore, the reaction of the state forces started before the M-19 attack and, as I will show later, it extended long after the consolidation of their military victory with the implementation of measures intended to conceal multiple human right violations perpetrated against M-19 members and civilians.

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<sup>120</sup> See, e.g., Peña, 1986: 23-38; Carrigan, 1993: 97, Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 66-67; Parejo, 2010: 37-63.

<sup>121</sup> The already mentioned attempts to hold Chief Justice Reyes Echandía responsible for the suspension of the protection of the Palace of Justice formed part of that reaction (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 94).

<sup>122</sup> The report was discovered accidentally by agents of Colombia’s prosecutor’s office in the archive of the XIII Brigade of the army (Laverde, 2013a). The report is part of a dossier titled *Documentos Corte Suprema de Justicia* (FMC–EN, 1985), submitted on November 15, 1985, by the director of the Department of Operations of the army to the director of the Military School of Cadets, José María Córdova. I obtained a copy during my fieldwork period of 2013 in Colombia under the condition of not disclosing neither the identity nor the institutional affiliation of the source.

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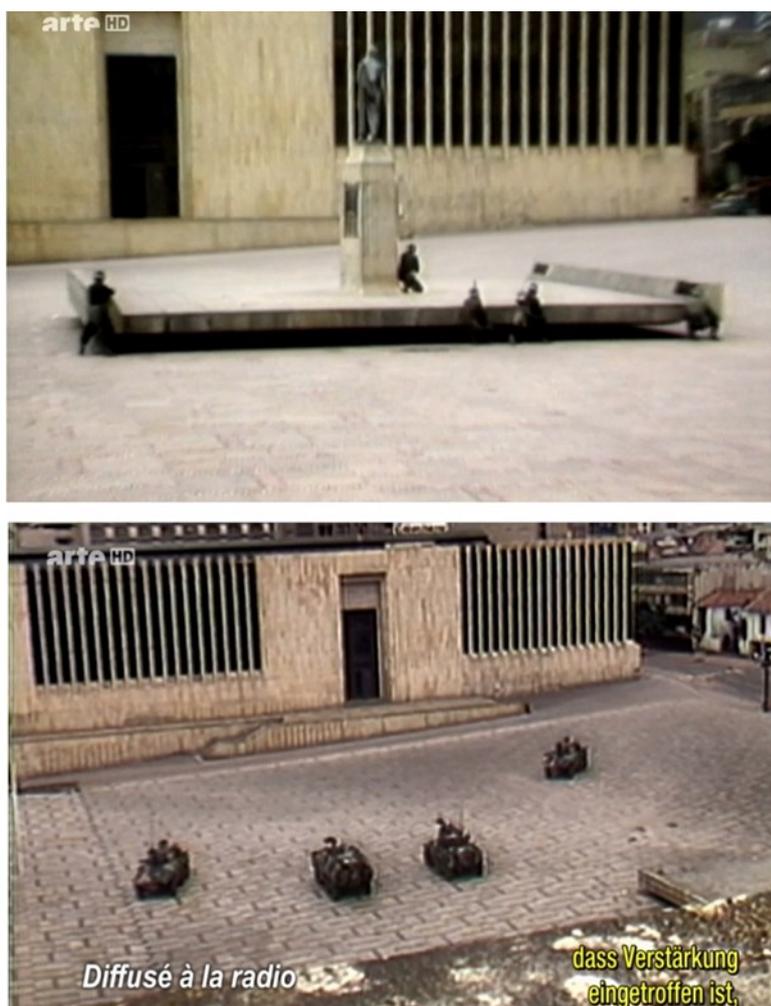


Figure 15. Snapshots from videos that show soldiers of the *Guardia Presidencial* battalion and army tanks positioned in the Plaza de Bolívar, a few minutes after 11:30 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. respectively. The original videos were recorded by press reporters from unspecified media. The snapshots were taken from the documentary film *The Siege* (Salazar and Gibson, 2011).

The fact that the assault and the counterassault took place in and around the seat of the nation’s highest courts put the situation immediately at the center of public attention. On the one hand, radio stations started broadcasting extraordinary bulletins about what was defined as “the chronicle of a take foretold” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 114).<sup>123</sup> On the other hand, photographers and cameramen of local and international media

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<sup>123</sup> *Crónica de una toma anunciada* (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 114). The denomination embodies an intertextual reference to *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, a novella by Gabriel García Márquez (1981) published in English as *Chronicle of a death foretold*.

arrived almost immediately, positioned themselves in the Plaza de Bolívar and in its vicinity, and started shooting and recording from diverse viewpoints and distances. From these positions they registered, until the end of the counterassault, actions that were visible from the exterior of the Palace of Justice, and by doing so they produced the core of a graphic repertoire on which journalists, protagonists, survivors, relatives of victims, activists, lawyers, judges, Justices, scholars, artists and other agents have relied since November of 1985, to articulate and illustrate journalistic, legal, memorial, academic and artistic narratives about the events.<sup>124</sup> But on November 6 and 7, these images were still far from acquiring their later condition of iconographic elements. They were transmitted to the nation and the world as support material of written and verbal reports and showed, for instance, armored cars and troops deployed in front of the Palace of Justice from 12:15 p.m. on, a tank tearing down its monumental bronze doors and entering the building shortly after 2:00 p.m., people being evacuated to the operational headquarters of the army established in the nearby Casa del Florero<sup>125</sup> museum during the whole afternoon, a fire that spread through the facility around 9:30 p.m. and consumed it together with most of its contents, and a tank firing rockets against its façade in the first hours of the next day (Figure 16 to Figure 19).

In a similar but much more vivid and perdurable way than the radio reports that brought descriptions of El Bogotazo to other parts of the country in 1948, the sounds, photographs, and videos of the Palace of Justice events, put into circulation by the

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<sup>124</sup> I have considered this subject in other works (Leal and Gómez, 2013; Leal, 2011b, 2015b) and will return to it later.

<sup>125</sup> “House of the vase”. According to official history, on July 20, 1810, a group of creoles started a quarrel about a vase with Antonio Llorente, the Spanish owner of a store located on the ground floor of the building, as a pretext for launching the movement that led to the independence of Nueva Granada. The quarrel, the vase and its owner were incorporated into local speech in the expression “*florero de Llorente*” (“Llorente’s vase”), synonym of *casus belli*. Since the decade of 1960, the house hosts the Independence Museum. The main entrance of the Palace of Justice was located about fifty meters from that house (Figure 13).

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media in 1985, installed them in the individual and collective memories of millions of Colombians. In chapter 4 I will illustrate the key role played by these press materials in the construction of individual and collective narratives about the events since their early aftermath.

Given the localization of photographers and cameramen in the Plaza de Bolívar and its surroundings, facing the Palace of Justice’s main entrance, they did not register the part of the counterassault implemented on the western side of the building, where the entrance to the parking levels was located. These images offer, thus, an incomplete record of the parts of the counterassault that were visible from the exterior.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> The Truth Commission of the Palace of Justice Events has pointed out that the lack of audiovisual records of these maneuvers makes it impossible to contrast hypotheses about the forced disappearance of survivors rescued through the gate of the parking level (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 127). That observation gives account of the importance of press materials as probatory elements in the aftermath of the events.

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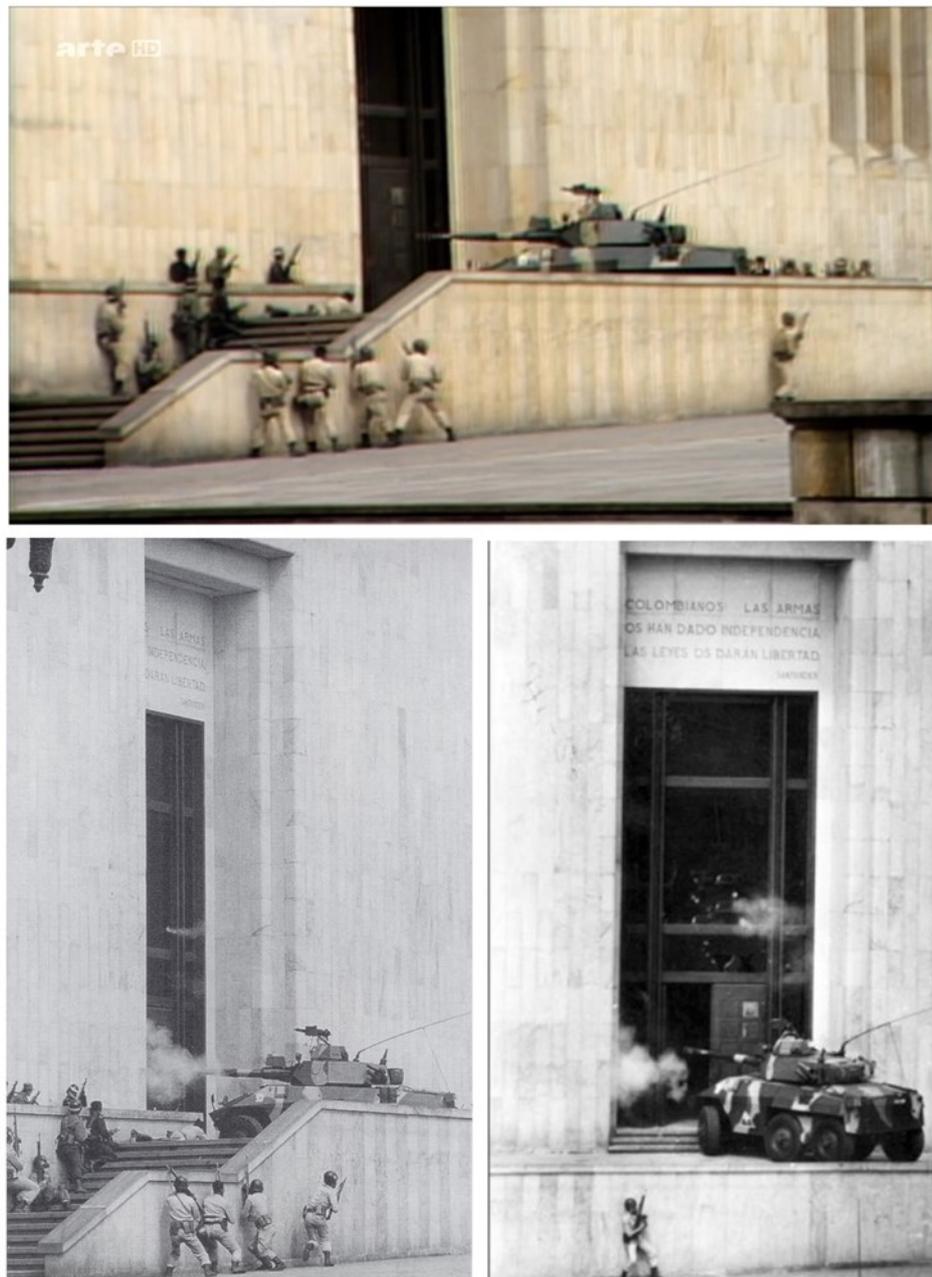


Figure 16. Tank belonging to the XIII Brigade of the army approaching the Palace of Justice’s main entrance and shooting 90 mm shells at its massive bronze doors shortly after 2:00 p.m., seconds before it entered the facility. The action was registered simultaneously from multiple viewpoints by press cameramen and photographers from diverse media. The first image is a snapshot from a press video by unspecified media, used in the documentary film *The Siege* (Salazar and Gibson, 2011). The other two are photographs taken by Daniel Jiménez for *Cromos* magazine and an anonymous photographer for *El Heraldo* newspaper.

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As I have just mentioned, videos and photographs were not the only immediate records of the events. They circulated together, although in different tempi, with radiophonic transmissions of reports by journalists who were present nearby, and telephonic interviews held by their colleagues from radio studios with direct witnesses located inside the facility and in its surroundings. The most famous of these witnesses was Chief Justice Alfonso Reyes Echandía, who held four short conversations with journalists from diverse radio stations after 4:00 p.m., when men of the state forces were already inside the building. By the time these conversations took place, he had failed several times to reach the President of the Republic by phone,<sup>127</sup> and the combats between the state forces and the M-19 inside the facility had been developing for more than three hours. In these combats, which constituted the second phase of the counterassault due to the shift of the offensive from the M-19 to the state forces, state agents kept up the pressure, using rockets, explosive charges and infantry weapons against the places occupied by the guerrillas and their hostages.

The progressive occupation of the facility allowed state agents to evacuate people who had not been captured by the M-19 and were hiding in offices, toilettes, and other spaces. These persons were put under control of men of the diverse units deployed at the front, who escorted them to the Casa del Florero (TSDJB, 2012: 94). There, the custody was transferred to men of the B2 Intelligence Department of the army’s XIII brigade, commanded by Colonel Edilberto Sánchez Rubiano, who registered, interrogated, and in most of the cases released them. The interrogations provided intelligence officers with valuable information about the composition of the guerrilla

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<sup>127</sup> The use of radio stations to broadcast Reyes Echandía’s appeal was suggested by his son Yesid as a way to finally reach Betancur (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 132). In 2005, Betancur declared to the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events that he followed the situation from his office in the presidential palace but refused to take Reyes Echandía’s phone calls. According to his declaration he considered it “inopportune” to speak with Reyes because the Chief Justice “was not free at that moment, since he himself warned that he was being pointed at with a machine gun” (*ibid.*: 338).

commando, the situation of its members, and their plan to evacuate some of them disguised as civilians. Therefore, the interrogators took special care of identifying the persons brought in from the front, keeping those for further interrogation who could not proof their condition as members of the diverse teams that worked in the Palace of Justice, or who were classified as suspicious because of their ethnic, generational, or occupational profiles.<sup>128</sup>

Meanwhile, a multitude of state agents, cameramen, photographers, reporters, spectators and relatives or friends of people who were inside the facility agglomerated near the Casa del Florero. The situation of the latter was desperate, and although soldiers and policemen kept them outside of the museum, they insistently inquired and carefully looked at the groups of evacuees who were escorted out of the Palace of Justice, hoping to recognize their loved ones among them. All of their attempts to obtain information were in vain (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 459), and for a long time they ignored that many of the persons they were looking for formed part of at least three groups of employees, visitors and M-19 militants who were evacuated in diverse moments under the condition of “special detainees”.

The first of these groups was integrated by at least thirteen persons who were transferred to the museum’s first floor shortly after their arrival, where they were kept

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<sup>128</sup> The initial identification was based on identity cards or testimonies of other persons rescued from the facility. These means were not available to people who were inside as visitors when the assault began, since they had exchanged their identity cards for visitor tags at the entrance, and in many cases were unknown to the employees rescued with them. Additionally, persons were classified as suspicious because of their condition of low-ranking employees or service providers (drivers, cleaners, members of the cafeteria staff), status of students or provenance from regions where the M-19 operated (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 401). That was the case, for instance, of the driver Orlando Arrechea and the law students Eduardo Matson and Yolanda Santodomingo (TSDJB, 2012: 12). Testimonial evidence shows that prejudice about the political significance of class and ethnicity became a decisive factor in the definition of the treatment given by state agents to evacuees. That bias favored M-19 militant Clara Helena Enciso, who was able to make use of her blond hair and general appearance to convince the soldiers who evacuated her that she was a hostage (Behar, 1988: 222).

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incommunicado, interrogated, and tortured under the suspicion of having participated in the assault (TSDJB, 2012: 551, 869). None of them was initially registered as detained nor included in official lists of rescued persons, but ten of these “special detainees” were included later, when they were liberated, sometimes due to the intervention of influential acquaintances who confirmed their identities. Although the state agents who set them free ordered them to keep silent about their experiences, the testimonies made public by them have been useful for reconstructing a pattern of forced disappearance—in some cases transitory—of evacuees who were moved secretly through a network of official facilities and interrogated under torture with the purpose of confirming their purported condition of M-19 agents (TSDJB, 2014: 162). One of the two members of that group who were not liberated was the driver José Eduardo Medina Garavito, who was seen alive by another “special detainee” in the Casa del Florero on November 6 but was registered the next day by members of the army as found dead inside the Palace of Justice (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 141). The other one was Irma Franco Pineda, an M-19 militant who was also seen in the museum’s upper floor by several witnesses and remains disappeared (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 263).

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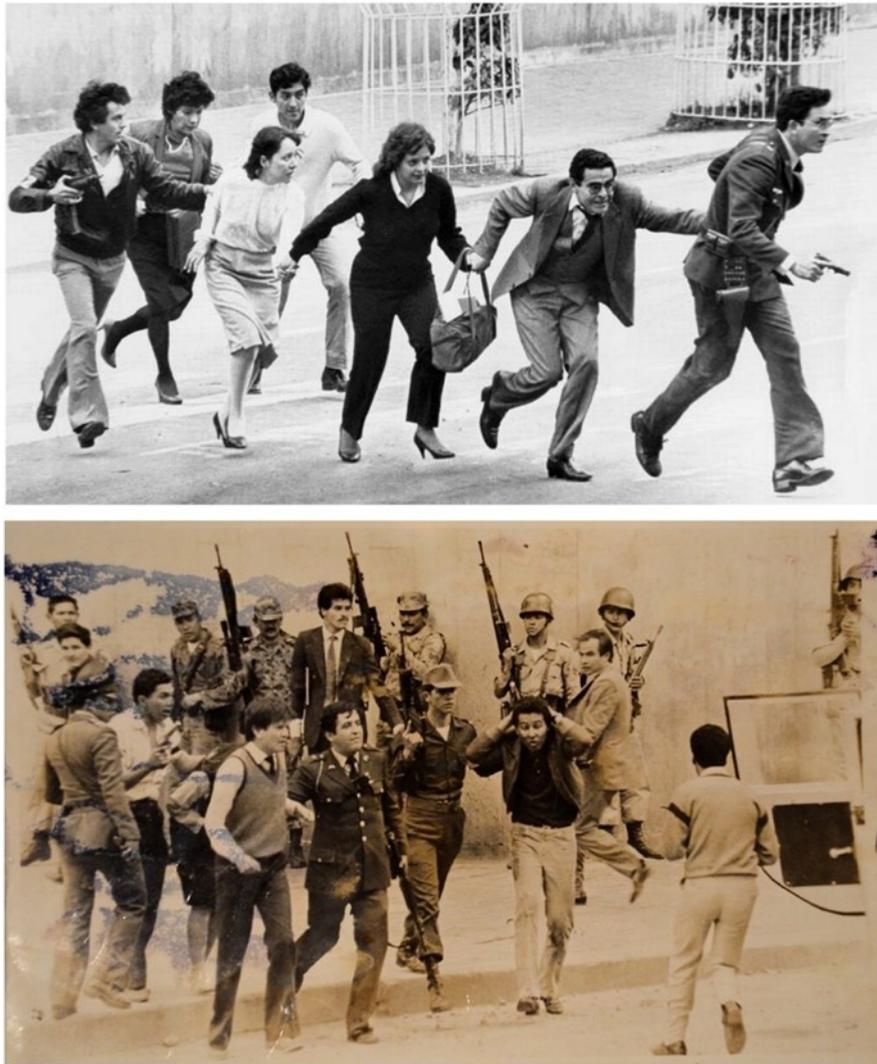


Figure 17. Press pictures taken on November 6, 1985, around 5:00 p.m. by unknown photographers for AFP and an undetermined newspaper, showing persons rescued from the Palace of Justice being conducted by state agents to the Casa del Florero. The second picture belongs to the archive of Yolanda Santodomingo Albericci and was provided to the author by her. It registers her transfer together with her fellow law student Eduardo Matson Ospino as “special detainees”. Both were mistaken for M-19 militants, subjected to transitory forced disappearance, tortured in diverse facilities, and later liberated due to the intervention of Miguel Maza jr., friend of Mr. Matson and son of Miguel Maza Márquez, then commander of the Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad – DAS. Note that the first group of persons was led forming a human chain, but those in the second picture were escorted separately. Individual control over evacuees who were held by the arms or other parts of their bodies, and sometimes forced to put their hands on their necks, was a distinctive element of the evacuation of “special detainees” (Orozco, 2015).

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The second group consisted of eight drivers who worked for Justices or their relatives and were not concentrated in the Casa del Florero but taken to the Cantón Norte, an army compound located in northern Bogotá that hosted the cavalry school commanded by Colonel Plazas, among other institutions. There, they were confined, interrogated under torture, and later liberated. Seven of them were set free thanks to the intervention of Justice Jaime Betancur, head of the Council of State and brother of the President of the Republic (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 181-182), and registered afterwards in the lists of rescued persons.<sup>129</sup> Jaime Arenas, the eighth member of the group, was taken to the compound separately and later liberated due to the intervention of Council of State Justice Jaime Valencia Arango, but neither his evacuation from the Palace of Justice nor his liberation from the Cantón Norte were registered in official records (*ibid.*: 182-183).

As most of these cases show, when state agents dealt with “special detainees” they shifted the burden of proof from the state to the citizen, imposing over suspects the obligation of demonstrating their innocence.<sup>130</sup> That displacement created a situation in which the possibility for a victim to be brought out of forced disappearance into

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<sup>129</sup> The pattern of transitory forced disappearance, interrogation under torture and late registration of certain detainees in official records has also been reported by victims of the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983), who refer the last of these three steps as “legalization” (CONADEP, 2006 [1984]: 198). The existence of shared perspectives about history and international politics among members of the state forces of Latin American countries, as well as their use of similar legal and illegal methods of counter-insurgent warfare, express the impact of the United States’ National Security Doctrine. The Doctrine was implemented in the Latin American context during the Cold War through treaties of military cooperation that included the participation of Latin American agents in training programs offered in military academies such as Fort Leavenworth (United States), Fort Amador (Panama) or the infamous School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia (United States) (Landau, 1988; Gill, 2004).

<sup>130</sup> The legal term *burden of proof* refers to the plaintiff’s obligation “to provide support as a means of avoiding claims unsupported by evidence” (Hahn, 2007: 43). Diverse legal traditions consider circumstances in which that burden could be shifted from the plaintiff to the defendant, but Colombian legislation does not allow that shift in situations like the counterassault of the Palace of Justice.

freedom—and ultimately of remaining alive—depended on their possession of the social capital necessary to prove their innocence. In other words, for “special detainees” having relations with powerful agents capable of confirming their innocence became a matter of life and death. Within that context, the odds were against low-ranking or new employees and occasional visitors, who for diverse circumstances were not well known among Justices and other high-ranking state agents.

The third group consisted of at least eleven civilians and three M-19 members who were evacuated and forcedly disappeared or assassinated by members of the Army.<sup>131</sup> Following a pattern that characterizes the public discussion, the field of memorialization and the legal proceedings that have followed the Palace of Justice events, state representatives have denied such crimes since November of 1985,<sup>132</sup> but direct and indirect witnesses, activists and experts have produced or collected elements that give account of them. Among these frequently overlapping pieces of evidence are several videos from local and international media that show the evacuation of twelve persons (Figure 18),<sup>133</sup> recordings of radio communications in

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<sup>131</sup> The estimations of the total number of persons who were evacuated alive and subjected to forced disappearance or execution have changed several times since 1985 and might continue to change with the development of judicial proceedings and the emergence of documental or audiovisual records of the events.

<sup>132</sup> CIO, 1987: 248; JTP, 2010: 240; Plazas, 2011a.

<sup>133</sup> Their identification by relatives and acquaintances started on November 7, 1985, when some of them were seen in videos broadcast in news magazines. It has continued until today with the progressive emergence of videos retrieved from private archives, and archives of local and international media. The identification of Justice Carlos Horacio Urán Rojas, visitor Lucy Amparo Oviedo Bonilla, and the canteen manager Carlos Rodríguez Vera and his employees Cristina Guarín Cortés, Bernardo Beltrán Hernández, Gloria Lizarazo Figueroa, David Súspe Celis and Hector Jaime “Jimmy” Beltrán Fuentes took place between 1988 and 2009 in the context of judicial proceedings (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 149; JTP, 2010: 14-16). Other survivors have been identified later in archive footage considered in judicial proceedings or put into circulation by journalists. The canteen employee Luz Mary Portela León and the M-19 militant William Almonacid were identified in 2015 (Martínez, 2015b; Orozco, 2015), and Justice Julio César Andrade and the M-19 commander Alfonso Jacquin in 2018 (CAJAR, 2018).

which army officers spoke about the detention of an M-19 leader,<sup>134</sup> and statements by an intelligence operative who reported the perpetration of kidnappings and assassinations under torture of people evacuated from the Palace of Justice.<sup>135</sup>

In the afternoon of November 6, 1985, while members of the state forces evacuated persons found in the parts of the Palace of Justice they had just conquered and tightened the siege with heavy fire around the positions occupied by the M-19, Chief Justice Reyes kept giving telephone interviews to radio reporters against a background of explosions, commands by M-19 combatants and laments by hostages. In all these conversations he directed an appeal at President Betancur, which in the aftermath of the events achieved the status of a *topo* of the memorial repertoire articulated around the events: “¡Que cese el fuego!” [“The fire must cease!”].<sup>136</sup> But instead of suspending the operation and engaging in negotiations, the government issued a ban on the

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<sup>134</sup> The detention of the M-19 leader Andrés Almarales Manga was mentioned in radio communications held by officers who coordinated the counterassault and recorded by the amateur radio operator Pablo Montaña. In 1986, the recordings were incorporated in legal proceedings but disappeared from the archives of the prosecutor’s office shortly after that. They resurfaced in 2007, when Montaña made public his own copies (JTP, 2010: 119, 129). Since then, they have been used to substantiate accounts of diverse nature about the events (Castro, 2008; Gómez *et al.*, 2010; Parejo, 2010), as well as for the prosecution of officers by local tribunals (JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012), and of the Republic of Colombia by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for its failure to protect the rights of the victims of these crimes (CIDH, 2014). Montaña and a radio journalist who made the recordings public were subjected to harassment and threats by unknown actors immediately after that in 2007 (El Tiempo, 2007; TSDJB, 2012: 9).

<sup>135</sup> In August of 1988, former police intelligence operative Ricardo Gámez Mazuera gave a detailed account of diverse crimes perpetrated by state agents during the counterassault and in other operations carried out against members of legal and illegal left-leaning organizations. Like other state agents who have done the same since 1985 (JTP, 2010: 216; TSDJB, 2012: 420), he related his decision to “a conflict of conscience that each day became more difficult to live with” (Gámez, 1988). His testimonies have been incorporated in legal proceedings as evidence of several human rights violations perpetrated by state agents against people rescued from the Palace of Justice (see, e.g., JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012 and CIDH, 2014).

<sup>136</sup> Reyes Echandía’s appeal has been used as quoted in the slogan of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010), the name of an NGO devoted to independent research on state-sponsored violence (Maya and Petro, 2009: 455), speeches delivered in memorial ceremonies (Semana, 2015), and publications about the subject (PGN, 2005; Donadío, 2010; CNMH, 2015).

broadcasting of such interviews and ordered the transmission of a soccer match (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 140).



Figure 18. Snapshot from a video taken by a cameraman from Televisión Española that show state agents escorting Carlos Rodríguez, manager of the Palace of Justice canteen out of the Palace of Justice on November 6, 1985. The snapshot was included in the judgment handed down by a local tribunal against general Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales, one of the commanders of the counterassault, for the forced disappearance of Mr. Rodríguez and other evacuees (TSDJB, 2014: 134).

Later, shortly after 5:00 p.m., a special unit of the police entered the facility through a hole opened with explosives in the rooftop, directly above the level where Reyes and other hostages were located, and the army reached the same floor through the staircase. From then on, the Chief Justice and those trapped with him lost communication with the exterior due to the breakdown of telephone lines (*ibid.*: 176). In the approximately one hour that passed between that moment and 6:00 p.m., two fires started on the ground and third floor. Although state agents have blamed the M-19 for these fires since 1985 (Serrano and Upegui, 1985: 88; Plazas, 2000: 249),

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testimonial and forensic evidence indicates that at that time these areas were under control of state agents, and the fires could have been caused by the rockets and explosive charges used by them or provoked with the purpose of forcing the guerrillas to surrender (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 150).

At around 9:30 p.m., the press crews present in the Plaza de Bolívar gathered around Colonel Plazas, as they had done already several times that day since his arrival at the theater of operations. Then, with a fire truck in the background, the officer gave what was going to be just another briefing about the ongoing operation, but in the end would become the most famous of the interviews he has ever given. He answered questions and informed that the situation was under control, but that combats were still taking place in the underground, and on the first and second floor. In that way he confirmed indirectly that the state forces had already captured the floors where the two fires were consuming part of the facility. He also informed that evacuees were transferred to the B2 intelligence department of the XIII Brigade and answered a question about the subjects, saying that he thought that no guerrillas had been captured. When another journalist asked about the current aim of the state forces, he answered: “¡Mantener la democracia, maestro!” [“To preserve democracy, buddy!”], uttering the sentence with which, in the years to come, he would enter in the collective memories that were about to be constructed about the events (Plazas, 2016; see chapter 4).

While Plazas spoke with the press, the fire that had started on the third floor spread from an undetermined ignition point to adjacent spaces, and from there to the second and first floor (*ibid.*: 142). Although men and machines from the fire brigade of Bogotá arrived almost immediately from the nearby positions they had occupied since the beginning of the counterassault, the ongoing combats inside the building forced them to operate from the outside, which rendered the fire extinction impossible (Gómez *et*

*al.*, 2010: 258). Within a few hours, the flames consumed the three floors (Figure 19), and all they contained, including the corpses of sixty hostages and M-19 combatants killed during the combats or by the smoke and gases produced by the conflagration (*ibid.*, 214). The bodies of Justice Reyes Echandía and his colleagues Ricardo Medina Moyano and José Eduardo Gnecco Correa were among them, and although the army informed the media on November 7 that the Chief Justice had been executed by the M-19 (Semana, 1985c), forensic analyses later showed that the three of them had been killed by weapons used exclusively by the state forces (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 152).

The temporary suspension of the offensive by the state forces due to the fire had three effects on the people trapped in the facility, the guerrillas, and their hostages. Some of the persons who had been hiding in offices and other rooms were forced to leave these places and tried to escape from the facility. Some of them succeeded (*ibid.*: 124), but others were caught by the M-19 and included in a group of around sixty hostages that were progressively herded into a 20 square meter toilet located in a staircase between the first and second floor, where they remained until the end of the retake (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 153). The guerrillas, commanded by Andrés Almarales, simultaneously tried to extinguish the fire with the means at their disposal, to keep control over the hostages and to defend their positions with the last ammunition they had.

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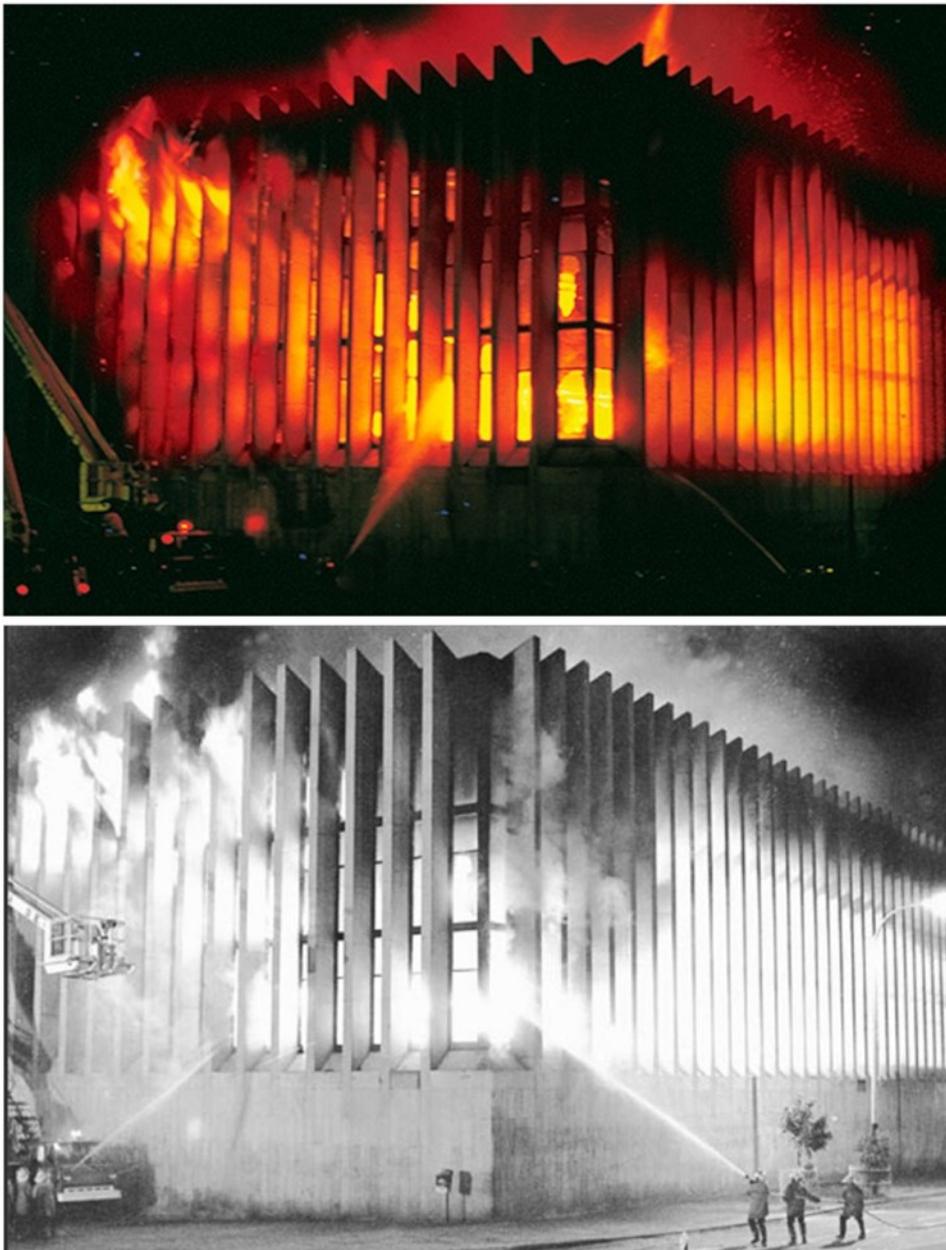


Figure 19. Palace of Justice on fire in the night of November 6. Pictures taken by unknown photographers for *Semana* magazine and *El Herald* newspaper.

Around 2:00 a.m., the Palace of Justice and its occupants were shaken by several rockets shot by tanks against the façade with the intention of opening a hole in order

to facilitate the escape of smoke.<sup>137</sup> Around 5:00 a.m., news about the preparation of the *Operación Rastrillo* [“operation rake”] were broadcast by radio stations in violation of the ban imposed on the previous evening and caused panic among the guerrillas, who explained to the hostages that the denomination referred to a tactic consisting in the raiding of a certain area and the assassination of the people found in it (Carrigan, 1993: 195). The apparent imminence of a massacre and the crisis opened by it among the members of the M-19 commando forced Almarales to accept a proposal by some Justices to appoint an emissary who should renew the plea for a ceasefire and negotiations to the President that could spare the lives of the hostages and the surviving seven guerrillas,<sup>138</sup> who were ready to surrender. At 10:00 a.m., guerrillas and state agents agreed on a short ceasefire intended to allow the appointed hostage, Council of State Justice Reynaldo Arciniegas, to exit the Palace of Justice, carrying letters in which kidnapped Justices and Almarales asked diverse agents for help.<sup>139</sup> Arciniegas was immediately taken to the Casa del Florero, where he was comforted by members of the army with the false assertion that the *Operación Rastrillo* had been canceled, and questioned about the localization and situation of the M-19 commando

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<sup>137</sup> More than two decades later, Colonel Plazas informed that the rockets were shot with the purpose of opening a hole in the façade and “facilitating the escape of the smoke and gases accumulated in the facility, preventing in that way the suffocation of the people who were inside it” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 285). Videos that show a tank shooting at the Palace of Justice are among the main audiovisual elements of the iconographic repertoire articulated about the events. The image of the perforation of the façade caused by the rocket was articulated to the logo of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Figure 22).

<sup>138</sup> According to the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 163), Andrés Almarales Manga, Diógenes Benavides Martinelli, Irma Franco and Clara Helena Enciso were in the group of guerrillas. The same source mentions the presence of two or three other men (one of them severely wounded) and a woman. According to recordings of military communications, the woman could have been Cristina Garzón Martínez, known as “Violeta” (*ibid.*: 398). The men were probably Alfonso Jacquin Gutiérrez and William Almonacid Rodríguez, who appear in press videos taken on November 7 outside the Palace of Justice (Noticias Caracol, 2015; CAJAR, 2018).

<sup>139</sup> President Belisario Betancur, rector of Externado de Colombia university, Fernando Hinestrosa, and the lawyer Oscar Alarcón Núñez.

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and hostages (Gómez *et al.*: 2010, 155). Subsequently, he was driven home without giving him the opportunity to contact President Betancur. For reasons that remain unknown, he merely asked the officer who assisted Minister of Defense Vega Uribe to extend to Betancur on his behalf the renewed plea for a ceasefire and negotiations, without making further attempts to contact him personally, nor delivering the letters addressed to him and other agents (*ibid.*, 156).

The information provided by Arciniegas allowed the state agents to focalize the offensive on the toilet where the surviving guerrillas and hostages had taken refuge, using heavy ammunition and explosive loads against its walls. The barrage spread panic among the exhausted and poorly armed guerrillas, who started burning their personal documents and preparing for death (*ibid.*: 163, 166). Confronted with the desperation of his own comrades and additional deaths among the hostages, Almarales set most of the hostages free and allowed at least four guerrillas to attempt an escape disguised as civilians (*ibid.*: 170). Another brief ceasefire was agreed shortly before noon, around twenty-four hours after the beginning of the M-19 operation, which allowed that last group to leave the facility, while Almarales stayed behind with a small group of male hostages and at least two other guerrillas.<sup>140</sup> There is no precise information about the fate of the latter, but recordings of military communications show that Almarales was captured and executed by members of the army at the end of the operation, although he was later presented as fallen in combat (*ibid.*: 398).

According to diverse sources, the M-19 members who tried to escape were Irma Franco Pineda, Clara Helena Enciso Hernández, William Almonacid Rodríguez and Alfonso Jacquin Gutiérrez.<sup>141</sup> Only Enciso succeeded because of the good relations she had made with the hostages protected her from denunciation, and the fine clothes

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<sup>140</sup> Diógenes Benavides and probably Cristina Garzón (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 163 and 399).

<sup>141</sup> See, e.g., Gómez *et al.*, 2010, Noticias Caracol, 2015, Cajar, 2018.

provided by hostages, together with her elegant make up and blond hair, helped her to maintain her dramatic realization of the role of hostage before the state agents.<sup>142</sup> In other words, she was able to profit from the race and class bias of state agents that in other cases doomed evacuees such as Eduardo Matson and Orlando Arrechea, who were treated as “special detainees” due to the suspicions caused by their ethnicities. On the contrary, Enciso was subjected to gallant treatment by the soldiers who evacuated her, and instead of being brought to the Casa del Florero, she was driven in an ambulance to her parents’ home (Behar, 1988: 222-223). Her comrades, though, were discovered. Irma Franco and Alfonso Jacquin were subjected to forced disappearance (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 262-263; CAJAR, 2018), and William Almonacid was executed, and his corpse reintroduced to the Palace of Justice, where it was officially collected and included in the list of M-19 members fallen in combat (Noticias Caracol, 2015). The same method of execution—sometimes preceded by torture—and reintroduction of corpses to the facility was applied to at least two other survivors: the secretary Ruth Mariela Zuluaga de Correa (Gámez, 1988), and the assistant Justice Carlos Horacio Urán, who was evacuated together with the M-19 members (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 395).

### III ¡Tapen, tapen!<sup>143</sup>

Immediately after the end of the operation, the commanders of the diverse state forces involved declared victory, and the army members paraded with their tanks and

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<sup>142</sup> “While in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure. For it the individual’s activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey” (Goffman, 1956: 19-20).

<sup>143</sup> “¡Tapen, tapen!” (imperative, plural third person, of “cover, cover!”) is an idiom commonly used in Colombia to refer to a situation in which some agent or group urges others to conceal a crime or a shameful act. It was used in 1944 by the painter Beatriz González as title for a work allusive to violence in Colombia (appendix 2). In 2015, it was also used to name the attempts by members of the army to obstruct legal proceedings conducted against them for the assassination of civilians in the

armored cars through the streets of Bogotá. Simultaneously, groups of state agents, firefighters and employees of Bogotá’s street sweeping company, commanded by army, police and secret service agents, engaged in an operation intended to destroy evidence of the actions undertaken by these forces during the counterassault (Carrigan, 1993: 253-277, Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 194-198). That operation should be understood as an integral part of the response by the state forces to the M-19 assault, extended from approximately 2:00 p.m. on November 7 until the late afternoon of the next day (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 144; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 149). It consisted of the coordinated performance of three tasks: collection of weapons and war material from the places that had been occupied by the guerrillas; collection, packaging and transport of human remains to the Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses (National Institute of Forensic Medicine and Forensic Science, referred to as “Medicina Legal” from now on), and the cleaning of the facility. During these more than twenty-four hours, the officers in charge prevented the intervention of the civil criminal investigation judges who were legally responsible for the inspection and registration of the place and its contents (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 142). The operation constituted, therefore, a violation of the sphere of competence of the Judiciary by the armed forces.

Simultaneously, for reasons that remain unknown but probably reflect a certain degree of improvisation, journalists, press crews and relatives of missing persons were allowed to access the ruin while the task force was engaged in what some sources call “Operación Limpieza”.<sup>144</sup> These visitors witnessed the activities of the task force, the

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context of a policy known as “*falsos positivos*” [“false positive results”] (Semana, 2015b) that caused between 2,248 and 10,000 victims between 1988 and 2014 (Vargas, 2019: 71).

<sup>144</sup> “Operation Cleaning”. The earliest printed, public use of the denomination can be traced to the work of Ana Carrigan, who attributes it to general Rafael Samudio, one of the commanders of the counterassault (1993: 254). The generalization of its use (see, e.g., Claros, 2009: 4; TSDJB, 2012: 95;

press crews recorded videos and took pictures (Figure 20), and the relatives and acquaintances of missing persons inspected their workplaces and other locations, where they collected objects recognized by them as belonging to those they were looking for (Corte IDH, 2014: 42-43). Some of the images and testimonies resulting from these visits appeared in the press immediately (see, e.g., *Semana*, 1985c), but others remained unpublished, integrated to press archives and individual or collective narratives of the events and the role played by the state forces in them.

Numerous sources and my own fieldwork prove that many of these narratives have circulated during more than three decades as underground memories in the form of personal or collective accounts, and have eventually surfaced to the public sphere in interviews, journalistic products, literary works, documentaries, and other products published either around anniversaries, or in periods of reactivation of the public discussion about the subject derived from steps taken by the Colombian Judiciary or the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.<sup>145</sup> Through them, since 1985, numerous witnesses belonging to diverse social sectors have contested in a wide variety of spaces and registers the accounts of the events defended by the commanders of the retake and their supporters (Jiménez, 1986; Landazábal, 1985; Plazas, 2000, 2001, 2016). Eventually, when local or international tribunals have admitted complaints concerning the human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault, these

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Molano, 2015; Noticias Caracol, 2019) reflects the impact of Carrigan’s work on the public discourse about the events.

<sup>145</sup> See, e.g., Mantilla, 1986; Peña, 1986; Behar, 1988; Carrigan, 1993; Echeverry and Hansen, 2005; Arrieta, 2007; Castro, 2008; Maya and Petro, 2009; Sánchez-Blake, 2009; González, 2010; Parejo, 2010; Torres, 2010; Gómez *et al.*, 2010 and Gibson and Salazar, 2011. The increase of publications after 2005 expresses the reactivation of the public discussion provoked by the creation of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events by the Supreme Court of Justice in 2005. That initiative also led to the reactivation, in 2007 of legal proceedings against state agents for human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault (Atehortúa, 2011), and to other official initiatives intended to memorialize the events and make public the voices of survivors and relatives of persons who were killed or disappeared in them (Leal and Gómez, 2013; Rincón, 2016).

memories have also achieved the status of probatory elements in legal proceedings held against state agents.<sup>146</sup> Additionally, in some cases they have been incorporated in the official accounts elaborated by the Special Investigative Tribunal and the Truth Commission appointed in 1985 and 2005 (Serrano and Upegui, 1986; Gómez *et al.*, 2010).<sup>147</sup>

Back in November of 1985, the treatment given by the task force to the corpses found in the Palace of Justice supposed the destruction of enormous amounts of forensic evidence. Nevertheless, that operation was not only destructive: it was intended to produce the material elements necessary to support the version of the events that has been defended since then by the commanders of the operation. On the one hand, all human remains found in the ruin and the personal belongings associated to them were removed from their original locations, packed in plastic bags, and placed in the patio located at the center of the facility. On the other hand, non-carbonized bodies were undressed, in some cases washed and, in some others, incinerated. According to the lawyer Amelia Mantilla, widow of the assistant Justice Emiro Sandoval, who entered the ruin on November 7 and 8 in order to look for the corpse of her husband, on the morning of the second day she witnessed how a state agent in plain clothes who carried a can “poured fuel over the remains of Justice Reyes Echandía, and caused a burst of fire two or three meters high” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 226, my translation).<sup>148</sup> The

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<sup>146</sup> See, e.g., JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012, 2014 and CIDH, 2014.

<sup>147</sup> My fieldwork and archive research did not allow me to access accounts by civilian witnesses that support the narratives of the events made public by the leaders of the state forces. But their existence and circulation as underground memories should be taken theoretically for granted and can constitute a subject of specific research.

<sup>148</sup> Her declaration, rendered before the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events at the end of the decade of 2000, substantiated the doubts expressed in 1986 by the members of the first special tribunal that investigated the subject, who mentioned in their final report that the complete calcination of the corpses of Chief Justice Reyes Echandía and his colleague José Eduardo Gnecco Correa contrasted with the perfect state of conservation of their personal identification documents (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 116). Although in 1985 the state forces reported that both Justices had

same procedure was applied to the remains of several persons who, according to testimonial or filmic evidence, were evacuated alive, but whose bodies were found charred inside the facility and registered by the military as part of the group of victims that either died during the combats and were incinerated by the fire that consumed the building, or perished due to the fire itself.<sup>149</sup> The practice of reintroducing corpses was also applied to victims who were executed but not incinerated, and presented as died in the crossfire<sup>150</sup> or fallen in combat.<sup>151</sup> Hence, during that stage of the operation,

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been executed by the M-19, forensic analyses ordered by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events more than two decades later showed that the bullets lodged in their bodies were fired by weapons used exclusively by official troops. The complete carbonization of the corpses did not allow the specialists to determine whether the causes of death were asphyxiation by inhalation of smoke from the fire that consumed the facility, accidental bullet impact, or execution (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 152).

<sup>149</sup> The civilians Ruth Mariela Zuluaga de Correa, Cristina del Pilar Guarín Cortés, Luz Mary Portela León, Bernardo Beltrán Hernández, Héctor Jaime Beltrán Fuentes and the guerrilla leader Alfonso Jacquin Gutiérrez. The carbonized remains of Mariela Zuluaga, Cristina Guarín, Luz Mary Portela, Bernardo Beltrán, Héctor Jaime “Jimmy” Beltrán and Alfonso Jacquin were incorrectly identified and delivered for burial to the relatives of other victims (EFE, 2016; El Tiempo, 2016; Vanguardia, 2016; El Tiempo, 2017; EFE, 2017; El Espectador, 2018). Their exhumation and identification were conducted only after the Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned the Republic of Colombia in 2014 for human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault and the subsequent and continued violation of the rights of a group of direct and indirect victims of these crimes (Corte IDH, 2014).

The fact that the Colombian state deployed efforts to locate and identify persons disappeared during the Palace of Justice events only after being condemned by an international tribunal gives account of the power of these courts to shape the outcome of struggles for justice waged by victims of political violence. The phenomenon has been analyzed in contexts of Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America by the contributors to a collective work edited by Thomas Risse and others (1999).

<sup>150</sup> For instance, Justice Carlos Horacio Urán, whose evacuation was registered by press crews on November 7, but whose execution was investigated only from 2010 on. The investigation was motivated in 2007 by the finding of his wallet and identification documents by agents of Colombia’s prosecutor’s office during an inspection at the Intelligence department of the Brigade XIII of the Army, in the context of proceedings related to the forced disappearance of evacuees from the Palace of Justice (Corte IDH, 2014: 64-65). In 2014, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights concluded that he was subjected to forced disappearance, torture, and execution because of his engagement in the movement of the Theology of Liberation (*ibid.*: 111-121).

<sup>151</sup> That is the case of Andrés Almarales and William Almonacid, M-19 members who were evacuated (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 398; Noticias Caracol, 2015), and seven other guerrillas who surrendered and were executed inside the facility. The second group consists of Diógenes Benavides Martinelli,

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the activities of the state agents were not limited to the destruction of the crime scene, but included the management of corpses of victims of human rights violations with the purpose of concealing the diffuse massacre<sup>152</sup> perpetrated during the counterassault and its immediate aftermath.<sup>153</sup>

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Alberto Nicolás Erazo Murcia, Ariel Sánchez Gómez, Ángela Murillo Salazar, Fernando Rodríguez Sánchez, Héctor Lozano Riveros and Jesús Rueda Velasco (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 239).

<sup>152</sup> The concept of *diffuse massacre* was introduced by Colombia’s ombudsman office in 2000 to refer to massacres “configured by homicides perpetrated in diverse criminal acts but which are related to each other in terms of authorship and purposes” (PPDH-DIH, 2004: 29). Originally, it characterized the methods implemented by paramilitary groups to conceal crimes perpetrated against civilians since the second half of the decade of 1990, when they became increasingly aware of the need to minimize the risk of being prosecuted for human rights violations by local or international courts (Steiner, 2005: 32-34). The existence of organic relations between the state forces and paramilitary organizations in Colombia is well documented since the decade of 1980 (see, e.g., HRW, 1996; Cinep, 2004; CNMH, 2018), but the historic and ethnographic documentation of the development and transmission of criminal practices between these actors is almost unexplored (Sanford, 2003).

I owe my awareness of the existence of the concept of diffuse massacre to my friend and sharp interlocutor, the lawyer Francisco Tabora Ocampo, whose expertise about the state-sponsored violation of human rights in Colombia and the history of the social and armed conflict have refined my perspective about its complexities.

<sup>153</sup> The tactic of concealing executions through fake reports of deaths in combat, known as “*falsos positivos*” in modern-day Colombia, is not unique to the state forces of that country. It has also been documented in other Latin American countries like Argentina (CONADEP, 2006 [1984]: 261-261), Brazil (Heinz, 1994: 79) and Chile (Frühling, 1999: 470), during the dictatorial periods of the decades of 1970 and 1980, and Peru in the context of the struggle waged by democratically elected governments against the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla since the beginning of the decade of 1980 (SSUS, 1984: 7).



Figure 20. Unknown author. 1985. Unidentified persons in the ruin of the Palace of Justice in the immediate aftermath of the counterassault. Date unknown. The picture belongs to the archive of *Vanguardia Liberal* newspaper.

Simultaneously, military criminal investigation judges, assisted by agents of the Criminal Investigation Division of the police (Dijin), made an inventory of corpses that shows the extent to which forensic procedures were disregarded and crucial evidence was destroyed, since only in forty-one of ninety-four protocols the data entered in the field “place of decease” allude to registers made at original locations.<sup>154</sup> In twenty-one of the remaining fifty-three protocols, the reported place of decease is the patio where corpses collected from different locations inside the facility, or reintroduced to it by

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<sup>154</sup> That number includes two protocols in which hospitals were registered as the places of decease of state agents wounded in combat. My calculation is based on data published by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 200-205). It corrects calculation errors made by the Commission itself, which despite its own data estimated that only 38 protocols contain specific information about the places of decease (*ibid.*, 198-199).

state agents, were gathered.<sup>155</sup> Another twenty contain a mere mention of the Palace of Justice,<sup>156</sup> and the lack of accuracy reached an extreme with the register of implausible places of decease located outside the facility, such as morgues, and in the case of five M-19 members, the Plaza de Bolívar (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 200, 201). Moreover, the packaging of carbonized human remains was performed in such an unprofessional way that bodies or fragments that belonged to different individuals were mixed and classified as belonging to single persons.

These widespread violations of forensic procedures gave place to an official death toll that did not reflect the actual number of casualties, and to the register and burial of the remains of several individuals under a single protocol or name. According to my own estimation based on the information available by October of 2020, the actual number of victims whose remains were collected during that stage is ninety-eight instead of the ninety-four initially registered.<sup>157</sup> Once registered and packed, the

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<sup>155</sup> Ironically, in the protocol associated to Jorge Tadeo Mayo, the only person who, according to testimonial evidence, died in the patio (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 115), the field “place of decease” contains an unspecific mention to the Palace of Justice.

<sup>156</sup> Twenty-one according to the mistaken calculation published by the Truth Commission on The Palace of Justice Events (2010: 199).

<sup>157</sup> Remains of two persons were buried in each of the graves of visitor María Isabel Ferrer and policeman Libardo Durán, and of three other persons in the grave of Justice Emiro Sandoval Huertas. In the first case they belonged to Ferrer herself and to Cristina Guarín, who worked at the canteen of the Palace of Justice (El Tiempo, 2015). The remains buried in Durán’s grave belonged to the M-19 militants Noralba García and Alfonso Jacquin (Caracol Radio, 2018), the first of whom remained excluded from official lists of M-19 casualties until her identification in 2018 (see, e.g., Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 200-205). The remains of Durán and Sandoval were found in a mass grave in a cemetery of Bogotá, together with those of other persons deceased during the events, most of them M-19 militants. By October of 2020, the identities of the three persons whose remains were buried in Sandoval’s grave have not been established. The information produced by these findings shows that the remains of four deceased persons were not individualized in the inventory made by military judges at the crime scene in November of 1985, but future findings might increase that account again. The proceedings that gave place to these findings took place between 2015 and 2018. Following the pattern shared by other cases already mentioned, they resulted from the judgment handed down by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2014.

remains were transported to Medicina Legal for further analysis, storage, and delivery for burial.

The third stage of the operation consisted in the clearing of the site. Employees of Bogotá’s street sweeping company cleaned the floors, collecting debris and fragments of human remains on the ground floor, before loading these materials on trucks that transported them for their disposal in an unknown location (Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 127; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 208).

On the night of November 7, while the members of the task force were still engaged in the *Operación Limpieza*, President Betancur addressed the nation on radio and television in a fifteen-minute speech. That was his first public appearance since the beginning of the Palace of Justice events and contained much more than the statement of a politician in trouble: it was an anticipatory public exhibition of the main themes, metaphors and narratives of the representational universe constructed around the events between 1985 and today. The audiovisual records show a disheveled, pale Betancur sitting behind a desk with Colombia’s flag on the right side, speaking calmly to the camera without uttering the words “M-19” or “Palace of Justice” even once.<sup>158</sup> He first invited the nation to see the Palace of Justice events

as something that, at the end [he waved the right hand like sweeping away something from the top of the desk], should reinforce even more the idea of what Colombia [needed] the most [was] the spirit of coexistence” (Betancur, 1985: 280, my translation. See a transcription of the speech in appendix 3).

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<sup>158</sup> Broadcast at 9:00 p.m. A video containing about half of the speech was published in 2018 on the website of a radio station as support material of an article about Betancur’s career and recent decease (Blu Radio, 2018). By November of 2020, it was the only audiovisual record of the speech available on the Internet. The excerpts translated in this work have been taken from the transcription published by Valbuena (2015: 280-283), although corrections have been added when the text did not match the video.

### Chapter 3. From “the Peace Quadrennium” to the Carnage

After thanking politicians, intellectuals, and the media for their support and the “tranquil, balanced and patriotic way” in which the latter covered the events, he pointed out that

the criminal assault against the supreme institution of our justice, the arson attack against its archives—among them those related to drug traffickers—, the unspeakable crime against faultless Justices who, in first place, are poised Justices... *were* poised Justices, impartial and just, until they were criminally sacrificed [...]. That attack can only be explained by a disturbance of the mind, a disturbance of the spirits that I hoped to reach with dialogue and with the promise that, as we offered yesterday to the guerrilla leaders [...] we offered them impartial and poised trials and Justices guaranteed by the [Supreme] Court [of Justice] itself (*ibid.*: 280-281, italics added).

He then mentioned the “insanity” of the guerrilla commando again, alluded to the commitment of the government to defend the principles and institutions that embodied them, and informed that the

immense responsibility [for the counterassault] was shouldered by the President of the Republic, who, regardless of the repercussions to himself for good or for ill, personally made all of the decisions, gave all of the respective orders, keeping an absolute control over the situation, and therefore all that was done to find a solution was decided by him, not done on account of other factors that can and should be controlled by him (*ibid.*: 281, partially translated by Carrigan [1993: 261]).

That clarification was followed by the announcement that he enjoyed the support of all members of the establishment grouped in the so-called national unity, called the nation to join them and reaffirmed the commitment of his government to the defense of institutions and the quest for a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the guerrillas. He went on extending his condolences to the relatives of the Judiciary staff and members of the armed forces who perished in the events, pointing out that the deceased Justices had “fallen before the altar of the Law” (*ibid.*: 282). Then he thanked the members of the state forces for their service to the fatherland and peace and informed

that the reconstruction of the Palace of Justice would start immediately. Finally, he offered his condolences to

all the relatives of the deceased, whose understandable indignation is being nurtured by their suffering, the relatives and friends of soldiers, officers, policemen, fallen state agents, to the relatives of the fallen guerrillas, because all of them are our compatriots (*ibid.*: 283).

The President did not mention the victims who lacked institutional affiliation to the state, like the cleaning or maintenance personnel, the canteen staff, or those who were visiting the Palace of Justice when the assault began, nor extended his condolences to their families. That exclusion publicly inaugurated the differential treatment given in the decades to come by different state institutions to those affected by the events, but as I mentioned before, his speech contained other seminal elements. These were, in the order in which Betancur introduced them, the explanation of the fire that consumed the building as an arson attack intended to destroy files related to the prosecution of drug traffickers, the attribution of sacrificial meaning to the death toll, the association of the events to the theme of “insanity”, the narrative of the complete subordination of the armed forces to presidential authority on November 6 and 7, and the definition of the counterassault as an act of service to the fatherland and to peace. I return to these subjects in chapter 4, where I consider their re-emergence in the visual and narrative representations elaborated by diverse memory entrepreneurs, who sometimes give account of counterposed understandings of the Palace of Justice events.

#### **IV The Battle, The Holocaust, The Volcano**

The bloody outcome of the television- and radio-broadcast counterassault, with its hundreds of direct and indirect victims and the dark ruin it installed at Colombia’s most important square, unleashed a highly polarized public discussion that is still ongoing after more than thirty-five years. Within that context, Betancur’s allocution of

the night of November 7 was just a sort of inaugural act of a period of Colombian history that remains open until today.

In the three and a half decades that have passed since then, memory entrepreneurs of diverse origins have incessantly engaged with others in dynamics of cooperation and confrontation around their understandings of the events and their answers to one fundamental question: Does the political and moral responsibility for the casualties and material destruction left by the Palace of Justice events lie with the M-19 or with the government and the state forces? That might seem like a simple question, but answering it entails engaging in highly problematic endeavors such as deciding which of the many narratives about the events that circulate is the most accurate, drawing the line that separates victims and heroes from perpetrators, and being able to tell which historical lessons should be drawn for the present and future of the Colombian society.

On one side of that memorial field, a sector initially integrated by the Betancur government, the commanders of the counterassault and the supporters of both groups have strived since 1985 to legitimate an epic narrative (Betancur, 1985; Plazas, 2000, 2011a). That version follows Betancur’s initial characterization of the counterassault as a heroic defensive operation, negates or relativizes the involvement of state agents in human rights violations (Plazas, 2011a, 2011b), and defines the bloody outcome as the unfortunate but normal effect of a battle between the enemies of the democratic system and its legitimate defenders (Samudio, 1986; Plazas, 2000; 2011a).<sup>159</sup> On the other side,

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<sup>159</sup> The composition of that sector has changed considerably since the reactivation of the public discussion caused first by the creation of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice events in 2005, and later by its report (Gómez *et al.*, 2010), the legal proceedings conducted against some of the commanders of the counterassault and the condemnation of the Colombian state by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2014 (see, e.g., JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012, 2014). With the remarkable exception of Jaime Castro, Minister of Government under Betancur (2009, 2011), the former members of his government that subscribed the epic narrative have retired from the public discussion of the events.

### *Chapter 3. From “the Peace Quadrennium” to the Carnage*

a mixed multitude of agents of diverse origins and political affiliations has simultaneously done the same, but in the opposite direction, calling into question that epic narrative and representing the events in a great variety of forms interconnected by the common understanding that what most of them call “the Palace of Justice Holocaust” was a particularly crude expression of a long tradition of illegitimate use of violence by state agents against civilians. For many of them, inscribing that understanding in collective memories, history, art, and other dimensions of culture, and in some cases struggling for judicial truth and accountability for the crimes committed by state agents during the counterassault constitute ways to confront that tradition of abuse and resist its continuation (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 422, 435; CNMH, 2015a; Jiménez, 2019).

But the first chapter of these struggles waged around memorialization lasted only for one week, because, as I have explained in the introduction, seven days after the end of the counterassault, the subject was swept away almost completely from public concern and the media by the volcanic avalanche that destroyed the city of Armero and killed 22,000 of its inhabitants. Judging by the press and the accounts of those, who back, then were mourning their loved ones perished in the Palace of Justice or looking desperately for them in morgues, hospitals, and army bases, by the end of November of 1985 everything seemed to indicate that their questions would remain unresolved, and the events would be covered by oblivion. Still, during those days, many of the relatives of the disappeared started noticing that the fate of their loved ones was shared by others, and the incidental meetings and conversations happened at the entrance of Medicina Legal and the Cantón Norte soon developed into shared efforts to locate them, that have extended over more than thirty-five years (personal communications by Pilar Navarrete and Inés Castiblanco during my fieldwork in

### Chapter 3. From “the Peace Quadrennium” to the Carnage

Bogotá; Castiblanco *et al.*, 2018).<sup>160</sup> Thus, the memorial and legal struggles undertaken by them and a wide group of other agents, moved by the radio and television broadcasted events of November 6 and 7 towards cultural creation and political struggle, allowed them to revert the situation and inscribe the Palace of Justice events in Colombian culture as the most traumatic event of the nation’s modern history. Chapter 4 deals in a comparative manner with the ways in which they and those who define the events as a patriotic battle have represented them until today.

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<sup>160</sup> A similar pattern of incidental encounters of relatives of disappeared persons at the gates of state facilities developed into a common understanding of the phenomenon and subsequent collective struggle has been reported regarding Argentina’s Madres de Plaza de Mayo (D’Antonio, 2006: 33).

## Chapter 4. The Battle and the Holocaust: Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma

In this chapter, I will present the core of my analysis of the multi-layered processes through which a diverse multitude of memorial entrepreneurs from different sectors of Colombian society have produced a diverse repertoire of narrative and pictorial representations of the Palace of Justice events over thirty-five years, that reflect multiple understandings of them and the Colombian social-armed conflict.<sup>161</sup> The following four sections focus on the role of individual and collective agency for the inscription of the events in local history and collective memory as a traumatic event (I), the public discussions about how the events should be named and thus globally understood (II), the collective search for historical intelligibility of what happened through the elaboration of political or mythical explanations (III), and the problematic representation of the events in the only two museums that have tackled them until today (IV). My analyses of these conflictive processes of memorialization are grounded in the fieldwork and archive research commented in chapter 1 and are intertwined with the analyses and descriptions presented in chapters 2 and 3. In that way, the text guides the reader through the social field of memorialization of the Palace of Justice events and reveals the connections that exist between these processes and realms of culture, such as the longstanding tradition of memorialization of political violence in Colombia, Christianity, and the confrontation of the civil rights movement and state forces involved in human rights violations, that has characterized Latin American history since the decade of 1970. The chapter closes with an analysis of two failed attempts of representing the Palace of Justice events in a neutral way in official

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<sup>161</sup> A first version of this chapter was published in May of 2015 under the title "'The Holocaust' or 'The Salvation of Democracy': Memory and Political Struggle in the Aftermath of Colombia's Palace of Justice Massacre", in *Latin American Perspectives* (Leal, 2015b). The contents of that article have been incorporated to sections I, II and IV, but have been re-elaborated entirely.

memorial spaces in Bogotá that, although based on fieldwork conducted already between 2010 and 2013, provide valuable information about the challenges and paradoxes derived from that kind of undertaking.

## **I Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma**

From the many things that happened at the Palace of Justice—a hostage-taking, a devastating recapture, the destruction of the building, and more than a hundred deaths and disappearances—the massacre is the element that is most relevant to the discussion of the facts and of how to achieve justice. The exceptional place that massacre occupies in local culture—being neither the largest nor the cruelest in Colombian history—, and its condition of key component of collective memory after more than thirty-five years are the result of the articulation of the attributes of the Palace of Justice events themselves and several cultural processes that have prevented Colombian society from dismissing them, unlike the massacres of Las Bananeras (1928) or Trujillo (1986–1994) (see Leal and Gómez, 2013; Leal, 2015b).

Despite the different places they occupy in Colombian history and memory, the massacres of Las Bananeras and the Palace of Justice were both extreme in their magnitude, their indiscriminate and public nature, and the fact that they were publicly justified by state agents. They were also extreme in that they went beyond the borders of Colombian tradition of mass murder, contrasting with the clandestine massacres perpetrated by illegal actors, usually supported by state forces, in small villages or distant places in front of few witnesses.

Considering the number of victims, the massacre of Las Bananeras was enormous (more than 1,000, according to a report produced at the time by the U.S. embassy in Bogotá), but although it was discussed in the press and the legislature, there was no effective intervention of the judicial branch (Uprimmy, 2008). It was not inscribed in

official national memorial rituals, and the voices of its survivors and perpetrators—all of them dead by now, after more than 80 years—were scarcely recorded (Díaz, 2019). In contrast, although the victims of the Palace of Justice massacre were fewer, they were not agricultural workers from a peripheral region and their families but—among others—eleven members of the Supreme Court and the Council of State. This observation might seem to support the idea that the exceptional place occupied by the Palace of Justice events in Colombian culture and collective memory derives from the phenomenon known as “moral inequality of victims” (Winter, 2001),<sup>162</sup> but a less simple comprehension of the phenomenon makes it necessary to consider other elements.

The exceptional position occupied by the Palace of Justice events is related not only to the special dignity of some victims, but also to the articulation of objective and subjective elements during both the events and their aftermath. Among the objective elements, the high status of the Justices killed should certainly be considered, but also the place where the events happened: the seat of one of the three branches of the state’s government, located at the Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá, the country’s most important square. Additionally, while all the other massacres in Colombian history have been witnessed by few, part of the Palace of Justice events were witnessed by the vast

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<sup>162</sup> The denomination designates the unequal valorization of suffering according to the social status of those who suffer. It allows to understand some dimensions of the phenomenon I analyze here, such as the invisibilization of direct and indirect victims of the Palace of Justice events who lacked institutional affiliation to the state, performed by Betancur in his speech on November 7, 1985, and several differential reactions of Colombian society regarding murder. For instance, in September and October 2008, the murder of the child Santiago Pelayo by his father in Chía, near Bogotá, provoked an official visit by President Uribe, massive mobilizations, riots, and demands for life imprisonment. Nevertheless, no equivalent reactions emerged when the press reported about the assassination of nineteen impoverished young men from Soacha, another city in that metropolitan region, who were attracted by employment offers and killed by members of the army who presented them as guerrillas to obtain economic and professional benefits. The filicide was described in the press as “atrocious” and “detestable” (El Espectador, 2008), but the executions are still known as “*falsos positivos*”.

majority of Colombians who had access to radio or television. Thus, the partial broadcast and the ineffectiveness or delay of censorship that, as I mentioned in chapter 3, was imposed in the afternoon of November 6 turned a broad sector of Colombian society into indirect witnesses. This condition is actualized whenever these images and sounds are reproduced in documentaries, news magazines, and commemorations as expression of the repetitive temporality that, according to Dominik LaCapra and Jeffrey Alexander (2008: 203; 2012: 27), is typical of trauma at the personal and collective level.

The broadcasting of the Palace of Justice events brought the war into the *Lebenswelt* of many who under different circumstances would have continued their quiet existences, protected by words, silences, distances, and absent images. We, the spectators, were carried into the situation referred by Levinas (1991: 21), who pointed out that “in war reality rends the words and images that dissimulate it, to obtrude in its nudity and in its harshness [...]. It establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior”. That shared condition of being indirect, forced witnesses has emerged several times with strength in my memories and during the fieldwork. Although I was only four years old at the time of the events, the impact of the reports in news magazines and the distress of my grandparents—whom I lived with at the time—marked my memory of the period and constituted what I later considered the beginning of my awareness of the existence of a reality beyond the spaces in which I lived, played, and learned. On the other hand, the accounts recorded during my fieldwork in interviews and commemorations usually began with the radio-broadcast demand for a cease-fire by the Chief Justice, followed by images of tanks shooting at the Palace and entering it, and ended with the image of the building in flames (Figure 21).



Figure 21. Héctor Osuna, 1985. *Rasgos y Rasguños*. The first frame alludes to the destruction of the first Palace of Justice during El Bogotazo. *El Espectador*, November 10, page 3A.

The sequence does not reflect the chronological order of the events because the appeal to stop the counterassault launched on the radio by Chief Justice Reyes Echandía took place at around 4:00 p.m., two hours after the tanks had entered the facility (cf. chapter 3). That rearrangement of elements in the collective memory shows that the devastating counterassault, represented by the motif of a tank entering the Palace of Justice is understood as a direct consequence of Betancur's refusal to attend Reyes Echandía's plea. But the gap between the sequence of the events as they happened and the order in which they have been integrated into collective memory also empirically confirms that the subject of memory studies is not *what happened*, but *what people think and tell about it* in diverse languages and formats. In the second half of the decade of 2000, these three elements were institutionally consecrated when the Truth Commission on the Palace de Justice Events integrated them in its logo, which therefore constitutes a pictorial synthesis of a broad memorial consensus (Figure 22).



QUE CESE EL FUEGO

COMISIÓN DE LA VERDAD  
PALACIO DE JUSTICIA

Figure 22. Palace of Justice façade with rocket impact, on November 7, 1985 (unknown author). Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events logo (ca. 2010). The dark dot on the upper left side of the entrance represents the perforation of the façade by a tank rocket and alludes to the use of tanks in the counterassault (cf. chapter 3).

Although the images and sounds broadcast by the media in 1985 have been profusely articulated to visual and narrative representations of the events, the persistence of these events in collective memory should not be understood as a direct effect of the media coverage,<sup>163</sup> but as a socially constructed and transmitted trauma resulting from the collective work of memory entrepreneurs. In the following paragraphs, I will

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<sup>163</sup> For instance, the volcanic disaster that destroyed the city of Armero a few days later does not occupy such an exceptional place, although it was much more often broadcast and recorded and the responsibility of state agents for the death of around 22,000 people has been established.

consider a set of initiatives led by relatives and acquaintances of persons killed or disappeared during the counterassault, and by artists who have problematized the events and their repercussions in their oeuvre. The selection is not aimed to be exhaustive but representative of the main fields of culture in which the construction of these events as a cultural trauma has taken place between 1985 and today. Additionally, it expresses the multiple ways in which the Palace of Justice events impacted the life of people belonging to diverse sectors of Colombian society and the processes of memorial struggle and cultural creation unleashed by them.

### *Claims, Commemorations, Testimonies*

As in other Latin American countries (see Ropp and Sikkink, 1999; Guglielmucci, 2013), the struggles led by relatives of victims of human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault to locate the disappeared, bring perpetrators to trial and memorialize their beloved ones were largely directed against the state, with the support of secular and clerical non-governmental organizations.<sup>164</sup> The group known as “Familiares de los desaparecidos del Palacio de Justicia” [“Relatives of the persons disappeared from the Palace of Justice”],<sup>165</sup> among which I performed fieldwork

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<sup>164</sup> James Franklin (2008, 2010) has analyzed such struggles and alliances and the response of different Latin American governments to them between 1981 and 1995. The authors of the works published in a book edited by Thomas Rise and others (1999) analyze cases from Chile, Guatemala, Uganda, Philippines, Tunisia, Morocco, and South Africa, and argue that international visibilization is a decisive condition for the victims to achieve at least partial victories in their own countries. The recent history of the struggles for justice and reparation waged by direct and indirect victims of crimes perpetrated by state agents during the counterassault on the Palace of Justice confirms this (see Corte IDH, 2014).

<sup>165</sup> Traditionally the relatives of eight canteen staff, three visitors and one M-19 member: Bernardo Beltrán, Héctor Jaime “Jimmy” Berltrán, Ana Rosa Castiblanco, Cristina Guarín, Gloria Stella Lizarazo, Luz Mary Portela, Carlos Rodríguez, David Suspes, Gloria Anzola, Norma Constanza Esguerra, Lucy Amparo Oviedo, and Irma Franco. Relatives of Justice Carlos Oracio Urán, executed by the state forces, and Emiro Sandoval, who remains missing, have participated occasionally during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The only case of relatives of an M-19 member subjected to forced human rights violations who have taken part in the struggles waged by the group is that of

between in 2011, 2012 and 2013, has operated on two fronts since 1985: the tribunals, where administrative reparation and accountability have been pursued, and memorial entrepreneurship. These legal and memorial struggles, waged by them for thirty-five years despite the intimidation and harassment they have been subjected to, have been central to preventing the closure of the case due to inaction or obstruction of justice, and to keeping the massacre an object of public concern (Figure 23 to Figure 25).<sup>166</sup> At the same time, the group's work has contributed to the public association of the counterassault with the forced disappearance of evacuees, and to the articulation of narratives about the events within the frameworks provided by international human rights law (see Leal and Gómez, 2013). According to agents belonging to diverse social and professional groups I interacted with in the field, the conditions of possibility of these struggles were improved since 2005 by the creation of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events, the hearings, discussions panels and other events that

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Irma Franco's family. The relatives of the other M-19 members disappeared or executed by state forces have refrained from participating in most of these public struggles due to the stigma imposed on them by the political affiliation of the victims, and the possibility of suffering violence from state agents (Gómez *et al.*, 2010; personal communication from Josefina Jacquin, sister of the M-19 leader Alfonso Jacquin, February of 2014). The discrimination and violence suffered in Colombia by relatives of guerrillas fallen or subjected to human rights violations is well known but remains unexplored. I will return to the subject in next section of this chapter.

<sup>166</sup> Since the early aftermath of the events, relatives, and acquaintances of the disappeared have been subjected to pressure and intimidation by state agents and unidentified actors intended to stop their search (see Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 263-264; Corte IDH, 2014: 90). In 1998, the lawyer Eduardo Umaña Mendoza was killed by paramilitary agents in cooperation with members of the XIII and XX brigades of the army for his work as representative of trade unionists and relatives of human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault on the Palace of Justice. Although Colombia's prosecutor's office has identified some of the intellectual authors of that crime, they remain unpunished (El Espectador, 2020). In 2009, René Guarín, whose sister Cristina was evacuated from the Palace of Justice and forcibly disappeared by state agents (Franco, 2015), was forced by death threats to leave the country temporarily in 2009 (Palomino, 2015). During my fieldwork season of 2013, I was subjected to harassment in the cities of Santa Marta and Bogotá by unidentified actors probably related to the Army.

accompanied its work (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 23-27), and the publication of its final report in 2010 (*ibidem*).<sup>167</sup>

On the legal ground, after the assassination of Eduardo Umaña in 1998, the representation of most of the families in the group was assumed by the Colectivo de Abogados José Alvear Restrepo and independent lawyers, who have lodged claims in local and international tribunals. Some of these claims were admitted by local tribunals and led to the prosecution of several state agents and the conviction of only one of them,<sup>168</sup> but did not produce results regarding the location of missing people. Nevertheless, despite their modest outcome in terms of justice, they have played a central role in keeping the public discussion open and in inscribing the counterassault in collective memory as an operation that involved massive human rights violations (see Gibson and Salazar, 2011).

As I have already mentioned in chapter 3, the international instance provided by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has been more effective, since the

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<sup>167</sup> The work of the Commission contributed to make the human rights violations perpetrated by the M-19 and the state forces, the lack of accountability, and the suffering and struggles of the relatives of civilians and M-19 members killed or disappeared, visible locally and internationally. As I have mentioned in chapter 3, the account of the events proposed by the Commission is widely accepted as accurate despite the criticism attracted by some of its theses. The legal analyses by the commissioners—all of them former members of the Supreme Court of Justice—reinforced previous efforts intended to frame the actions of the M-19 and the state forces as violations of local legislation and international human rights law (Serrano and Upegui, 1986; Jiménez, 1986), and to inscribe them in collective memory within the meaning frames provided by scholarly discourses on human rights. Additionally, the memorial events organized by the commission across the country on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events (2010) mobilized members of the Judiciary and university professors who were disciples of Justices killed in the Palace of Justice to organize memorials, academic events, and publications. That reactivation of the public discussion awoke my interest in the conflictive memorialization of the events and eventually led to the research project that originated this work. Thus, my first fieldwork period developed during the sort of “memorial spring” generated by the Commission’s public activity in the city of Ibagué, capital of the department of Tolima, where the then-Chief Justice Alfonso Reyes Echandía, came from, during the last quarter of 2010.

<sup>168</sup> General Jesús Armando Arias Cabrales, commander of the XIII brigade of the army, convicted for the forced disappearance of Carlos Rodríguez, Bernardo Beltrán, Luz Mary Portela, David Suspes, and Irma Franco (TSDJB, 2014).

judgment handed down in 2014 by that tribunal against the Colombian state gave place to the first coordinated effort by state agencies to locate missing people and led to immediate results in that respect.<sup>169</sup>

Memorial entrepreneurship, on the other hand, has been fundamental to inscribing the Palace of Justice events in culture and collective memory as a breakpoint in Colombian history and an extreme case of abuse of power by state agents. According to the information provided in interviews and my own field observations, memorial entrepreneurship is highly dynamic among the members of the group and results from the combination of historically accumulated experience, memorial objects and social capital, and the financial and material resources at hand at every specific moment. The importance of the already mentioned historical accumulation of knowledge, goods and relations is expressed by the evolution of the memorial acts organized by the group on the anniversaries of the events, ranging from the modest participation in a general demonstration in 1986 to big interventions in the Plaza de Bolívar in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Figure 23 to Figure 25).

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<sup>169</sup> According to my own estimation based on the information published in the two official reports on the events (Serrano and Upegui, 1986; Gómez *et al.*, 2010), a total of eighteen persons—eleven civilians and seven M-19 members—disappeared either by intervention of state agents or due to the disorganized management of human remains during the so-called *Operación Limpieza*. By November of 2020, remains of eleven persons had been found in diverse graves, ten of them after 2014, the year in which the Colombian state was condemned by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (appendix 4).



Figure 23. Relatives of members of the canteen staff behind a banner with the text “DONDE ESTAN LOS DESAPARECIDOS DEL PALACIO DE JUSTICIA” [Where are those who disappeared from the Palace of Justice]. Bogotá, November 6, 1986. Archive of the Rodríguez family. Courtesy of Alejandra Rodríguez Cabrera.

While in the first commemoration the group only made use of a banner and flyers, the modern memorial acts are the result of several weeks of preparation and complex logistic operations. In them, the group tries to attract the attention of passers-by, the media and the government with speeches amplified by speakers, posters or other visually attractive elements, and an exhibition of pictures and illustrated albums. Thus, while the speeches and posters mobilize the narrative of the Palace of Justice events that underlines the responsibility of the Betancur government and the state forces for the bloody outcome<sup>170</sup> and present the group’s demands, the albums—which are exposed on wooden chairs marked with the names of the disappeared—focus on the twelve victims and the impact of their disappearance on their families (Figure 24).

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<sup>170</sup> In the group, diverse opinions exist about the responsibility of the M-19 and whether its members deserve to be considered victims or not. I refrain from commenting this and other aspects of its internal life for the ethical reasons exposed in the introduction of this work.

Additionally, in 2010, 2011 and 2012 the group took the initiative of installing memorial plaques, but only one of them remains at its intended place.<sup>171</sup>



Figure 24. Memorial act on the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Palace of Justice events held by relatives of persons disappeared during the counterassault and their supporters on November 6 and 7, 2013 in Bogotá's Plaza de Bolívar. Background: participants painting panels allegoric to the human rights violations perpetrated by state agents during the counterassault and the inaction of Colombian tribunals about these crimes. Foreground: passers-by looking at pictures and reading biographical albums exposed on wooden chairs marked with the names of twelve persons—eleven

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<sup>171</sup> The first one was placed in 2010 on a sidewalk in front of the *Casa del Florero*. It bears the text “25 AÑOS / UN GRITO DE DIGNIDAD CONTRA LA IMPUNIDAD ¿Dónde están las y los desaparecidos del Palacio de Justicia?” [25 years / A scream of dignity against impunity. Where are the female and male persons who disappeared from the Palace of Justice?] and is the only that remains. The second one contained the names of the twelve disappeared under the question “¿DÓNDE ESTÁN LOS DESAPARECIDOS?” [Where are the disappeared?]. The group planned to install it in the Casa del Florero, but the museum director did not allow them, arguing that the house was a historical building that could not be altered. Nevertheless, the plaque was later included in a section of the museum's permanent exhibit devoted to the Palace of Justice events. The third one was installed in 2012 at a column of the building that hosts the office of Bogotá's mayor on the western side of the Plaza de Bolívar. It contained the same list and mentioned the fact that by that time Colonel Luis Alfonso Plazas had been convicted for his responsibility in the disappearances. It was removed at some stage between April of 2016 and February of 2019 by request of the Colonel after he had been acquitted by the Supreme Court of Justice of all charges (El Espectador, 2016).

#### *Chapter 4. The Battle and the Holocaust: Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma*

of them disappeared, and one executed by state forces—during the Palace of Justice events. Taken by the author.

Each year, the core elements of the program are complemented by other activities organized by the members of the group, or by individuals or groups who offer out of their own initiative concerts, film projections or artistic interventions (Figure 25).



Figure 25. Enactment of the evacuation of Bernardo Beltrán and Lucy Amparo Oviedo by members of the army from the Palace of Justice to the Casa del Florero. Rayuela theater company, Bogotá, November 6, 2013. Taken by the author.

These developments express, on the one hand, the professionalization of memorial entrepreneurship resulting from three and a half decades of psychological, logistic, and financial support offered by two non-governmental organizations,<sup>172</sup> which has allowed the members of the group to process their loss and develop soft skills applicable to their public memorial work. On the other hand, they reflect the success of the group's contribution to the construction and intergenerational transmission of

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<sup>172</sup> Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz [Inter-Ecclesial Justice and Peace Commission] and Fondo de Solidaridad con los Jueces Colombianos – FASOL [Fund for Solidarity with Colombian Judges], supported by the Deutscher Richterbund [German Federation of Judges] since the beginning of the decade of 1980.

the Palace of Justice cultural trauma, since usually most of the material and human resources invested in the memorial interventions proceed from voluntary contributions by external individuals, groups or organizations that share the group's commitment to the memorialization of the events.

While the group focuses most of its activities around the anniversaries or official acts held in other moments of the year, some of its members also engage permanently in memorial work, bearing witness at schools and universities, giving interviews, and engaging in a great variety of initiatives related to other cases of human rights violations. That engagement, which secures the intergenerational transmission of the cultural trauma, made my fieldwork in the group possible and has nurtured a theater play (Torres, 1994),<sup>173</sup> a novel (González, 2010) and a movie (Arias *et al.*, 2015) that thematize the disappearance of Héctor Jaime "Jimmy" Beltrán and Cristina del Pilar Guarín, and the ensuing experiences of suffering and struggle of their relatives.

Most recently, in 2018, Pilar Navarrete and Inés Castiblanco, wife and sister of Héctor Jaime "Jimmy" Beltrán and Ana Rosa Castiblanco respectively, engaged with the theater company Entre Tensiones in the collective creation of *El Palacio arde* ["The Palace burns"] (Figure 26),<sup>174</sup> a testimonial play based on their own experiences of loss, suffering and struggle (Castiblanco *et al.*, 2018; Entre Tensiones, 2019). The play constitutes, therefore, a memorial stage<sup>175</sup> whose narrative and veritative dimensions

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<sup>173</sup> Politically engaged theater has a long history in Colombia, starting in the decade of 1960 (Cuervo, 2011; Satizábal, 2015; Parra, 2015). Its use as a tool for the memorialization of victims of state crimes and the trajectories of struggle and suffering of their relatives and acquaintances in other Latin American contexts has been analyzed by Brenda Werth (2010), Javiera Núñez (2013) and César Figueredo (2015) in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.

<sup>174</sup> Directed by Leonardo Rodríguez. A video of a show held on an unspecified date was published on Youtube on the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Palace of Justice events by Bogotá's Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación (link available in the list of references).

<sup>175</sup> The concept has been proposed by Claudia Feld to define "the spaces in which a plausible account of the past is presented for a public to watch and hear. Analyzing them requires to take into account at least three dimensions: a narrative one (the act of telling a story) in which what matters is who,

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are based on the testimonies borne on stage by Pilar and Inés themselves. Its spectacular dimension, on the other hand, is based on the recreation of their lives with Jimmy and Rosa and the struggles that followed their disappearance, articulated to their favorite music and elements that form part of the representational repertoire of the Palace of Justice events, such as Justice Reyes Echandía's desperate plea for a ceasefire or the fire that consumed the building. The play was released on November 8, 2018, in the context of the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the events, and according to Pilar Navarrete (personal communication, November of 2020) its immediate reception surpassed the expectations of its creators. In the sixteen months passed until the declaration of the Covid-19 lockdown in Colombia on March 25, 2020, the play was presented thirteen times in memorial spaces, theaters and universities in Bogotá and Pasto, and six times in schools in Bogotá, reaching approximately 2,000 people (Entre Tensiones, 2019; personal communication by Pilar Navarrete, November of 2020).

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how and to whom the story is told, a spectacular one (the *mise-en-scène*) in which the languages and elements employed in the staging are what matters, and a veritative one (the production of a certain truth) in which what matters is what kind of truth about the past is constructed and which other truths it contests" (2002: 6-7, my translation).



Figure 26. Inés Castiblanco and Pilar Navarrete present the pictures of Ana Rosa Castiblanco and Héctor Jaime “Jimmy” Beltrán to the public in *El Palacio arde*. Snapshot of a video of an unspecified show published on Youtube by Bogotá’s Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación in November of 2020.

### ***Art as Memorial Entrepreneurship***

For the artists Beatriz González, Doris Salcedo and Josefina Jacquin, the Palace of Justice events were a brutal expression of the Colombian conflict that imposed existential and artistic turning points. Although their memorial work has had a different, more localized impact than the multidimensional entrepreneurship of the actors just considered, their oeuvre and testimonies have contributed to the construction and transmission of the cultural trauma in Colombia and abroad. Moreover, their initiatives constitute counterpoints to the silence imposed by the National Museum of Colombia in its permanent exhibit on official history, reflect the strong capacity for political agency of artists and show how public aesthetic

representation can be used within the legitimate culture as a tool for resistance against the silences imposed from within the same field.

### Beatriz González: “I cannot laugh anymore”

Beatriz González was born in 1932 in Bucaramanga and studied art at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá. Speaking about her work in a biographic documentary, she said that

with the burning of the Palace of Justice, the death of the Justices, the death of a lot of civilians, I told myself: ‘I cannot laugh anymore’. That is the very clear conclusion I arrived at. This country was not a comedy anymore. It was a tragedy, and all of us were about to begin to cry. (García, 2010, my translation.)

She then alluded to the memorial program that has articulated her oeuvre after the Palace of Justice events, pointing out that Colombia

is a very harsh country, and I think that people should remember not only the courage of the national heroes but also the courage of the people and the struggles that there have been. [...] I think that people should keep in mind that things here have not been easy. (*Ibid.*)

These two elements are a constant throughout González’s comments about her life and oeuvre, turning exhibitions and interviews into memorial stages in which she publicly actualizes her understanding of the Palace of Justice events as an overwhelming expression of the brutality of the Colombian conflict, and pointing out President Belisario Betancur as the main responsible. That permanent commitment to the memorialization of the events and their impact on her oeuvre has placed two works from 1986 and 1987 at the center of exhibitions and academic works on her trajectory, both titled *Señor presidente, qué honor estar con usted en este momento histórico* [“Mister President, what an honor to be with you in this historic moment”] (Figure 27), in which she points out Betancur as perpetrator. In that way, González’s memorial entrepreneurship ultimately turned curators, critics and intellectuals into involuntary

agents of her commitment to inscribe the Palace of Justice events into collective memory as an exceptionally brutal event of Colombia's modern history (Toscano, 1999; Rodríguez, 2005; Villegas, 2005; Malagón, 2008).



Figure 27. Beatriz González, 1986 and 1987. *Señor presidente, qué honor estar con usted en este momento histórico*. Oil on paper, 150 x 150 cm, private collection. Pastel and charcoal on paper, 150 x 150 cm, unknown location.

Both versions of *Señor presidente, qué honor estar con usted en este momento histórico* were inspired by a press picture from the time (personal communication from Beatriz González, November of 2011), and they allude to Betancur's assumption of full responsibility for the counterassault in his speech of November 7, 1985. Both works represent Betancur sitting at a table, smiling, and surrounded by members of his cabinet and the state forces. In the first one, a burnt, deformed corpse that evokes the condition in which many victims were found occupies the center of the table. In the second one, a bunch of red anthuriums occupies its place, Betancur wears glasses and two officers occupy the margins of the composition. The artist has not explained the specific conditions of production of the works or their differences, but it is easy to imagine that the first one alludes to the actual results of the counterassault, while the second one alludes to the official narrative about them.

The current localization of the first work is unknown, while the second one forms part of a private collection. None of them is part of any permanent exhibit, but given that they are the only works in González's oeuvre that memorialize the event which, according to her own account, reoriented her oeuvre in November of 1985, they have appeared frequently in retrospective individual or collective exhibitions (Universidad de los Andes, n.d.), and even gave name to an individual exhibition hosted in 1998 by the Museo del Barrio in New York City (Villegas, 2005: 215).

### **Doris Salcedo: "It is not just a visual memory"**

Doris Salcedo was born in 1958 in Bogotá and studied art at the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano. A disciple and old friend of Beatriz González, to whom she credits her education, Salcedo is renowned as "one of the most influential sculptors working today" (Grynsztejn, 2015: 7). When she was granted the one-million-dollar Nomura Award in October of 2019, the biggest monetary art price in the world (Holmes, 2019), the jury summarized her trajectory and agenda in the following way:

For more than thirty years, Doris Salcedo has been making sculptures and installations that capture the anguish associated with the loss of loved ones and preserve the memory of traumatic events in the long civil war in Colombia. However, her language has an empathy and her materials an everyday character that give her work a universal meaning that speaks to people across the world. (Nomura, 2019)

Like Beatriz González, whenever she speaks about her career, she underlines the influence of the Palace of Justice events, but given that she was only twenty-seven years old when they happened, their place in her oeuvre is not that of a breaking point but rather of a foundational event:

A few months after I returned to Colombia in 1985, having spent a year in Europe and two years in New York, the Palace of Justice in Bogotá was occupied by guerrilla forces. The violence that ensued ended in a horrific tragedy. It was something I witnessed for myself. It is not just a visual

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memory, but a terrible recollection of the smell of the torched building with human beings inside ... it left its mark on me. I began to conceive works based on nothing, in the sense of having nothing and of there being nothing. (Basualdo, 2000: 17.)

As in the case of Beatríz González, but on a larger scale, the articulation of individual memories and explanations of the origins of her artistic agenda has the effect of turning interviews, exhibitions, reviews and analyses of her oeuvre into memorial settings for the construction of the historical exceptionality of the Palace of Justice events in Colombia and abroad.<sup>176</sup> That sustained presence of the events in the comments of her trajectory is noteworthy, taking into account that *Noviembre 6 y 7*, one of her three works on the subject,<sup>177</sup> was an installation on the façade of the current Palace of Justice building that replaced the one demolished after the events of 1985, and of which only photographic records remain. The work, performed in 2002 on the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events, started on the date and hour that the take began (November 6, 11:45 a.m.) and continued until the date and time on which the counterassault was officially completed (November 7, 2:30 p.m.). Within that time span, two hundred eighty chairs similar to the ones used by the relatives of twelve of the disappeared to represent them were slowly lowered from the rooftop in front the eyes of passers-by.<sup>178</sup> Thus, these pieces of furniture, inscribed in public culture by the relatives of the disappeared as symbols of their absence, formed a cascade on both sides of the southeastern corner of

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<sup>176</sup> See, e.g., Cole, 2011; Finkel, 2015; Martínez, 2015a; Huyssen, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> The others are *Tenebrae Noviembre 7, 1985* (1999–2000, lead and steel, 193 x 561 x 5550 cm, Vancouver, private collection) and *Noviembre 6* (2001, stainless steel, lead, wood, resin, and steel in three parts, dimensions variable, Zurich, Daros-Latinamerica AG Collection).

<sup>178</sup> In a conversation with the author in May of 2011 in Malmö, Sweden, Doris Salcedo excluded any intentional relation with the chairs used by the relatives of people disappeared from the Palace of Justice. Pilar Navarrete, one of the most prominent members of the group of relatives of the disappeared cannot recall whether the group started using the chairs as memorial elements before Salcedo's installation or after it (personal communication, December of 2020).

the building (Figure 28), which occupies the area that was consumed by the fiercest flames in 1985 (Figure 19).



Figure 28. Doris Salcedo, 2002. *Noviembre 6 y 7*. Installation. Picture by Sergio Clavijo.

According to opinions of passers-by recorded by the press, *Noviembre 6 y 7* generated a socialization effect like the one provoked by the media in 1985. It was different, though, in that in 2002 the subject was not the outbreak of war in the Plaza de Bolívar itself, but the experience of its annual return to the present of many people who could not or did not want to forget the events. Miguel Castro Conde, a 48-year-old man who had come to Bogotá escaping from violence, was quoted saying: “This homage is for the relatives of those who died there and for all of us who pass by and look at it. It is

hard, very hard. I cannot find words to describe it". And Germán Peña, a 47-year-old unemployed man, commented:

It is a symbol. It seems to me that I can see the turmoil of that day, how they shot and how it caught fire. The falling chairs point to a life which is falling, ending. They are like hanging by a thread [idiom: "cogidas con babas"]. It is possible to see the lament of the people who asked for a negotiated solution instead of a clash. (*El Tiempo*, 2002, my translations).

Nevertheless, the opinions registered by *El Tiempo* give account of more than the impressions caused by Salcedo's intervention. They express the central place occupied by the counterassault, the fire that consumed the building and Chief Justice Reyes Echandía's plea for a ceasefire in the cultural trauma constructed about the Palace of Justices events.

### Josefina Jacquin: "Because I want to, I can do it, and I'm not afraid"

Josefina Jacquin's background and work are different from those of Beatriz González for various reasons. Born in the Caribbean city of Santa Marta in 1960, she studied restoration and museology at the *Università Internazionale del'Arte* in Florence, Italy, and visual arts at San Francisco Art Institute, in the United States.<sup>179</sup> Although she witnessed the Palace of Justice events from afar because she lived in Italy by that time, they deeply impacted her and her family because her oldest brother Alfonso was the second commander of the M-19 commando that seized the facility and was subjected to forced disappearance after having been evacuated by the army (*Noticias Uno*, 2018). In the immediate aftermath of the counterassault, her sister Lilia tried to locate Alfonso's corpse at *Medicina Legal*, but noticed the perils such an activity could entail after hearing Colonel Plazas ordering the immediate detention of people who asked

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<sup>179</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all references to Josefina Jacquin's work and biography are taken from the transcription of a non-directive interview with the author held in February of 2020, and numerous chat-based conversations held between then and March of 2021.

for information about deceased guerrillas for interrogation.<sup>180</sup> She found a way to immediately leave the place discretely and did not stop when she heard people calling her by her surname on the street in front of Medicina Legal, for fear of being arrested. Years later she found out that those calls had been made by relatives of other disappeared persons, but in November of 1985 she was too shocked, afraid and inexpert to even consider that possibility. Not knowing if Alfonso was dead or alive, the family kept trying to locate him in a period in which Lilia's apartment in Bogotá and her father's house in Santa Marta were raided by state forces, and later suspended the search after a childhood acquaintance of Alfonso senior, who occupied a high position in the secret service (DAS), called him to say: "Ponjacquin, stay put. Don't try to find out or do anything, because you have a family and kids who need you".

That was the beginning of two decades of fear, silence and hidden grief in the family that affected everybody, but was particularly destructive for men because, "you know", comments Josefina, "in such a patriarchal society like the Colombian, women have their own ways of processing things, but men are forced to swallow everything". During these twenty years, almost everybody enclosed in individual suffering, carrying on their backs the stigma of being immediately associated with "the guerrilla who seized the Palace of Justice", facing the rejection and insults of people unknown to them at the workplaces, public offices, and wherever else the circumstances forced them to tell their surname.<sup>181</sup> That was also a period of intra-familiar silence over which the specter of the unspeakable subject, Alfonso's disappearance, hovered especially on

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<sup>180</sup> The stigmatization of relatives by state agents of victims who looked for victims at Medicina Legal has also been reported by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 211).

<sup>181</sup> The painter and M-19 member Armando Martínez, partner of Cristina Garzón, who by the time of the Palace of Justice events taught at the Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes in Cali, suffered a similar pattern of aggression and ostracism. He was subjected to harassment by colleagues and acquaintances in the aftermath of the events, until he was forced to resign and leave Cali (Falla, 2014).

anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas and New Year's Eves. Josefina's memories of her last encounter with Alfonso are associated precisely to one of these dates: in the evening of December 31, 1982, they met in her boyfriend's house in Santa Marta. Alfonso was happy, making jokes and laughing with those white teeth of his, well dressed, wearing the red shirt with which she depicted him in a portrait in 2010 (Figure 30). After that meeting, she moved to Italy, Alfonso left his position as university professor and transited to clandestine political activity, and they never saw each other again.

After the Palace of Justice events, Josefina managed to encapsulate the suffering for two years, until she returned to Colombia in 1987 and was confronted with discrimination for being "the sister of the guerrilla", the extermination campaign against Unión Patriótica militants, and the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Pablo Escobar in his war against the government. At that time, the grief for "Pompo", as Alfonso was known in the family, ran out of control and mixed with her own experience of everyday violence in Colombia, until the situation became unbearable, and she returned to Italy in 1988. Later, she moved to the United States, where she is living until today, and has kept returning to Colombia regularly to visit her family and to expose her work, but without the plan of settling in the country again.

Given the way in which the counterassault ended and the reports by the army about the decease of all M-19 members that had seized the Palace of Justice, the family understood relatively early that there was no hope of finding Alfonso alive. But they kept the hope of finding his remains at some time and witnessed with a mix of sadness and rage that not only he was permanently excluded from official and extraofficial lists

of disappeared persons.<sup>182</sup> He was “erased” even by the M-19, whose leaders never mentioned him nor asked about his whereabouts.

In 2005, in the context of the reactivation of the public discussion about the events provoked by the appointment of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice events, Josefina’s sister Lilia decided to reactivate the search. At that point, Alfonso’s exclusion from official lists gave place to the impossibility of registering him as disappeared in tribunals and other instances, which was experienced by the family as insulting, because his presence in the Palace of Justice is confirmed by his participation in the radio-broadcast interview in which Chief Justice Reyes Echandía asked for a ceasefire. During one of his holidays in Colombia, Josefina accompanied Lilia to a meeting with a high-ranking government official, native of the Caribbean region like them, who, according to a common acquaintance, was interested in supporting their quest. They met her in her office, she listened to their account of the past years and their renewed attempt to locate Alfonso and answered from the other side of her desk: “I will see what I can do, but I want to tell you that I am happy to know that he was *fried* there with the others” [“Voy a ver qué puedo hacer, pero eso sí tengo que decirles que a mi me alegra que lo hayan fritado allá con los otros”]. It was like a slap in the face, and although Lilia and Josefina were already used to be treated with disdain, the cold, calculated way in which that display of cruelty was performed left a deep impression on them. On that day, they did their best to end the meeting peacefully, because at the end of the day their host was a powerful politician who could do harm if she felt compelled to revenge an affront, so they thanked her for receiving them and left.

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<sup>182</sup> The already mentioned anti-subversive bias of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice events expresses itself in the fact that six of the seven M-19 members who were subjected to forced disappearance were excluded from the list of disappeared persons included in its final report (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 261-265; appendix 4). Jacquin was also excluded from other lists (see Serrano and Upegui, 1986; Maya and Petro, 2009).

A couple of years later, when Josefina told me in 2014 about the suffering of her family and the struggles led by Lilia, she also told me that their experience from that second period of search had let them discover a particular way in which a sector of Colombian society exercises power over the relatives of disappeared guerrillas. She summarized it as follows:

It seems that in addition to the fact that they were disappeared, a lot of people are committed to punishing us just because we are their relatives. They want to erase them from history as if they had never existed, and not let us mourn them, as if we had no right to mourn. We just want to be able to bury Pompo and then go and have a cup of coffee like everybody else, dammit! But that is too much for them.<sup>183</sup> (My translation.)

That awareness moved Josefina to close the period of silent mourning and engage in memorial entrepreneurship. Thus, in 2010 she took the opportunity offered by an artist-in-residence program at the Kala Art Institute in Berkeley, California, to produce the serigraphic series *Noviembre 1985*. The work consists of twelve screen prints that represent in six images the Palace of Justice events and characters associated to their immediate historical context (Figure 29 and Figure 30).

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<sup>183</sup> The deprivation of the right of the relatives of the M-19 members who seized the Palace of Justice to bury and mourn their loved ones has also been mentioned by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice events regarding the experience of the family of Cristina Garzón (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 222).



Figure 29. Josefina Jacquin, 2011. *La toma del palacio* and *Belisario Betancur*, from the series *Noviembre 1985*. Screen print on paper, 76 x 112 and 112 x 112 cm respectively. Courtesy of Josefina Jacquin.

Like in other representations of the events, the image chosen is that of the tank entering the building, although she stretched up the gate in allusion to “the dark period of Colombian history that had begun started with [these events] and continued with the extermination of the Unión Patriótica, the bombs of the Medellín cartel and all those terrible things that happened later”. The characters chosen are President Betancur, Alfonso Jacquin, Omaira Sánchez—the most famous victim of the Armero catastrophe—, Pablo Escobar and María Mónica Urbina, Miss Colombia 1985.



Figure 30. Josefina Jacquin, 2011. *Alfonso Jacquin Gutiérrez, Omayra de Armero, Señorita Colombia* and *Pablo Escobar*, from the series *Noviembre 1985*. Screen print on paper, 112 x 112 cm respectively. Courtesy of Josefina Jacquin.

*Noviembre 1985* was conceived as an homage to the artist's brother and a synthesis of a period in which the Palace of Justice events, the Armero catastrophe and the violence sponsored by Pablo Escobar were mixed in the media with the news about the jet set and the national beauty contest.<sup>184</sup> The work was exhibited for the first time in the Mina Dresden Gallery and the Colombian consulate in San Francisco in February of 2011, and was expected to be exhibited in March of that year in the current Palace of Justice

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<sup>184</sup> Josefina categorically rejects the narrative about the involvement of Pablo Escobar in the assault on the Palace of Justice.

in Bogotá. Nevertheless, the exhibition was cancelled right before being mounted, the artist was informed via email by a secretary, and the justice who had been co-organizing the exposition never communicated with her again. She was informed later by a third person that the incident was the result of the intervention of the son of one of the Justices deceased in 1985, who informed the Supreme Court of Justice that he would not tolerate that the sister of one of the guerrillas who seized the Palace of Justice would expose her work there (Toro, 2015). His complaint was followed by a meeting in which the cancellation was decided, but the Court never officially pronounced itself on anything related to the issue.

The incident exemplifies the polarization that is typical to the social field of memorialization of the Palace of Justice events. But it also expresses the power descendants of high-ranking victims of political violence in Colombia exert over state agencies.<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, it did not prevent Josefina from exhibiting her work the next

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<sup>185</sup> The economic dimension of that dynastic privilege consists in access to high-ranking, well paid positions in public institutions, and is popularly known as “vivir del muerto” [“to make a living of the corpse”]. Far from being exclusive of descendants of victims who belonged to the establishment, that privilege is also enjoyed by descendants from leaders of legal or illegal anti-establishment organizations. The most relevant example for its relation to the aftermath of the Palace of Justice events is that of María José Pizarro, daughter of the slain M-19 leader Carlos Pizarro, one of the intellectual authors of the assault on the Palace of Justice. She was born in Colombia but spent most of her life abroad due to the risks derived of his father’s activity as guerrilla leader, but resettled in the country in 2010. According to the information available on Colombia’s civil service public data bank ([www.funcionpublica.gov.co](http://www.funcionpublica.gov.co)) between that year and 2017 she was appointed to diverse positions at public institutions, where she played roles that lacked relation to her technical studies in jewelry production. Between September of 2010 and March of 2011, she was appointed “researcher and curator” by the Museo Nacional de Colombia, in relation to an exhibition on the political life of his father which by that time had already been prepared, produced, and exhibited at the Casa América of Barcelona (see chapter 4). Between March of 2011 and March of 2013, during the term of the former M-19 leader Gustavo Petro as mayor of Bogotá (2012-2014), she was appointed at the city’s Secretary of Culture, Recreation and Sport under de designation *Divulgación* (“outreach”). Between May of 2013 and December of 2014, also during Petro’s term, she was appointed at Bogotá’s Centro de Memoria Histórica under the designation *Participación Víctimas* (“Victims’ Participation”). Later, she was appointed at the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, first between January of 2014 and December of 2016, under the designation *Estrategia de Participación* (“Participation Strategy”), and later between January and November of 2017 as “Leader” (*Líder*). That chain of appointments at

year in the Casa Museo Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá, and in 2014 in the Museo Bolivariano de Arte Contemporáneo of Santa Marta and the Museo de Arte Moderno of Cartagena. The transformation of her experience and relation to memorial entrepreneurship between the decade of 1980 and today becomes evident in one of her comments on her reaction to the veiled reproaches she receives from people every once in a while:

Sometimes people ask me why I made this work, because people are uneasy with the fact that I—the sister of the guerrilla—address such subjects. And my answer is: because I want to, I can do it, and I am not afraid. That's it: I do it because I want to, I can, and I am not afraid!

That is what everything is about in the field of counter-hegemonic memorialization. The permanence of the Palace of Justice events in public discussion and collective memory as the most traumatic incident in Colombia's recent history does not derive from its relative brutality. It is the result of the legal and memorial struggles of relatives of the disappeared, artists and other memory entrepreneurs who, like Josefina Jacquin, have spent thirty-five years constructing and transmitting in private and in public a cultural trauma because they want to, they can do it, and they are not afraid of doing it. The socially traumatic nature of the Palace of Justice events is not the byproduct of violence on "the collective psyche": it is the multidimensional cultural result of individual and collective agency.

## **II The Battle and the Holocaust**

Although memorial entrepreneurs and groups like those considered in the preceding section refer the Palace of Justice events by names that point out the intention of

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public institutions was interrupted in December of 2017 by her participation in the foundation of the *Lista de la decencia* ("List of decency"), led by the already mentioned Gustavo Petro and other traditional leaders of left-leaning organizations, that conduced to her election as member of Colombia's House of Representatives in March of 2018 for the period 2018-2022.

achieving neutral denominations such as “the assault” (“la toma”) or “the events” (“los hechos”), others call them “the battle” or “the holocaust”. In this section, I will show that calling the events “the battle” is consistent with the epic narrative launched in November of 1985 by the Betancur government and the armed forces, while the application of the figure of “holocaust” is the result of an ancient local representational tradition of Christian origin that consists in attributing sacrificial meanings to collective, violent death. My analysis shows that these different ways of naming—that is, representing—the events express different understandings of the Colombian conflict and disputes about the historical intelligibility of what happened.

### ***The Battle***

Given the well-established participation of state agents in instances of excessive use of force and human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault and its immediate aftermath, the epic narrative about the Palace of Justice events that depicted these agents as national heroes was later abandoned by Betancur (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 343-344). Nevertheless, it has been upheld by the commanders of the counterassault and regained notoriety when some of them were prosecuted for human rights violations perpetrated against civilians and M-19 members.<sup>186</sup> Like on November 6 and 7, 1985, Colonel Luis Alfonso Plazas has been the most vocal of these officers in the long aftermath of the events, and the public discussion launched by his indictment in 2008 opened the possibility of observing and recording the narratives elaborated by him and his supporters. That exceptional scenario was closed seven years later with his acquittal by the Supreme Court of Justice (Salazar, 2015), and although he published another book on his participation in the counterassault later (2016), the visibility of these sectors and their narratives of the events has receded.

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<sup>186</sup> JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012, 2014.

The charismatic Colonel Alfonso Plazas has presented his own narrative about the Colombian conflict and what he calls “the battle of the Palace of Justice” in three books (2000; 2011a; 2016) and multiple interviews. He is, therefore, a highly dynamic memory entrepreneur whose accounts of international and local history, framed by the National Security Doctrine and a bipolar *Weltanschauung* inherited from the Cold War, have been widely appropriated by those who blame the M-19 for the catastrophic results of the Palace of Justice events. During the period opened by his indictment and closed by his acquittal, that adherence has been publicly expressed in support campaigns by agents who defined him and the other commanders of the counterassault as victims of unjust trials (see Leal, 2015a, 2015b).

Plazas’s account of the Palace of Justice events and of his indictment points out that between 2008 and 2015 he had been the victim of a criminal revenge by the guerrillas who had been defeated by him and his soldiers in 1985, when they impeded that the terrorist group M-19 took over power and imposed a totalitarian regime with the support of foreign Communist allies, Pablo Escobar, and other drug traffickers. After that defeat, the guerrillas had changed their tactic, demobilized, and infiltrated the democratic system in general and the Judiciary in particular, with the intention of taking revenge against the commanders of the heroic troops who had defeated them in 1985, and of subjugating the armed forces in general (2011a: 382-383). But taking revenge would have been just one of the strategic aims of that subversive plan. The other and most important aim would have been to achieve from within the state what they could not achieve with bombs and weapons: to substitute the democratic system with a communist dictatorship (2011b).

Consistent with that vision, the neo-Nazi groups Tercera Fuerza and Movimiento Nueva Sociedad,<sup>187</sup> together with other right-leaning groups, publicly supported Plazas during the seven years from his indictment until his acquittal, presenting him as a political prisoner and demanding his liberation (Figure 31; Rugeles, 2013; Leal, 2015a). Additionally, the neofascist Movimiento Vanguardia Nacional and the Asociación Colombiana de Oficiales en Retiro – ACORE (Colombian Association of Retired Commissioned Officers) declared November 5, the day before the anniversary of the Palace of Justice events, “national day of the fallen hero,” and organized gatherings in front of Bogotá’s cathedral. During my three fieldwork periods, these events gathered just about ten people and took place only in 2011 and 2012, but they were a clear reaction to Plazas’s indictment, and to the commemoration organized by the relatives of disappeared persons on the following day almost in the same place. They were, therefore, the spatial expression of the memorial struggles waged by Plazas from jail and by his supporters in diverse electronic and geographic spaces.

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<sup>187</sup> Both represent the Palace of Justice events within the meaning frames provided by Nazi anti-Semitic anticommunism, and older conspiracy theories derived from the Counter-Enlightenment (Leal and Gómez, 2013). At the time of my fieldwork, these groups were articulated locally to the Catholic fundamentalist organization Sociedad de San Pío X and to international partners from Spain and Venezuela (Rugeles, 2013; Leal, 2015b), but in December of 2020—the time of the final correction of this work—it is practically impossible to follow their online presence because they migrated from websites and blogs to closed Facebook groups.

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[www.mievasociedadcolombia.blogspot.com](http://www.mievasociedadcolombia.blogspot.com)

Figure 31. An image used in 2014 by the neo-Nazi group Movimiento Nueva Sociedad in its support campaign for Colonel Plazas. Note the combination of red, black and white, the colors of the German empire and the Nazi party.

The narratives about the Palace of Justice events and the legal prosecution of state agents for human rights violations proposed by Plazas and his supporters are local products. However, they are not new, and they are ideologically and rhetorically connected to other exculpatory narratives made public in the region before by officers like general Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973), admiral Emilio Massera in Argentina (1985), and general Fernando Landazábal in Colombia (1985).<sup>188</sup> Like Plazas, all of them substituted the figure of the state agent involved in human rights violations with that of the heroic soldier who, instead of enjoying the appreciation of the people saved by

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<sup>188</sup> I have analyzed these connections in a book chapter titled “‘Esto no es justicia, es la venganza de la subversión contra los héroes de la patria’: luchas por la memoria de la violencia política desde la derecha en Colombia y la Argentina” [“‘This is not justice, it is a subversive revenge against the heroes of the motherland’: right-leaning memory struggles about political violence in Colombia and Argentina”] (Leal, 2015a). Regarding the reactions of South American armies to prosecutions for human rights violations, see the collective volume on the subject edited by Felipe Agüero and Eric Herschberg and their introductory article (2005).

him from the peril of a Communist dictatorship, returns from battlefield to face vilification and mistreatment.

That, of course, does not imply the negation the fact that some of the people who were in the Palace of Justice when the military operation began are still missing. Colonel Plazas has dismissed the issue, arguing that the problem of the disappeared does not reflect the involvement of the Army in human rights violations, but the effects of the poor management given to the corpses during the *Operación Limpieza* (2011). Nevertheless, he has taken care of also pointing out that “what took place in the Palace of Justice was a battle, and people disappear in all battles” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 377).<sup>189</sup>

### *The Holocaust*

Contrary to what the post-war, Western common sense might indicate, the extended use of the name “Palace of Justice Holocaust” in the press, by members of the Judiciary and government officials is not grounded on the direct association of the events to the Shoah but expresses a local tradition of usage of sacrificial metaphors—frequently charged with secular meanings—to refer to politically motivated collective murder. Thus, a non-exhaustive analysis of historical sources makes it possible to track the usage of the words “*sacrificio*” [“sacrifice”], “*hecatombe*” [“hecatomb”] and “*holocausto*” [“holocaust”] in at least five sources from the period of 1929-1964.<sup>190</sup> Acknowledging the existence of that tradition makes it possible, on the one hand, to

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<sup>189</sup> The same argument was made public with identical wording in an unsigned article published on November 11 of 1985 in *El Tiempo* (El Tiempo, 1985e). Given that the already mentioned secret report about the Palace of Justice events commented the use of the press by the Army as a means of non-official propaganda (FMC-EN, 1985: 216), it is highly likely that the article was part of an operation intended to persuade the relatives of persons subjected to forced disappearance to stop trying to establish their whereabouts.

<sup>190</sup> Gaitán, 1974 [1929]: 140; Blandón, 1954: 289; El Tiempo, 1960; Guzmán *et al.*, 1962a: 44, 56, 90, 241, 280, 297, 300, Fals *et al.*, 1964. Additionally, in a work of 1999, Jorge Meléndez applies the term “holocaust” to two massacres perpetrated in 1949 and 1997 in northeastern Colombia (pp. 98, 156).

fulfill the purpose of exposing the cultural roots of the representational repertoire elaborated around the Palace of Justice events, which I have declared at the beginning of this work. On the other hand, it empirically reinforces the general conclusions of Jon Petrie's work about the existence of cultural traditions in which the word "holocaust" has been used extensively with diverse secular meanings, independently of its modern, generalized application to the Nazi judeocide (2000).<sup>191</sup>

The earliest records of the application of the noun "holocaust" to the outcome of the Palace of Justice events in a printed media of nationwide circulation are three mentions in the edition of *El Espectador* which appeared in the early morning of November 8, less than 24 hours after the official end of the retake, that was announced at 2:00 p.m. on the day before.<sup>192</sup> Two of them appeared on the front page, one in the bold capital letters of the grammatically odd title "Holocausto en la Justicia" ("Holocaust in the Justice", Figure 32), and the other one in a sentence of remarkable religious tones that served as introduction to a summary of the events. There, in a way that seemed to evoke the already mentioned sacrificial metaphor employed by President Betancur in his speech of the night before, the newspaper defined the outcome of the events as "a horrifying *holocaust in which sixteen Supreme Court Justices were sacrificed*" (*El Espectador*, 1985a, front page, my translation, italics added). But by representing the

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<sup>191</sup> Petrie's work focuses on the secular usage of the word "holocaust" prior to the Nazi judeocide, but the historical evidence provided by him goes beyond the substantiation of his main thesis inasmuch as it gives account of the word's multiple "cultural lives" in diverse contexts. A memorial plaque discovered by me in 2013 during a period of studies in Florence, Italy, offers another example. There, the façade of the Ginnasio Liceo Statale Michelangiolo (Via de la Colonna 1) exhibits a plaque installed in 1937 to pay tribute to two students of the school, fallen as volunteer soldiers during the colonial war in Ethiopia. It states that the "faith in the imperial destinies of the fatherland was heroically confirmed [by them] with the generous holocaust of their youth" (see appendix 5).

<sup>192</sup> *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo* are the two major Colombian newspapers since the decade of 1930. Although there is no information available about their market share during the decade of 1980, data available for the beginning of that of 1990 indicate that they controlled 30% of the daily sales, with 170,000 and 230,000 copies respectively. The other 70% was controlled by 32 local and regional newspapers (Bustos, 2003: 41).

outcome of the assault and the counterassault in sacrificial terms, the editorial board of *El Espectador* not only—or perhaps not necessarily—followed the pattern inaugurated by the President on November 7: they actualized the local variant of an old Western representational tradition,<sup>193</sup> according to which Colombians of several generations, social classes and political sectors have resorted, at least since the last quarter of the 19th century, to meaning frames, motives and metaphors derived from Christian tradition to make sense of their own politically violent past and present (see chapter 2 and Jimeno, 2012).

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<sup>193</sup> Domick LaCapra points out that “one aspect of the term ‘Holocaust’ [...] is a retrospective acceptance or perhaps appropriation of a sacrificial ‘logic’ in an attempt to make religious sense of traumatic events” (1994: 94). Giorgio Agamben follows the same line but goes further when he argues that the “doctrine of martyrdom [...] justifies the scandal of a meaningless death, of an execution that could only appear as absurd” (1999: 27). On the Western tradition of usage of sacrificial metaphors to represent massacres, see the works of José Emilio Burucúa and Nicolás Kwiatkowski (2010, 2014) and Fabian Campagne (2010).



Figure 32. Front-page of *El Espectador*, November 8, 1985. Note the usage of a picture of a tank in front of the Palace of Justice to represent the events.

The third association of the figure to the events appeared on page 13A, in an article titled “27 horas de angustia, sangre, terror y fuego” (“27 hours of fear, blood, terror and fire”). There, the also odd denomination “Holocausto judicial” (“Judicial holocaust”) occupied the first place among the fifteen subtitles of a lengthy report focused on the number and identities of the direct victims who had been identified until midnight of November 7: ninety-four civilians, members of the armed forces and guerrillas who, according to official reports, had been killed, wounded, or had disappeared during the assault and counterassault (De Castro and Enríquez, 1985). That article exhibits two remarkable features that anticipated elements of the ways in

which the Palace of Justice events have been memorialized between November of 1985 and the present.

First, unlike on the front-page, where the term “holocaust” appeared imbued of sacrificial connotations, the usage given to it on page 13A reflected another representational tradition, according to which the word does not connote a sacrifice, but *a great destruction of human lives* (see Petri, 2000). As I have already shown in other works (Leal and Gómez, 2012; Leal, 2015b), the polysemic nature of the term revealed by these diverse usages is the central feature of the social field of memorialization of the Palace of Justice events until today. Second, the authors of the article did not limit themselves to counting and identifying the direct victims of the assault and counterassault: they also hierarchized them on a descending scale ranging from Supreme Court Justices to M-19 combatants.<sup>194</sup> Thus, they also anticipated a broadly extended classification pattern that can be found in most of the comprehensive lists published in diverse contexts until the present.<sup>195</sup>

My archive research shows that, although *El Tiempo* attributed a sacrificial meaning to the destruction of human lives in the Palace of Justice during the early aftermath of the events that extended until the irruption of the Armero catastrophe in the press on November 14,<sup>196</sup> in the two newspapers under consideration the term “holocaust” was used almost exclusively by *El Espectador* during that period (El Espectador, 1985a,

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<sup>194</sup> Deceased Justices, assistant Justices, female lawyer, and secretary of the tribunals; disappeared Justices; wounded Justices; disappeared civil servants and employees belonging to the Judiciary, and persons who occupied lower positions in tribunals, worked in the canteen or were visiting the Palace of Justice when the assault began; deceased members of the military; wounded members of the military; deceased security and maintenance personnel, agents of the secret service, and M-19 militants.

<sup>195</sup> See Hernández, 1986: 30-31; CVPJ, 2010: 261; TSDJB, 2012: 562-563.

<sup>196</sup> “The legitimacy prevailed and cost *the sacrifice* of an illustrious public man, Justice Alfonso Reyes Echandía, Chief Justice *immolated* in order to fulfill the oath of putting law above force” (El Tiempo, 1985a, my translation, italics added).

Giraldo, 1985; Silva, 1985). In the weeks between the end of the counterassault and the first news about the Armero catastrophe, editorialists and reporters of *El Tiempo* used diverse words such as “assault” (Castellanos, 1985; Acero, 1985), “battle” (El Tiempo, 1985g) or “take” (Duarte, 1985) to denominate the events, and although the term “holocaust” was used twice in editorial pieces on November 10 and 11 with the meaning of “catastrophe”,<sup>197</sup> it did not change the newspaper’s fundamental line of avoiding its usage.

On November 11, the M-19 leadership introduced a turn in the public appropriation of the category with the publication of a press release in which it defined the confrontation between the commando and the state forces as a battle, but characterized the outcome of the counterassault as a holocaust, meaning a massacre perpetrated by the state forces (M-19, 1985b; see appendix 6).<sup>198</sup> Thus, the polysemic nature of the figure emerged within the first four days after the completion of the counterassault and anticipated the multiple meanings that would be conveyed by the term until today and its potential to make nominative unity within interpretative diversity possible (see, Leal and Gómez, 2013; Leal, 2015b).

It must be considered, nevertheless, that during the period in which I performed field and archive research, the use of the term “holocaust” to represent the outcome of the events as a massacre perpetrated by the state forces had receded almost

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<sup>197</sup> On November 10, “Ayatollah” (pseudonym of Rafael Santos) published an editorial piece in which he supported the armed forces and defined the M-19 operation as “un holocausto de suicidas” [“a holocaust of suicide people”], meaning “a great destruction” (Ayatollah, 1985). On November 11, an editorial note which had appeared on the same day used the same term to refer to the events as a catastrophe and proposed the dedication of a monument to the victims (El Tiempo, 1985f). The same meaning was attributed to the term by Emilio Urrea, peace commissioner of the Betancur government, in his resignation letter of November 10 (Mantilla, 1986: 85).

<sup>198</sup> An article in *El Tiempo* commented the release in the last of the three pieces in which the term was printed by the newspaper until the almost complete disappearance of the events from the press on November 14 due to the Armero catastrophe (Castellanos, 1985).

completely. As I have described in the preceding section of this chapter, the denominations commonly used by memory entrepreneurs who make state forces responsible for the immense death toll are the more technical term “take” and “events”. Within that context, both in that period and currently, the circulation of the figure “holocaust” has been almost exclusively associated to two meanings. First, that of “great destruction of human lives” which, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this subsection, has a long history in Colombian culture (see Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 94-95; Echeverry and Hansen, 2005; Castro, 2009: 204; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 19, 417, 438). Second, that of sacrifice of exceptional men in a sacred space (Peña, 1985: 289-299; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 22, 257, 327, 419).

At the time of my field and archive research the attribution of sacrificial meaning to the term was limited to the already mentioned instances in the report of the Truth Commission on the events, informal conversations and speeches by priests and representatives of state agencies held in commemorations. Nevertheless, it deserves particular attention because it constitutes another expression of the already mentioned role played by Christian meaning frames in the constructions of representations of political violence in Colombia (cf. chapter 2).

### ***From Carnage to Sacrifice***

The Christian concept of “holocaust” as a sacrifice in which the victim is incinerated completely was minted by the authors of the *Septuagint*, the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, completed in the first century of the Common Era (Dines, 2004: 1), as an equivalent to the Hebrew word “עֹלָה” (“*olah*”).<sup>199</sup> That transposition from

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<sup>199</sup> In the Torah and later Jewish sources, the Hebrew word exclusively designates a specific type of offering intended to repair a link with the Divinity damaged by a transgression, and is different, for instance, from thanks-giving offerings. I thank my teachers Rabbi Juan Mejía (Oklahoma City) and Rabbi Mendel Gurewitz (Offenbach) for helping me understand the diverse functions of sacrifices in Jewish law.

Israelite to Christian culture results of high relevance to my analysis,<sup>200</sup> since while the Hebrew word alludes to the “elevation” of the sacrificial victim burnt on the altar—a literal reference to the steam and smoke generated by its combustion—,<sup>201</sup> the Greek word is linked centrally with the victim’s complete incineration without alluding to its elevation.<sup>202</sup> That displacement of the attention from elevation to incineration introduces a decisive gap between “*olah*” and “holocaust” and establishes a foundational relation between the latter and Christian tradition.<sup>203</sup> Therefore, in this work I use the term introduced by the *Septuagint* and relate the attribution of sacrificial meaning to collective death in Colombian culture to Christian instead of Judeo-Christian meaning frames.

The conditions for the performance of holocausts are described in diverse passages of the Old Testament, among them the following from the book of Leviticus (1: 2-9):

[...] The man among you that shall offer to the Lord a sacrifice of the cattle, that is, offering victims of oxen and sheep.<sup>3</sup> If his offering be a holocaust, and of the herd, he shall offer *a male without*

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<sup>200</sup> The term is translated as “burnt offering” in modern Jewish and Christian versions of the Pentateuch (see Herzl, 1961; CBA, 1966; JPS, 2003; Alter, 2019; KJV, 2020). Reviewing the history of Christian translations of “*olah*” into English surpasses the scope of this work. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the first Catholic translation from 1610 known as *Douay-Rheims Bible* speaks of “holocaust” (ECRD, 1610), while its Protestant counterpart, the King James Version from 1611, speaks of “burnt sacrifice” (KJV, 1611). It is not known to me when the Catholic versions substituted “holocaust” with “burnt offering”. The panorama is completely different in the Hispanic world, as the most popular (Figari, 1995) Catholic and Protestant translations into Spanish (Martín *et al.*, 1964; Ricciardi and Hurault, 1972 and SBU, 1909 respectively) follow the *Septuagint* in the use of “holocaust”.

<sup>201</sup> The plain meaning of the root “עלה” is “to go up, rise; to come up, arrive”, so the word and its derivatives are also applied in the Hebrew bible to non-sacrificial objects such as geographic displacements and administrative acts (Jastrow, 1926: 1081-1082).

<sup>202</sup> I am indebted to my teacher Vered Hollander-Goldfarb from the Conservative Yeshiva of Jerusalem, who introduced me to linguistic and contextual analysis of the Hebrew Bible and has always been a generous and inspiring interlocutor.

<sup>203</sup> Translation of the Hebrew Bible and the linguistic and conceptual challenges associated to it has been tackled by a great variety of authors. See for instance the works of Pinchas Lapid (2004) and Robert Alter (2019).

#### Chapter 4. The Battle and the Holocaust: Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma

*blemish, at the door of the testimony [tabernacle], to make the Lord favourable to him: <sup>4</sup> And he shall put his hand upon the head of the victim, and it shall be acceptable, and help to its expiation. <sup>5</sup> And he shall immolate the calf before the Lord, and the priests the sons of Aaron shall offer the blood thereof, pouring it round about the altar [...] <sup>7</sup>And shall put fire on the altar, having before laid in order a pile of wood: <sup>8</sup> And they shall lay the parts [...] and the priest shall burn them upon the altar for a holocaust [...]. (ECRD, 1610, italics added.)<sup>204</sup>*

Hence, the biblical holocaust is a sacrifice of a perfect male in a sacred place, aimed at inducing a restorative, cleaning effect. Precisely the first two of these elements are the central attributes of a great number of narrative representations of the Palace of Justice events that have been made public between 1985 and 2020 by diverse memory entrepreneurs.<sup>205</sup> Thus, sources of diverse kinds abound in references to the Palace of Justice as a “temple”<sup>206</sup> or an “altar” (Betancur, 1985), mentions of the deceased Supreme Court Justices that allude to the perfect, male, sacrificial victim mentioned in

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<sup>204</sup> “[...] Cuando alguno de vosotros quiera hacer una ofrenda al Señor, podrá hacerla en animales, ganado mayor o menor. <sup>3</sup> Si su ofrenda es un holocausto de ganado mayor, ofrecerá *un macho sin defecto, el cual debe ser presentado en la puerta de la tienda de la reunión, para que el Señor lo acepte.* <sup>4</sup> Impondrá su mano sobre la cabeza de la víctima y le será aceptada *para que le sirva de expiación.* [...] <sup>5</sup> Inmolará la res delante del Señor, y los hijos de Aarón, los sacerdotes, ofrecerán la sangre, derramándola en torno del altar [...] <sup>7</sup> y los hijos de Aarón, los sacerdotes, pondrán fuego sobre el altar, dispondrán leña sobre el fuego <sup>8</sup> y acomodarán los trozos [...] y el sacerdote *lo quemará todo sobre el altar: es un holocausto, una ofrenda quemada [...].*” (Martín *et al.*, 1964, italics added.)

<sup>205</sup> They were also synthesized by a Catholic priest in his sermon at a memorial mass paid by members of the Judiciary in the city of Ibagué on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events (2010): “We have met today to commemorate this holocaust... so it has been called, with such an important word, which for us means ‘offering of the best’” (see the work of Iris Gareis [2010] with regard to the political function of rituals and the place occupied by symbolic communication in them). David Mantilla’s work (1986) contains a rich collection of testimonies and press excerpts in which the events were represented in sacrificial terms by a great diversity of agents between November of 1985 and the third quarter of 1986, but unfortunately most of them were reproduced without mentioning sources and dates, which undermines the book’s value as historical source.

<sup>206</sup> E.g. Jiménez, 1986a: 142; Plazas, 2000: 15; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 22, 78, 257, 327, 358; Bustos *et al.*, 2015: 18, 83, 117; El Tiempo, 2020.

Leviticus,<sup>207</sup> and instances of the application of the nouns “sacrifice”<sup>208</sup> and “immolation”<sup>209</sup> to the collective death that took place during the counterassault (Figure 34).

Disagreements emerge, however, about the effects attributed by Leviticus to holocausts: their restorative effect. Thus, some agents have represented the enormous death toll as a necessary sacrifice for the restoration of order and the preservation of institutions,<sup>210</sup> while others have represented it as the devastating effect of a gruesome sacrifice imposed by the illegitimate use of power.<sup>211</sup>

Most of the time these meanings about the sacredness of the building, the dignity of the Justices, and the utility of the sacrifice are diffuse in memorial and testimonial texts like the ones mentioned in the notes to the preceding two paragraphs, but there is a piece (Huérfana Ufana, 1985) which is worth considering because it densely articulates Christian meaning frames with a conservative interpretation of the Colombian conflict that is still shared by actors who justify the counterassault (see Castro, 2009; Plazas, 2016). It appeared on November 24, 1985, on the front page of the *Hogar* [Home] section of *El Espectador* and was presented as the statement of a deceased Justice’s daughter under the title *De una huérfana del holocausto de la Justicia: El sacrificio de un magistrado* [“By an Orphan of the Holocaust of the Justice: The Sacrifice of a Justice”]. Its authenticity should not be taken for granted, because it was published in the midst of an intense controversy about the legitimacy of the retake (which was

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<sup>207</sup> E.g. Betancur, 1985; Jiménez, 1986a: 335; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 23, 92, 427-447.

<sup>208</sup> E.g. Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 52, 63, 68, 126, JTP, 2010: 220; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 8, 102, 335, 422; Bustos *et al.*, 2015: 15, 16, 23, 24, 33, 117.

<sup>209</sup> In Spanish, like in English, the verb “*inmolar*” (to immolate) has a strictly sacrificial meaning. For sources in which it is applied to the collective death occurred in the Palace of Justice see, e.g., Serrano and Upegui, 1986: 135; Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 23; Parejo, 2010: 200; JCUPC, 2011: 16, 135, 147, 272; Bustos *et al.*, 2015: 45, 113.

<sup>210</sup> E.g. Ayatollah, 1985; Betancur, 1985; Plazas, 2000; Castro, 2009.

<sup>211</sup> E.g. Serrano and Upegui, 1986; Jiménez, 1986a: 276; Gómez *et al.*, 2010; Parejo, 2010.

publicly condemned by many relatives of the deceased Justices) and is probably a piece of propaganda intended to reinforce the government's position.<sup>212</sup> Nevertheless, it is valuable as an example of the optimistic use of the figure of "holocaust" to represent the gruesome death of more than one hundred persons in the seat of Colombia's Judiciary:

Frightened as he was by the noise, the machine gun bursts should have filled his heart as he faced the possibility of inexorable death on the altar of the fatherland [...]. I would almost say that he was delighted to see that his and his companions' sacrifice was going to be the price that our nationality had to pay for preserving the principles that were so dear to him. [...] Today I feel, paradoxically, amid my sorrow as an orphan, rich in greatness for having inherited from my progenitor what I know he lived in his last moment: the value of a sacrifice which, though unsought, was useful for the common good.<sup>213</sup>

It is highly likely that my suspicion is correct, and the "proud orphan" never existed. But what indeed exists and according to my research still has a long life ahead of it, is the idea that the people killed in the Palace of Justice were not just killed, but immolated. In collective memory, they are the sacrificial victims of the Palace of Justice holocaust.

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<sup>212</sup> This hypothesis is reinforced by a mention contained in the secret report by the army found in 2013 of their use of the media to "send messages [...] to the public opinion" during the Palace of Justice events (FMC-EN, 1985: 216).

<sup>213</sup> "Asustadizo como era frente a los ruidos, las ráfagas de metralla debieron henchir su corazón ante la posibilidad de una muerte inexorable en el altar de la patria [...]. Casi diría que se deleitó al ver que su involuntario sacrificio y el de sus compañeros iba a ser un precio que nuestra nacionalidad habría de pagar por el mantenimiento de los principios que le eran tan caros [...]. Hoy me siento, paradójicamente en mi dolor de huérfana, rica en grandeza por haber heredado de mi progenitor lo que sé que él vivió en su último trance: el valor de un sacrificio que, aunque no buscado, fue útil para el bien común."

### **III How could these things have happened?**

Disputes about the historical intelligibility of the Palace of Justice events are not limited to the question of how they should be named but extended to that of how they could have happened. The answers proposed are diverse, independent of the way in which the events are denominated, and usually tackle two main subjects: the origin of the M-19 operation and the authorship of the devastating counterassault deployed by the state forces. They focus, therefore, on the origins of these opposite military actions. In this section, I will consider both subjects, starting with the most contentious of them—President Betancur’s assumption of responsibility for the counterassault—and ending with a widely accepted, although fantastic explanation of the origin of the M-19 operation.

As I have shown at the end of chapter 3 and in the precedent section of this chapter, the early official narrative about the presidential control of the counterassault expresses an attempt by the commanders of the operation and most of Betancur’s government to build consensus around the idea that its outcome was a victory of the democratic system. In this section, I will consider the testimony of Professor Elvira Sánchez-Blake, a memory entrepreneur I met during my fieldwork, who calls that narrative into question and substantiates, based on her direct experience, a widespread inferential explanation of the counterassault as the result of a transitory coup d’état. Her account offers a glimpse on the relations between civil and military power that shaped the Palace of Justice events, and its reception in Colombia expresses the power and limitations of testimony for the construction of counterhegemonic memories of political violence.

At the end of the section, I will consider a fantastic, yet widely accepted narrative that associates Pablo Escobar to the M-19 operation and in many cases leads to moral justification of the guerrilla assault. My analysis will expose the cultural roots of that

consensus and the positive valuations of the guerrilla assault and the fire that is attributed to it.

***From “the first duty of a statesman is to be a good butcher” to “I was not consulted about that”***

On the night of November 7, when Belisario Betancur appeared on radio and television trying to convince the public of the restorative effects of the “collective sacrifice” that had taken place in the Palace of Justice, he also underlined that he had exercised full presidential authority over the counterassault “personally making all decisions, giving the necessary orders, holding absolute control of the situation” (Betancur, 1985: 281). These elements were the core of the definition of the events as a victory of the democratic order over subversive chaos, advanced by Betancur, most of his government,<sup>214</sup> and the commanders of the state forces. The distribution of roles among the protagonists of that narrative was clear: the M-19 and the drug barons supposedly associated to it were the enemies of the democratic system, the armed forces its saviors, and Betancur the supreme commander who led these heroes to the battlefield without considering anything but his supreme obligation to preserve the republican order (see Betancur, 1985; Plazas, 2016). That account of the events gave place to sharp criticism of Betancur as a ruthless politician who disregarded Chief Justice Reyes Echandía’s desperate plea for a ceasefire and by doing so refused to spare the lives of the more than one hundred victims (Jiménez, 1986a; Mantilla, 1986; Figure 27). Some of his detractors also claimed that by not suspending the counterassault Betancur delivered the Supreme Court of Justice into the hands of the army, allowing the military to kill

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<sup>214</sup> The consensus among the members of the Betancur government was broken in the early aftermath of the events by the then Minister of Justice Enrique Parejo, who since then has publicly criticized what he describes as an act of abuse of power by the armed forces through which their members took control of the situation, overriding the authority of the government (Carrigan, 1993: 255; Parejo, 2010: 159-184).

the members of a tribunal seen as an enemy for its firm opposition to the employment of human rights violations in counterinsurgent warfare (Peña, 1986: 60-61; Figure 33). In some other cases the criticism went beyond that, affirming that the Palace of Justice events were the repetition of another massacre perpetrated by the army against workers on strike in February of 1963, during Betancur's term as Minister of Labor (Peña, 1986: 217-221).<sup>215</sup> All these critics seemed to be confirmed in January of 1986, two months after the Palace of Justice events, when *El Tiempo* published Betancur's letter to another politician, in which he explained to him in a paternalist tone that "the first duty of a statesman is to be a good butcher" (Betancur, 1986).

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<sup>215</sup> On February 23, 1963, the army attacked workers from El Cairo concrete factory in Santa Bárbara, department of Antioquia, who had been on strike since January 23. The soldiers killed twelve workers, wounded thirty-two and arrested eighty. The way in which the government of that time and the press framed the action anticipated Betancur's version of the Palace of Justice events, since the massacre was presented as the result of a defensive action by the army, the workers were accused of using weapons against the soldiers, and the strike was depicted as a communist operation (Jáuregui, 2011). The events, which resembled the Masacre de las Bananeras, are known as Masacre de Santa Bárbara. None of the state agents responsible for it were ever prosecuted.



Figure 33. Unknown author, 1985 or 1986. Unknown title. Belisario Betancur presenting the head of Chief Justice Alfonso Reyes (in Peña, 1986: 212). / Benvenuto Cellini, 1545-1554. *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (detail), bronze and marble, 550 cm. Loggia dei Lenzi, Florence. Photography by the author. An educated guess about the political meaning of the intertextual link with the Greek legend would be that in November of 1985, Betancur turned out to be the hero who liberated the army from the surveillance of the Supreme Court of Justice and its paralyzing effect over illegal counterinsurgent warfare.

Betancur's assumption of responsibility for the counterassault was, however, more than an attempt to present its outcome as a victory of the democratic system. It was also an *excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta* that addressed the concerns of many who hypothesized that the government could have been subjected to a transitory coup d'état from November 6, until the end of the counterassault on the next day.<sup>216</sup> After the presidential speech of November 7, the rejection of these hypotheses was assumed by the rest of the government and the armed forces, who in general terms have spent

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<sup>216</sup> See, e.g., Santos, 1985; Samudio, 1986: 47-49; Vélez and Atehortúa, 1993: 249.

the last thirty-five years insisting that the subordination of the latter to presidential authority had never been called into question.<sup>217</sup> Although the accuracy of his initial account was publicly relativized by Betancur in 1991 and 2005 with statements about his “transfer of the command” of the counterassault to the army,<sup>218</sup> he never retracted his initial statements about the integrity of presidential authority during the whole operation. But Professor Elvira Sánchez-Blake, who in November of 1985 worked as a reporter at the presidential palace’s press office, contradicts these official accounts:

Elvira: –[On November 7, the second day of the Palace of Justice events,] journalists kept calling and we didn’t know what to do [because] it was very strange that [the President] did not answer the phone, did not say anything [...]. I checked and saw one of his aides [at the entrance of the President’s office], a man from the military, and then... usually he was very friendly to me, and then [I told him]: “Hello, officer, how are you doing?”, something like that... “What’s going on? Why doesn’t the President say anything?” [...] “I want to get in”. He answered: “You are not allowed to get in!”, and I asked “Why?”.

Hagai: –So he was not friendly anymore...

E.: –No, no! [He said:] “You are not allowed to get in! You are not allowed to get in!” And I asked, “Why?” [...]. [He answered:] “Because the President is not the president anymore, madame journalist!”. That sentence, these words. “The President is not president anymore. The one in charge is [Lieutenant General Miguel] Vega Uribe.” These were his words. I was [astounded], of course. He didn’t lose his stoic attitude for a second and didn’t allow me to enter, but I peered in and saw all the military there. The top brass of the military there! There... in the President’s office. I returned to my office and informed my coworkers: “We are under a coup d’état”. And they... Well, on the one hand... There was some stress, but on the other hand they [...] started joking about that, as if there was something to joke about. [...] Later we started hearing the news on the radio, they started saying “They are leaving the Palace of Justice”... Such things [...]. And Juan Gossain [said on the radio] “The Chief Justice is dead!” [...]. When I heard these words... Uh...

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<sup>217</sup> Samudio, 1986: 53-54; Echeverry and Hansen, 2005: 104; Castro, 2009; Plazas, 2016.

<sup>218</sup> “I did not order the use of tanks to enter the Palace of Justice. I was not consulted about that. The person in charge [was] the Military Commander and it was a prolonged operation. As commander in chief, I transferred the command to the Army” (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 128).

#### *Chapter 4. The Battle and the Holocaust: Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma*

[Closes the eyes and shakes the head]: It was so... Such a tension! [...] That was the moment when... I don't know what my coworkers were doing, I can't tell, and sometimes I ask myself, why didn't my coworkers do anything?! I went again and looked at the President's office [...] and nobody was there anymore. One or two hours before it was full of officers and soldiers, and suddenly everything was empty, deserted. I climbed the stairs and checked the President's office, and everything was empty, deserted [...]. I continued and arrived at the Council of Ministers [...] Nobody was there! [...] There were secretaries and so on, but the military were gone. Then I opened the Council of Minister's door and the President was there, just like you and me are here, and he said to me: "What happened?".

H.: -Was he sitting inside, or coming out of the office?

E.: -He was coming out. I suppose that he was at the door. I don't know if the door... It was not locked because I could open it, but I don't know if from the other side... I don't know, I cannot explain! I opened it and the President came out. He was with other people; I don't know who was there with him. [And he asked:] "What happened?". I was [astounded and answered:] "What do you mean? Mister President, everything is over!". [The President asked:] "And the Chief Justice?". [I answered:] "He is dead". He held his head and asked, "Are you sure, are you sure?". [My answer was:] "It is being reported by all radio stations". That was the end of our conversation. He held his head and I left because I thought: "I have nothing to do here". I gave the news to the President. That's what I can tell you. Nobody can tell me that it's not true [that there was a coup d'état]. It wasn't a dream.<sup>219</sup>

Professor Sánchez-Blake's testimony has been published and quoted in diverse works,<sup>220</sup> and although it was never explicitly addressed by Betancur, who died in 2018, it has been confirmed indirectly by other witnesses (Castro, 2008: 239; Parejo, 2010: 164). Paradoxically, despite her condition of direct witness and the credibility that might derive from the intellectual status she has achieved in the United States and Colombia as writer and Literature professor, her testimony has been excluded from

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<sup>219</sup> Interview with the author, Chicago, May of 2014. See appendix 7 for an unabridged, untranslated transcription of the excerpt quoted. Elvira Sánchez-Blake is associate professor in the department of Spanish and Portuguese at Michigan State University.

<sup>220</sup> See, e.g., Sánchez-Blake, 2000; Castro, 2008: 284; Capote, 2014: 198.

journalistic and academic works on the events,<sup>221</sup> the report elaborated by the Truth Commission (Gómez *et al.*, 2010), and judgements passed by local and international tribunals for human rights violations committed during the counterassault.<sup>222</sup> Hence, although the characterization that Betancur was subjected to a transitory coup d'état on November 6 and 7 is circulating in popular memories,<sup>223</sup> the institutional and independent narratives that occupy the center of the memorial stage follow the argument proposed by the President on the night of November 7, according to which he, "for good or for ill, personally made all of the decisions, gave all of the respective orders, keeping an absolute control over the situation" (Carrigan, 1993: 261).

The exclusion of Professor Sánchez-Blake's testimony from most of the mainstream memorial canon about the Palace of Justice events means the invisibilization of the testimony of a direct witness who also happens to be a well-known writer and university professor in the United States. Therefore, it constitutes a remarkable example of how institutional and independent memorialization rely on the inclusion and exclusion of sources to *tell a specific story*—in this case the stability of Colombian democracy and the subordination of the military to presidential authority—. <sup>224</sup> But since

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<sup>221</sup> See, e.g., Maya and Petro, 2006; Atehortúa, 2010; Gibson and Salazar, 2015.

<sup>222</sup> See, e.g., JTP, 2010; CIDH, 2014; TSDJB, 2012 and 2014. Despite these exclusions, a local tribunal concluded in 2014, based on indirect evidence, that a transitory coup d'état took place between November 6 and 7 (TSDJB, 2014: 23).

<sup>223</sup> The narrative about the transitory coup d'état is marginal in the memorial canon but widely present in the oral tradition of the educated, politically engaged middle class. My first encounters with it took place during my undergraduate studies in social sciences at the Universidad del Tolima (1999-2004), where it was hegemonic among my professors as an explanation of the enormous death toll and the human rights violations committed by the state forces during the counterassault. Years later, during my fieldwork for this work, I recorded its circulation among members of the Judiciary, professors from diverse universities, professionals of diverse disciplines who were active in the human rights movement, and relatives of victims of human rights violations perpetrated during the counterassault and its aftermath.

<sup>224</sup> On the "editorial" nature of collective memorialization, see e.g., Kansteiner, 2002; Wertsch and Roediger, 2008; and Kim, 2019.

the memorial ostracism suffered by her testimony until today (autumn of 2020) is the result of specific historical conditions, it could be broken in the future by changes derived for instance from the emergence of revisionist historiography, or from the Colombian political situation.<sup>225</sup>

### *The Unifying Myth: An Arson Attack Commissioned by Pablo Escobar*

My fieldwork and archive research show that the narrative which explains the assault on the Palace of Justice and the fire that consumed it as the result of a conspiracy between drug traffickers and the M-19 is the most widespread mythical account of these events. I appeal at this point to the anthropological concept of *myth* because, like other stories that have attracted the attention of my colleagues in diverse cultural contexts and epochs (see, e.g., Malinowski, 1926; Lévi-Strauss 1964, Kulmar, 2019), that narrative explains *the origins* of the event in terms that result intelligible to the members of the cultural group within which it emerged and has been transmitted since 1985.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> An emblematic example of that kind of process is the revalorization of the experiences and testimonies of survivors of the Shoah who did not necessarily take part in the armed resistance against the Nazis, set into movement in the Israeli society by the Eichmann trial in 1961 (see, e.g., Yablonka, 2003; Shapira, 2005).

<sup>226</sup> The classical anthropological definition by John Myres and Charlotte Burne (1912: 210-211) characterizes myths as “intellectual efforts [and] attempts to exercise reason, imagination and memory [...] which, however marvelous and improbable to us, are nevertheless related in all good faith, because they are intended, or believed by the teller, to explain by means of something concrete and intelligible an abstract idea or such vague and difficult conceptions as Creation, Death, distinctions of race or animal species, the different occupations of men and women; the origins of rites and customs, or striking natural objects or prehistoric monuments; the meaning of the names of persons or places. Such stories are sometimes described as *etiologial*, because their purpose is to explain why something exists or happens” (quoted by Malinowski, 1926: 88). Daniel Kunin (1995) and Jeppe Jensen (2009) have published commented reviews of diverse approaches to the concept that considered other dimensions and social functions of myths, and of the discussions and developments that occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am aware of these approaches, discussions and developments, but I make use of the classical, functionalist concept by Burne and Myres because it makes it possible to understand the etiologial value of the narrative that situates Pablo Escobar as intellectual author of the fire that consumed the Palace of Justice. The roles played by mythical narratives in modern societies is an object of concern for anthropologists and other social scientists (see, e.g., Rusu, 2013; Collins, 2014; Verstraete and Jouison, 2019; Wilners and Chernobrov, 2020).

Throughout my fieldwork I witnessed the circulation of that mythical account in diverse contexts that spanned from casual conversations to political debates. At the same time, I have followed its emergence on—and circulation through—equally diverse means such as a memorial plaque (Figure 34), city tours,<sup>227</sup> pamphlets,<sup>228</sup> declarations by politicians,<sup>229</sup> academic articles (Rubio, 2008), news reports and cartoons (Figure 35),<sup>230</sup> memoirs,<sup>231</sup> documentaries,<sup>232</sup> television series,<sup>233</sup> and one official report (Gómez *et al.*, 2010). The core of the collective narrative that enables the variants embraced and actualized by diverse actors through means like the aforementioned ones is the following: “The Colombian justice was prosecuting powerful drug traffickers for their crimes. Their files were in the Palace of Justice, and therefore they needed to destroy them to put an end to the proceedings. They took part in the preparation of the operation by the M-19. After that, an M-19 commando stormed the facility and burnt the files.”

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<sup>227</sup> Rodríguez, 2007; Strawberry Tours, n.d.

<sup>228</sup> Villamarín, 2018; Pardo, 2019.

<sup>229</sup> EFE, 2004; Semana, 2004b, 2020.

<sup>230</sup> Noticias Caracol, 2018; Retador, 2020.

<sup>231</sup> Plazas, 2000, 2016; Aranguren, 2001; Legarda, 2005; Vallejo, 2007; Castro, 2009; Guzmán and Escobar, 2010.

<sup>232</sup> Arancibia, 2013; Lerat and Bouquet, 2020.

<sup>233</sup> Cano *et al.*, 2012; Brancato *et al.*, 2015, de Hoyos, 2019.

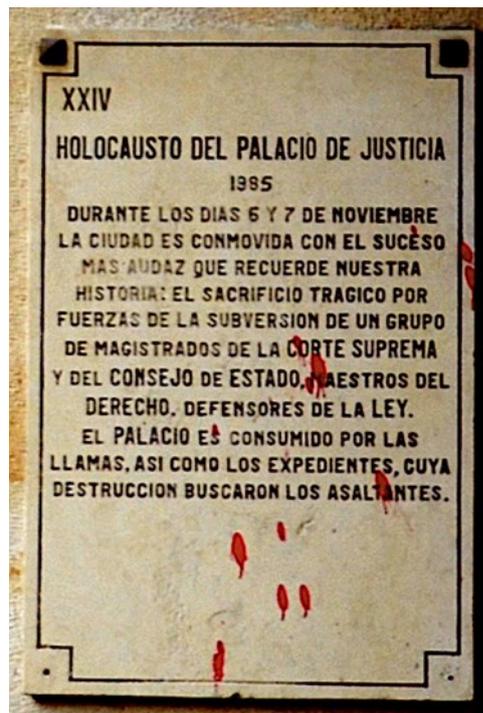


Figure 34. Memorial plaque installed by the Bogotá mayor's office at the façade of its main building in 1988. Palacio Liévano, Plaza de Bolívar, Bogotá. Picture by the author. The text goes: "Palace of Justice Holocaust / 1985/ On November 6 and 7 the city is shaken by the most audacious event remembered by our history (*sic.*): the tragic sacrifice by subversive forces of a group of Justices of the Supreme Court and the Council of State. Masters of the law [derecho], defenders of the law [ley]. The Palace is consumed by the flames, together with the files whose destruction was intended by the assailants".

As the summary shows, unlike most of the myths studied by classical anthropology, in which natural and social phenomena are typically explained as resulting from the activity of supernatural agents or their interaction with human beings, the story under consideration is a secular myth in which the plot is articulated exclusively around the action of social agents. That feature makes it possible to formulate it not only as a myth in the most limited sense of the term (an etiological narrative), but eventually also as the kind of modern myth known as *conspiracy theory*.<sup>234</sup> In the following paragraphs, I

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<sup>234</sup> Brian Keeley argues that a "conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret [...]. First, a conspiracy theory deserves the appellation 'theory,' because it proffers an explanation of the event in question. It proposes reasons why the event

will illustrate how diverse segments of the broad group that embraces that narrative make use of it and actualize it in one way or the other.



Figure 35. Retador, 2020. *El holocausto del Palacio de Justicia*. Published on Twitter.

Without the intention of proposing a definitive typology, for the analytical purposes of this work I classify those who claim the narrative under consideration to be a truthful account of the origin of events into two memory communities. The smaller of them is relatively clearly delimited and is integrated by agents whose biography, level of instruction and/or professional activity provide them with first-hand experience of the period in which the events took place, and/or access to sources that prove the

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occurred” (1999: 116). He adds that within that scheme, the “true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious [and, according to the perspective of those who embrace them,] the events explained [...] are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures” (*ibid.*: 117). Therefore, while conspiracy theories can be understood as a particular kind of secular myth to the extent that they explain the origin of specific events, they differ from other myths, whether religious or secular, because those who formulate or embrace them attribute at the same time nefarious intentions to the main characters, and a counterhegemonic nature to the narratives themselves. These two elements constitute the line that separates the usages of the narrative about the involvement of drug traffickers in the assault on the Palace of Justice either as a conventional secular myth or as a conspiracy theory.

factual inaccuracy of the narrative, as much as the intellectual capital necessary to understand these sources. The consideration of such historical, professional, and intellectual conditions supports the hypothesis that a part of these agents, who belong to the right wing of the political spectrum and are usually grouped around former President Álvaro Uribe and his Minister of the Interior Fernando Londoño,<sup>235</sup> are aware of the historical inaccuracy of the narrative but reproduce it with the intention of discrediting political contradictors based on their former adherence to the M-19. In line with the moral contents and perceived counterhegemonic nature of conspiracy theories, when these agents retell the story of the involvement of drug traffickers in general or Pablo Escobar in particular in the M-19 action, they point out that the conspirators<sup>236</sup> were imbued with nefarious intentions,<sup>237</sup> and underline their own commitment to revealing the hidden connections of well-known politicians to that event (Plazas, 2004; Losirreverentes (*sic.*), 2018; Matiz, 2019; El Expediente, 2020).

Within that context, when used in full awareness of its historical inaccuracy against former M-19 members with the purpose of delegitimizing their participation in legal politics, the narrative plays the role of a libel.<sup>238</sup> That form of political

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<sup>235</sup> Álvaro Uribe Vélez was President of Colombia during the terms of 2002-2006 and 2006-2010. Fernando Londoño Hoyos was Minister of the Interior and Justice of his government from 2002 to 2004. Both are prominent figures of the local right. At the moment of the final correction of this work, in the spring of 2021, Colombia's prosecutor's office was investigating Álvaro Uribe for human rights violations committed by paramilitary groups that, according to demobilized members, were organized and conducted by him in the decade of 1990 (Rodríguez, 2020).

<sup>236</sup> Unspecified drug traffickers (e.g., Betancur, 1985; Plazas, 2004, 2016) or Pablo Escobar (e.g., Castro, 2009; Strawberry Tours, n.d.), depending on the version.

<sup>237</sup> To burn files (e.g., Rodríguez, 2007; Figure 34), burn files and kill Justices (e.g., Legarda, 2005; Mejía, 2020), or to do all that and impose a communist dictatorship (e.g., Plazas, 2004; Castro, 2009), depending on the version.

<sup>238</sup> The preferred targets of that libel are Gustavo Petro and Antonio Navarro, the former M-19 militants who have made the most successful political careers since their incorporation into legal activity after the demobilization of the group in 1991. The first has been elected five times parliamentary representative between 1991 and 2020, and mayor of Bogotá—Colombia's second most important democratically elected post after that of the president of the Republic—, for the term of 2012-2016.

instrumentalization relates it to other libelous narratives put into circulation by conspiracists in diverse countries with the double purpose of giving account of complex realities in simple terms and discrediting their political opponents.<sup>239</sup> At the same time, the conspiracy theory allows those who embrace it—independently of whether they sincerely believe it or use it as a libel—to articulate the Palace of Justice events to a broader narrative about Colombia's politically violent past and present that represents the longstanding social-armed conflict as a struggle between the “defenders of the fatherland” and its enemies.

The second memory community, much more numerous and diverse, is integrated by agents who, independently of the question of whether they were alive when the Palace of Justice events took place or not, share two correlated features. First, for

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Navarro's career has followed a similar trajectory, although it started with his participation in the constituent assembly that crowned the demobilization process of the M-19 in 1991. He has been elected three times parliamentary representative between 1998 and 2014, mayor of the city of Pasto, capital of the department of Nariño for the term of 1995–1998, and governor of the same department for the term of 2008–2012.

The versions of the conspiracy theory used against them contain additional details or allusions that depict them as intellectual (Losirreverentes (*sic.*), 2018; El Expediente, 2020) or material authors of the assault (Matiz, 2019). The falsity of these accusations has been repeatedly proved by several authors who have pointed out that by the time of the preparation and execution of the assault, Petro was serving a sentence that kept him in prison between October of 1985 and February of 1987 (Laverde, 2013b), and Navarro was in Cuba, recovering after an attack perpetrated against him during the peace negotiations with President Betancur, that led to the amputation of one of his legs and a permanent speech impairment (Navarro, 2015).

<sup>239</sup> Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2019) have analyzed in a persuasive, yet philosophically spirited work the structure, contents, and effects of the conspiracist rhetoric and imagery used in the United States by Donald Trump and his political allies against their opponents between 2015 and 2019. According to their analysis, one of its main effects is the delegitimization of opponents, who are described as “willfully ruinous, treasonous” agents of a group that “harbors ambitions to seize control” of society (*ibid.*: 90). That is precisely the way in which former members of the M-19 are represented by the most radical agents of the sector led by Álvaro Uribe and Fernando Londoño. Within that context, the libel related to the Palace of Justice events is used to substantiate the alleged “willfully ruinous, treasonous” nature of former M-19 members, who are regularly accused of having joined Pablo Escobar in 1985, and of operating as agents of foreign leaders of the Latin American nationalist left such as the Castro brothers from Cuba, or Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro (El Espectador, 2018a).

diverse reasons they do not approach political violence in Colombia from socio-scientific or legal points of view; second, they are either not acquainted with the sources that demonstrate the falsity of the narrative under consideration, such as court proceedings and specialized reports, or lack the intellectual skills necessary to understand them.<sup>240</sup> My fieldwork and archive research shows that the most widespread variants of the collective narrative under consideration are those that place Pablo Escobar specifically, instead of “drug traffickers” in general, as coauthor of the operation. Within that context, my encounters in the field with these actors were marked by their efforts to show me that they were well informed about the events, and their frequent dismissal of the importance of my research because “everybody knows what happened”. In other words, the myth that explains the assault on the Palace of Justice as an arson attack commissioned by Pablo Escobar is ubiquitous, and for a diverse multitude of agents it has the cultural weight of a self-evident truth. It is therefore understandable that these interlocutors consider that a research project on the subject would lack purpose and utility.

When questioned about their sources, these actors mentioned memoirs, particularly those by one of Escobar’s lovers, the former beauty queen and newsreader Virginia Vallejo (2007), and the most notorious of his hitmen, John Jairo Velásquez, known as “Popeye” (Legarda, 2005). These references to printed works are, however, less common than the almost universal mentions of Velásquez’s appearances on television

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<sup>240</sup> The members of the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events are the exception to that rule. Analyzing why they supported that account of the origins of the M-19 operation, despite the sources of diverse nature that contradict it, is an enterprise that surpasses the aims and possibilities of this work. Investigating the political bias of the Truth Commission against the M-19 is a necessary enterprise that requires to work with data that was not collected during my fieldwork, such as in-depth biographies of the commissioners, interviews with them and documents such as minutes, memos and drafts that might be in archives of the Commission.

and Youtube,<sup>241</sup> and historical fiction television series aired on local channels (Cano *et al.*, 2012; de Hoyos, 2019) and Netflix (Brancato *et al.*, 2015).

The versions of the collective narrative embraced by the second group exhibit two features that situate them in the field of myth in a broad sense, and simultaneously exclude them from the more restricted field of conspiracy theory. In the first place, while conspiracists frame their story within an understanding of social reality as a field subjected to the coordinated intervention of dangerous agents committed to taking control of institutions and people's lives, the agents belonging to the second group frame it within a broader narrative according to which Colombia's politically violent past and present are the result of the permanent confrontation of the subordinated majority and its heroes on the one side, and a small group of politicians and rich people, who have exercised illegitimate control of the state and wealth for many generations, on the other. Pablo Escobar emerges in that landscape as an enemy of the elites—and sometimes as a benefactor of the poor—, the M-19 as a group that in some respects looks like a heroic guerrilla and in some others like Escobar's contractor, and the Palace of Justice as a big storage room packed with files whose destruction would put an end to legal problems faced by Escobar and sometimes by some M-19 leaders.

The following fragment of one of the interviews conducted by me in Colombia in November of 2013 offers a synthesis of the way in which the narrative about Escobar's

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<sup>241</sup> In 1992, Velásquez was sentenced to thirty years of imprisonment for diverse crimes that included the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán in 1989. He was paroled in 2014 but was imprisoned again in 2018 under new charges. Since the beginning of the decade of 2010 until his death in February of 2020, Velásquez became a mass media celebrity and popular youtuber due to his detailed accounts of the killings and terrorist attacks perpetrated or organized by him for Pablo Escobar (El Universo, 2020; Peltier, 2020). His popularity gave place to numerous interviews, more than 1.2 million subscribers to his Youtube channel *Popeye arrepentido* ("Remorseful Popeye"), television series (Bolívar and Uribe, 2013; Hiller *et al.*, 2017), documentaries (Builes, 2017; Perea, 2018; Balentien, 2019, among several others) and even a B action film directed by himself (Velásquez, 2019).

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involvement in the Palace of Justice events is framed within that broader understanding of Colombian history:

Hagai: –Let’s imagine that you had to explain a foreigner who doesn’t know anything about Colombia’s history who was Pablo Escobar. How would you do it?

Isabel:<sup>242</sup> –Pablo Escobar was a very rich man who helped poor people a lot. Back then, he donated several neighborhoods to poor people in Medellín. The problem is that politicians didn’t like him, you know, the usual...

H.: –Have you heard anything about his involvement in what happened in the Palace of Justice?

I.: –Yes! I read it in the book of this lady... What’s her name?... One who was a beauty queen...

H.: –Virginia Vallejo?

I.: –That one, Virginia Vallejo. She was his lover and wrote a book. She says that the problem is that the politicians had some papers in the Palace of Justice and were planning to ruin him, and they also had papers against [Gustavo] Petro and the other one from the M-19, the one with the speech impairment... What’s his name? I don’t remember his name...

H.: –[Antonio] Navarro?

I.: –That one! Well, the politicians had some papers and were planning to use them to ruin them, so they went into the Palace and burned them. The problem is that the military meddled in, as they always used to do, and killed a lot of people.

H.: –Do you think that entering the Palace of Justice and burning the files was good or bad?

I.: –It was good, because otherwise the politicians would’ve used these papers to ruin them, as they always do. They didn’t like the M-19 either because they also helped the poor.

H.: –Does Pablo Escobar remind you of other Colombian historical characters?

I.: –Yes, Efraín González.

H.: –Who?

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<sup>242</sup> Retired nurse, born in 1955. She has lived all her life in the Sumapaz region, southeast of Bogotá. She was 30 years old in November of 1985 but cannot recall many details of her experience of the Palace of Justice events. Although she defines herself as “liberal like her mother” and has supported the Liberal party against its Conservative contender during her whole adult life, she also has political affinities with the guerrilla movement. These affinities might explain her positive opinion of Efraín González (1933-1965). The original transcription of the fragment quoted can be found in appendix 8.

#### *Chapter 4. The Battle and the Holocaust: Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma*

I.: –Efraín González. He was a guerrilla, but from before that time.<sup>243</sup> He robbed rich people and gave to the poor, but as it always happens, the politicians and the military hunted him down until they killed him. Pablo Escobar was killed too. And they also killed one who was member of the M-19: Pizarro. He was a courageous and very intelligent man. I was working when I heard on the radio the news about his assassination. After a while a colleague entered the room and told me: “–Your boss has been killed!”.

As this interview shows, in that narrative Pablo Escobar and the M-19 do not emerge as the criminal agents imbued with nefarious intentions represented by conspiracy theorists. They are social bandits,

outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who [...] are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for Justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported (Hobsbawm, 1981: 17).<sup>244</sup>

In other words: for those who integrate the second of the social groups considered here, like Isabel, the events were not the result of a secret pact sealed by dangerous enemies of the nation. They were just another of the audacious, sometimes cinematographic hits with which the M-19 and Pablo Escobar, like the famous bandits that preceded them during La Violencia (Sánchez and Meertens, 1983), used to defy the traditional elites in public during the decade of 1980. In that way, the Palace of Justice events are articulated to a wider narrative about the past and present of

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<sup>243</sup> González was a bandit affiliated to the Conservative party who operated in the northeastern departments of Santander and Boyacá in the decades of 1950 and 1960. Isabel’s political affinity with the guerrilla movement might explain that, although she opposes the Conservative party, she also admires González for his opposition to the (liberal) government and his alleged support of the poor. Historical evidence contradicts that supra-partisan, Robin Hood-like imagined biography, and describes him as a fiercely partisan bandit who played a key role in the political homogenization of the areas under his control through assassination, forced displacement and despoilment of liberal peasants (Sánchez and Meertens, 1983: 52).

<sup>244</sup> Banditry as a form of individual and collective resistance against traditional elites and the establishment has been extensively tackled in the context of multidisciplinary analysis of Colombia’s politically violent reality (see, e.g., Maullin, 1968; Sánchez and Meertens, 1983; Acuña 2014; Henao, 2015).

Colombia's longstanding social-armed conflict, in which outlaws and bandits remain inscribed as popular heroes, able to publicly and in spectacular ways humiliate the members of an establishment perceived as illegitimate and unjust.

As a cultural and historical phenomenon, the iniquitousness and axiomatic character attributed by many to the collective narrative on the involvement of drug traffickers in the assault on the Palace of Justice give account of the fact that when the government, the armed forces and their allies committed themselves in November of 1985 to making that version of the origins of the events public, they engaged in what turned out to be a successful mythopoetic enterprise. In other words, one that gave place with a great degree of effectiveness to a narrative about the origins of the events.

Analyzing the intentions of the agents who took part in that initial attempt surpasses the empirical and conceptual limits of this work. Nevertheless, it should be considered that agents with diverse understandings of the situation and political intentions, such as members of the government, members of the state forces, politicians and journalists formed part of the initial sector that advanced the narrative about the participation of drug traffickers in the operation. Therefore, the hypothesis that some of these agents, such as politicians and journalists, were convinced of the veracity of that explanation based on the information they had access to, and others, like intelligence officers, were aware of its falsity, should be considered.

The long-term effectiveness of that enterprise, whose resultant collective narrative has revealed itself to be plausible enough to resist the weight of historical sources that contradict it, sheds light on the impact of the drug business on popular perceptions about Colombia's past and present political reality. At the same time, it offers an example of the ways in which collective memory, popular culture and cultural industry interact with—and codetermine—each other in Colombia. As in the case of classical myths that constitute one of the subjects of cultural anthropology, and

conspiracy theories that have started attracting the attention of social scientists from diverse disciplines in the recent past,<sup>245</sup> the collective narrative about the participation of drug traffickers in the preparation of the assault on the Palace of Justice by the M-19 is widely accepted among the protagonists of this work, because it renders a complex event intelligible in terms that are familiar to that audience. No matter how factually inaccurate they might be, the variants of the myth that attribute the events to the activity of conspirators or outlaws offer explanations that are plausible to many people because they can be connected to other widely accepted narratives about Colombia's past and present.

Considering that, as Wulf Kansteiner has pointed out, the "language and narrative patterns we use to express memories [...] are inseparable from the social standards of plausibility and authenticity that they embody" (2002: 185), it is understandable that broad sectors in Colombia perceive the accounts that attribute the Palace of Justice events to Pablo Escobar or other drug traffickers as much more reasonable than the explanations proposed by social scientists, jurists and other experts. At the end of the day, according to oral tradition, the press and the cultural industry, drug traffickers and the industry operated by them were—for good and for bad—responsible for the ups and downs of the economy, politics and everyday life of Colombians during the decade of 1980 (see, e.g., Blanco, 2008; Acosta, 2017; Rocha, 2018). Within that context, the collective narrative about the Palace of Justice events that presents them as the result of an operation commissioned, sponsored or co-organized by drug traffickers is not only plausible, but has the appearance of a historically truthful account.

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<sup>245</sup> See, e.g., Oliver and Wood, 2014; Smallpage *et al.*, 2017; Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019.

***Excursus: Pablo Escobar as Cultural Hero and Proverbial Villain***

Although Pablo Escobar has been widely represented in local and foreign media as the personification of Kantian radical evil (Bowley, 2013), the assessment of his role in Colombian history marks one of the several political and moral cleavage lines that separate the memory communities that coexist and interact with each other within Colombian society. There are, in general terms, two memory communities that embrace the narrative about Escobar's involvement in the M-19 operation, either as a conspiracy theory or as a traditional secular myth. The first one of these memory communities is integrated—although not exclusively—by actors native to the field of what Pierre Bourdieu (2010) referred to as “the legitimate culture”, such as members of the traditional elites and the educated middle class. They underline the criminal nature of Escobar's business and the bloody war waged by him and other members of the Medellín cartel against the state apparatus between the decades of 1980 and 1990, actualizing the stereotype of the vicious public enemy associated to him in television series and documentaries (Salazar and Ferrand, 2012; Bialowas, 2017). The other memory community, diametrically opposed to the first one, is integrated by less visible agents, who nevertheless were ubiquitous during my fieldwork and are frequently associated to impoverished or marginalized social sectors, and who underline Escobar's modest origin, his philanthropic career, and his opposition to an establishment despised by them as oligarchic and corrupt (Rincón, 2015; Ahmed, 2016). The different valuations of Escobar's biography by the members of each of these memory communities thus lead to counterposed representations of his persona either as a monster worth to be called “master of evil” (Salazar and Ferrand, 2012), or as a bandit enthroned in the popular pantheon beside well-known enemies of the traditional elites who have frequently reached the status of popular saints (Losonczy, 2001, Aguirre, 2012). These are, in general terms, the two memory communities that

embrace the narrative about his involvement in the M-19 operation either as a conspiracy theory or as a traditional secular myth.

Although Escobar resorted to terrorist acts during the periods of war against the state apparatus (1984-1991, 1992-1993) to publicly call the monopoly of force by the political establishment and its security forces into question, during the early stages of his public life his defiance of the traditional elites followed a different pattern. At the end of the decade of 1970, when he was known as a real estate and ranching entrepreneur in the department of Antioquia, he started a political career in Medellín and the neighboring city of Envigado, founding the movement *Civismo en marcha* ["Public Spirit in Motion"]. The initiative was entirely funded by him and sponsored environmental projects, soccer teams, public health programs, the first unemployment compensation system in Colombia's history, and the construction of sports fields, sanitation infrastructure and housing in impoverished areas, among other projects.<sup>246</sup> The impact of these interventions on marginalized communities and Escobar's public critique of the traditional elites that controlled the state, failed to provide basic services to the population, and were accused by him of being servile to the government of the United States, earned him popular support and eventually paved his way into the lower chamber of Colombia's parliament in 1982 (Duncan, 2013). From that moment on, his involvement in the drug business became an issue of public debate and confrontation with traditional politicians and led to the suspension of his parliamentary immunity in 1983 and his official retirement from politics in January of 1984. Three months later, the assassination of Betancur's Minister of Justice, Rodrigo Lara, by a gunman commissioned by Escobar marked the beginning of a period of violent confrontation between the Medellín cartel and the state, that lasted until 1991. Like in the cases of famous outlaws during La Violencia (Sánchez and Meertens, 1983:

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<sup>246</sup> Osorio, 2008; Thoumi, 2013; Morales, 2017.

176), the popular support enjoyed by him in Medellín and Envigado was decisive during that period, since it provided him with a widespread network of helpers and hideouts that rendered his capture impossible (Thoumin, 2013: 203). In 1991, he started serving a prison term as part of an agreement reached with the government, but escaped thirteen months later (El Tiempo, 1993). The end of that agreement led to a new period of confrontation with the state that ended on December 2, 1993, when he was killed during an operation conducted by Colombian agents and the United States Delta Force.

Aware of the reaction that would be triggered by Escobar's funeral among broad sectors of the population, the government forced his family to bury him on December 4, 1993, one day earlier than originally planned (García, 1993). The move impeded the attendance of people from different regions of the country who were already on their way to Medellín with the original date in mind, but nevertheless more than 20,000 people attended, crying, playing and singing folk songs, and chanting "¡Pablo, amigo, el pueblo está contigo!" ["Pablo, our friend, the people are with you"], and "¡Se vive, se siente, Pablo está presente!" ["We experience it, we feel it, Pablo is present!"]. Surprisingly, given the clear circumstances in which Escobar was killed, the multitude also chanted "¡Sí señor, cómo no, el gobierno lo mató!" ["Oh, yes, there is no doubt: the government killed him!"], a slogan typically used in the funerals of leaders and militants of the Unión Patriótica and other left-leaning organizations assassinated by unknown agents, presumably related to the state.<sup>247</sup>

Like in the cases of other famous Colombian outlaws and bandits, including Carlos Pizarro, an M-19 leader and presidential candidate assassinated in 1990,<sup>248</sup> a popular tradition of religious devotion grounded on the memorialization of his confrontation

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<sup>247</sup> Brooke, 1993; Tele13, 2018; León, 2018.

<sup>248</sup> Sánchez and Meertens, 1983; Losonczy, 2001.

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of traditional elites and philanthropic career on the one hand, and the attribution of miracles on the other, has developed around his persona (Aguirre, 2012; Croda, 2013). Thus, his tomb has been transformed into a sacred space where libations and votive offerings are made by pilgrims from all over the country throughout the year, but particularly on the anniversaries of his assassination (Gómez, 1994; Infobae, 2018). Outside the cemetery, these religious expressions of moral and political support are particularly evident in a district built by him in Medellín for 443 families in 1984. Renamed “Barrio Pablo Escobar” after his death, the former “Barrio Medellín sin tugurios” [“Medellín without hovels”] was turned by its inhabitants into an open-air memorial space where Escobar’s life, and his philanthropic and criminal careers appear memorialized through toponyms, murals and memorial plaques, and his image occupies domestic shrines beside those of official Catholic saints (Saavedra, 2017; Figure 36).



Figure 36. Unknown author and date. Main entrance to the Pablo Escobar district, Medellín, Colombia. Taken from the Facebook group *Area 503 ES*.

Seen against that background, the purported participation of Pablo Escobar in the preparation of the M-19 operation can only but appear like another of his famous acts of defiance against traditional elites. At the same time, the fire attributed to his “nefarious intentions” by conspiracists “reveals itself” as a defensive action intended to curtail the plans of the same oligarchs who used the state apparatus against other bandits during La Violencia, and finally hunted down and killed Escobar in 1991.

#### **IV A Hot Potato: The Palace of Justice Events in Museums**

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have shown how the widespread consensus about the exceptional place of the Palace of Justice events in modern Colombian history nurtured a great variety of memorial initiatives for thirty-five years. In this section, I will consider the challenges posed by their inclusion in two exhibits in the nation’s most important historical museums: the Museo de la Independencia, located in the Casa del Florero, and the Museo Nacional de Colombia. I will show that analyzing the treatment given to the events in these official memorial spaces makes it possible to consider the challenges and tensions derived from what Ana Guglielmucci calls “the institutionalization of remembrance” (2013), when the events to be remembered have caused such a polyphonic representational repertoire like the Palace of Justice events. The inclusion of the subject at the end of the argumentative part of this work is intended to emphasize the contrast between the highly dynamic production and publication of narrative and pictorial representations of the events that took place in diverse realms since 1985 and the troublesome nature of their treatment in both institutional settings.

The inclusion of the Palace of Justice events in these exhibits is worth considering because they are the only museographical instances in which the subject has been addressed until today, and because they express different approaches to the subject by

#### *Chapter 4. The Battle and the Holocaust: Anatomy of a Cultural Trauma*

institutional memorial spaces. The first of them is the permanent exhibit at the Museo de la Independencia, located in the Casa del Florero, where according to official history the independence movement started in 1810, and where the state forces established their headquarters for the coordination of the counterassault on the Palace of Justice in 1985 (see chapter 3). The second one was the temporary exhibit *Carlos Pizarro: Hacer la paz en Colombia* [“Carlos Pizarro: Making Peace in Colombia”], presented between September of 2010 and March of 2011 in the Museo Nacional de Colombia. At the moment of my observations each exhibit presented an expository unit on the events in the context of a broader narrative: the first in the context of the history of the building where the museum is located, and the second in the context of the biography of the deceased guerrilla leader and presidential candidate. The analyses presented here are based on my fieldwork from the period between 2010 and 2013. In the case of the Museo de la Independencia that means that I mostly consider a past moment of the exhibition, that my observations have mostly historic value, and that a more accurate analysis would require to compare these observations with a study of the current exhibit. The same historical consideration applies to the Museo Nacional, with the particularity that the Palace of Justice events were addressed by that institution ten years ago in the temporary exhibit considered here and remain excluded from the permanent exhibit until today.

#### *The Casa del Florero: New Museology for an Old Controversy*

The exhibition unit at the Museo de la Independencia forms part of an exhibit dedicated to the history of the building which, as I mentioned in chapter 3, is the same where those rescued from the Palace of Justice were concentrated during the

counterassault before being liberated or subjected to forced disappearance.<sup>249</sup> It is located in a room on the ground floor and by the time of my fieldwork observations consisted of a video projection, an introductory poster and two display cases (Figure 37).

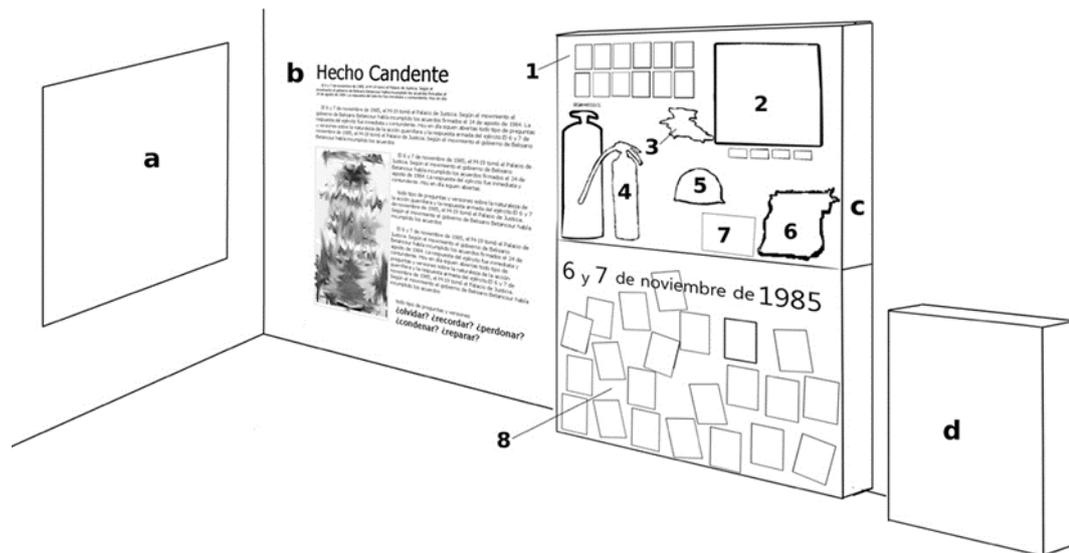


Figure 37. Sketch of the exhibition unit devoted to the Palace of Justice events in the Museo de la Independencia. Elaborated by the author based on a picture taken in November of 2012. The sizes of the elements have been represented proportionally but the sketch is not to scale. Published for the first time in Leal and Gómez, 2013: 177. Legend: a. video projection, b. introductory text, c. and d. display cases, 1. pictures of twelve disappeared persons recognized by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 261-265), 2. list of civilian and military casualties, 3. burnt fragment of a picture frame, 4. fire extinguishers perforated by bullets, 5. helmet used by Colonel Plazas during the counterassault, 6. charred typewriter, 7. text about Colonel Plazas's conviction for forced disappearance of survivors, 8. acrylic surface where comments left by visitors had been exposed.

The audiovisual projection (a) consisted of pictures and video sequences that showed El Bogotazo and the counterassault on the Palace of Justice: the operation deployed by air and on the ground by the state forces, a tank shooting a rocket against the building,

<sup>249</sup> Nelson Rincón (2016) has extensively analyzed the process of museographic production of the exhibition unit and criticized my culturalist approach to the collective memorialization of the Palace of Justice events, which he understands as an effect of their psychological impact on Colombian population.

the evacuation of civilians to the Casa del Florero, and the fire that consumed the building and its contents. That audiovisual articulation of images and sounds that in most of the cases proceeded from press archives associated both events, which had taken place in downtown Bogotá in 1948 and 1985 and integrated the Palace of Justice events into the broader history of the Colombian social-armed conflict, whose outbreak is related in collective memory to El Bogotazo (see chapter 2). The introductory text (b) was titled “Hecho candente” [“hot event”] and presented a succinct account of the events followed by quotes of the statement made by the M-19 when its commando seized the facility, Chief Justice Reyes Echandía’s public plea for a ceasefire, and the television interview from the night of November 6, in which Colonel Plazas uttered his famous sentence about his aim to sustain democracy. The text reflected President Betancur’s silence during most of the events since it did not quote his later declarations on the subject, which, as I have mentioned before, have changed from assuming full responsibility for the counterassault in 1985 to relativizing that statement in 1991 and 2005. It closed with what the curators called “hot questions”: Forget? Remember? Condemn? Forgive? Repair?

The biggest of the two display cases (c) contained the objects listed in the caption of Figure 37, and Colonel Plazas’s helmet was the only object associated to persons directly related to the events.<sup>250</sup> During the period of my fieldwork observations and beyond it, that display case has been the most dynamic element of the ensemble because, consistent with the principles of the New Museology applied in the museum (Castro and Sánchez, 2013; Rincón, 2016), its contents have been periodically modified by the curatorial team with the purpose of adapting it to the changing juridical reality shaped by tribunals and the ongoing public discussion. Thus, while at the end of 2012 a text about Colonel Plazas’s conviction for the forced disappearance of survivors had

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<sup>250</sup> It was donated by Colonel Plazas to the Museo Nacional in 2004 (Lleras, 2008: 11).

been added by request of the group considered in the first section of this chapter, the text and the helmet were retired in May of 2013 following a request by Plazas's lawyer in which he demanded the protection of the officer's personal dignity, because his conviction had not been confirmed yet (Rincón, 2016: 112-115). According to a review of the exhibit published by the museum on its website on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the events in November of 2020 (MI, 2020), the helmet was not included again, and its place is currently occupied by a facsimile of the front page of the edition of *El Espectador* from November 6, 2015, in which the newspaper reviewed the public apology offered by President Juan Manuel Santos on the same day for the state crimes committed during the counterassault.<sup>251</sup> Nevertheless, at the time of my observations neither the showcase nor the rest of the exhibition tackled the question of who was responsible for the immense human and material loss caused by the Palace of Justice events. That silence about one of the key issues of the public discussion around the events expressed one of two attempts to achieve neutrality amid a highly polarized, ongoing debate. The second one was the inclusion of civilians, guerrillas, and state agents in the same list of casualties titled "Victimas fatales" ["fatal victims"],<sup>252</sup> which blurred the highly contentious lines that separate victims and perpetrators in emic narratives about the events (Leal and Gómez, 2013).

The inferior part of the showcase was devoted to the exhibition of comments left by visitors on small pieces of paper provided by the museum, which at the time of my observations centered on the obligation of remembering the events and achieving peace in the country. These notes, like the changes of the contents of the upper part of the case derived from requests of relatives of disappeared persons and Colonel

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<sup>251</sup> The apology had been part of the measures ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in its sentence against the Colombian state for the state crimes committed during the counterassault and the continued violation of the victim's rights in its aftermath (Corte IDH, 2014).

<sup>252</sup> The construction is as odd and grammatically incorrect in Spanish as it is in English.

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Plazas's lawyer, gave account of the tensions characteristic of the social field of memorialization of the Palace of Justice events considered in other parts of this chapter.

Between the end of October and the first days of November of 2011, a smaller exhibition case containing two books devoted to the Palace of Justice events was included in the exhibit (d). One of them was the report by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events, and the other was a 2010 edition of *La Siempreviva*, a theater play by Miguel Torres, written in 1994, that deals with the suffering of Cristina Guarán's family after her disappearance from the Palace of Justice. The inclusion of these works shows that the curators recognized them as canonical narratives about the events and their consequences and decided to consecrate them through their exhibition in the official memorial space provided by the museum.

As this subsection shows, by the time of my fieldwork the museum's curatorial team had incorporated the Palace of Justice events to its permanent exhibit in a dynamic way, relating them to the broader history of the Colombian social-armed conflict and adapting the exhibit to the legal reality shaped by tribunals and the ongoing public discussion about the perpetration of human rights violations by state agents during the counterassault. That approach, which according to the museum's website still orients its handling of the subject as of today (MI, 2020), contrasts with the complete exclusion of the Palace of Justice events from the Museo Nacional de Colombia.

#### ***Museo Nacional de Colombia: Brief Pause in a Long Silence***

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the Palace of Justice events remain excluded from the Museo Nacional's main exhibit, although after thirty-five years there is a widespread consensus about their exceptional place in Colombia's modern

history.<sup>253</sup> That silence was briefly broken between September of 2010 and March of 2011 by the temporary exhibition *Carlos Pizarro: Hacer la paz en Colombia*, dedicated to presenting a narrative about the political career of the slain M-19 leader and presidential candidate Carlos Pizarro as a trajectory marked by the quest for peace. The exhibit was produced by his daughter María José and was based on a previous exhibit called *Ya vuelvo. Carlos Pizarro* ["I will be right back. Carlos Pizarro"], produced under the auspices of the Casa América of Catalonia, Spain, and presented in Barcelona in 2009 (Nin, 2010). According to one guide I spoke with during a visit, the initial version presented in Barcelona did not tackle the Palace of Justice events. That initial silence is revealing, considering that the responsibility of the M-19 leadership, headed by Pizarro, for the assault that led to the Palace of Justice events is one of the main subjects in the public discussion about the historical balance of that guerrilla in Colombia.<sup>254</sup> The centrality of that aspect in the local public discussion was confirmed by the inclusion of an exhibition unit about the events in the version of the exhibit presented in Bogotá. As I will show in the following paragraphs, the solution implemented consisted in adapting the museographic concept developed by the Museo de la Independencia.

Like in the case of the original exhibition unit, the one under consideration centrally consisted of an introductory text and a showcase containing objects associated to the events, some of them taken from the Museo de la Independencia (Figure 38). The text was titled "Palacio de Justicia", avoiding any reference to the events themselves, and consisted of a laconic allusion to them and the ongoing public discussion about the

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<sup>253</sup> The exclusion of the subject from the permanent exhibition was considered by Cristina Lleras in a work on the pieces of the museum's collection associated to the Palace of Justice events (2008).

<sup>254</sup> See e.g., García, 2008; Grabe, 2011; Navarro, 2015.

assault and counterassault.<sup>255</sup> Nevertheless, that text and the exhibition unit as a whole excluded the quotes that gave voice to the M-19 commando, Chief Justice Reyes Echandía, and Colonel Plazas in the Museo de la Independencia, eliminating in that way the polyphonic nature that characterized that exhibition. Remarkably, that exclusion was extended to the voice of Pizarro himself, probably because his only declaration on the subject did not address the responsibility of the M-19 but underlined that during the events “the M-19 members cried because they were not there living the fate of all the men [*sic.*] that were there risking everything for a truth in this country” (Hernández and Pizarro, 2017). Given that the selection of elements of Pizarro’s biography on which the exhibition relied was oriented by the purpose of presenting him as an advocate of peace, that declaration—which included the invisibilization of the ten female members of the commando that stormed the Palace of Justice (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 113)— would have played the role of what Erving Goffman called “destructive information” (1956: 87). Therefore, its exclusion was not only justified, but necessary.

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<sup>255</sup> “On November 6 and 7, 1985, the M-19 seized the Palace of Justice. According to the movement, the government of Belisario Betancur had failed to comply with the agreements signed on August 24, 1984. The army’s response was immediate and forceful. Today, all kinds of questions and versions remain open about the nature of the guerrilla action and the armed response by the army.” My translation. The focus on the Army is inaccurate because the counterassault was deployed by the Army, the Police, and the Secret Police (DAS).

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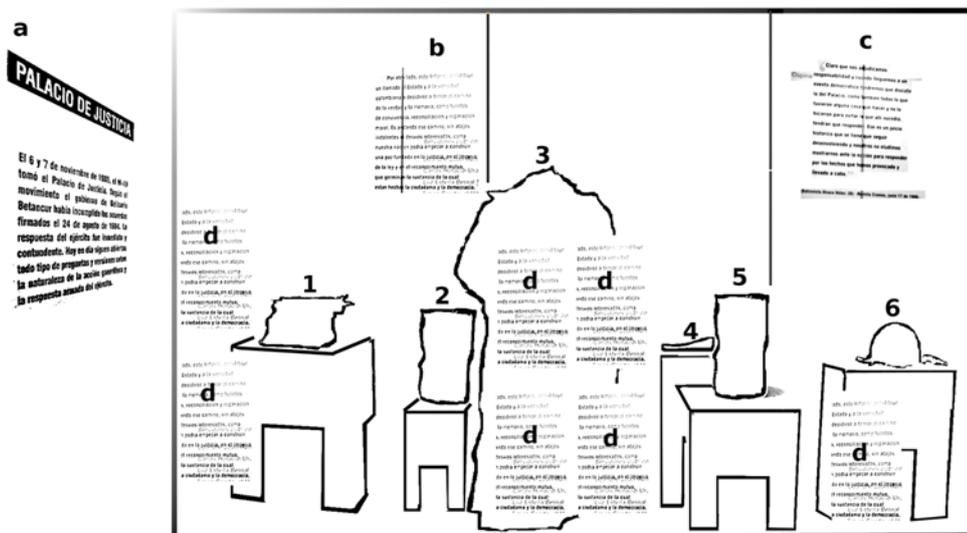


Figure 38. Sketch of the exhibition unit devoted to the Palace of Justice events in the exhibit *Carlos Pizarro: Hacer la paz en Colombia*, (September of 2010 to March of 2011, Museo Nacional). Elaborated by the author based on a picture taken in November of 2010. The sizes of the elements have been represented proportionally but the sketch is not to scale. Legend: a. Introductory text, b. quote from the report by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez *et al.*, 2010), c. quote from a press interview on the subject given by an M-19 member in 1986, d. list of deceased and disappeared persons 1. typewriter, 2. coffee machine, 3. beheaded statue of José Ignacio Márquez, 4. plaque originally located at the entrance of an office, 5. fire extinguisher, 6. helmet associated to Colonel Plazas.

The showcase was composed following the same pattern. Thus, the typewriter (1) and one of the fire extinguishers (5) exhibited in the Museo de la Independencia were incorporated in the exhibit, together with a helmet attributed to Colonel Plazas (6). Given that during that period a second helmet was exhibited in the Museo de la Independencia, it is not clear if Colonel Plazas donated two pieces, or one of them was a replica that was not labeled as such. The other pieces on exhibit were a coffee machine perforated by bullets (2), a statue of José Ignacio Márquez, beheaded during the counterassault (3),<sup>256</sup> and a bronze plaque originally located at the entrance, that was deformed by the fire that consumed the Palace of Justice (4).

<sup>256</sup> A member of the Supreme Court of New Granada (1793-1880), the political entity that succeeded the Spanish viceroyalty of New Granada and preceded the Republic of Colombia. He was appointed by

The ensemble was completed by three texts pasted on the showcase background (a, b) and glass (c). The first was a quote from the report by the Truth Commission on the Palace of Justice Events about the importance of truth, memory and justice to achieve peace (b).<sup>257</sup> The second, a quote from a statement by an M-19 militant who in 1986 expressed the organization's willingness to assume responsibility for the Palace of Justice events "in the future" (c).<sup>258</sup> The third was the same list of deceased and disappeared persons exhibited in the Museo de la Independencia, presented in five columns without the original title "Fatal Victims" (d).

### ***Concealment of Perpetrators and Universalization of Victimhood***

The main feature of the two museographic interventions considered here is that, while all the other memorial initiatives considered in this work are grounded on the attribution of the responsibility for the immense loss of lives to specific actors, these exhibition units were grounded precisely on the construction of silences around that question. According to María José Pizarro, the production team found it difficult to approach the subject, and the final exhibit expressed the desire shared by the Museo Nacional, the Casa América of Catalonia and herself to avoid "playing the role of

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Simón Bolívar and was elected president of the Republic of Colombia in 1837. The beheaded statue was removed from the Palace of Justice patio after the events in 1985 and donated to the Museo Nacional by the Superior Council of the Judiciary in 1998 (Lleras, 2008: 6).

<sup>257</sup> "On the other hand, this report constitutes a call to the Colombian state and society to take the path of truth and memory as sources of coexistence, reconciliation and moral reparation. It is by walking that path, without indolent shortcuts or interested detours, that our nation will be able to start building a peace founded on justice, on the rule of law, and on the mutual recognition that germinate the substance [*sic.*] which citizenship and democracy are made of. (Report Truth Commission: 279) – December 17, 2009." My translation.

<sup>258</sup> "Of course, we claim responsibility and when we get to a democratic event [*sic.*] we will have to discuss the Palace, and all those who had something to do and did not do it to avoid what happened there will have to assume responsibility as well. That is a historical judgment that must continue to unfold, and we do not avoid presenting ourselves to the nation in order to answer for the events caused and carried out by us. (Interview Álvaro Vélez: 26) - *Cromos* Magazine, June 17, 1986." My translation. The original odd grammar has been preserved.

judges” and leave that task to “regular justice” (Morris, 2011). That desire, shared by the director and the museological adviser of the Museo de la Independencia (Castro and Sánchez, 2013), enabled the universalization of victimhood through the general lists of deceased and disappeared persons exhibited in both museums, on which the names of civilians killed or subjected to forced disappearance were presented together with those of guerillas executed or disappeared by state agents, and of guerrillas and state agents fallen in combat. As the preceding sections of this chapter have shown, these rhetorical and museographic operations, on which the pretended neutrality of both museums was constructed, contradict the internal logic and contents of the public discussion on the Palace of Justice events.

The following statement by the director and museological adviser of the Museo de la Independencia highlights the background and limits of that pretended neutrality, and might offer a hint at the background of the permanent exclusion of the subject from the Museo Nacional’s permanent exhibit:

The museum is a National Museum, operating under the Ministry of Culture, and hence everything the museum offers is basically an official message; in a way, *it is the government speaking*. Most of the accused (for using *unnecessary force*) are members of the Colombian Army, and because of that, there is a feeling that the government does not agree with the accusations made against them. The guerrilla group signed a peace treaty in 1990 and most of its militants were pardoned. However, at the time of the museum's reopening (2010), they faced open opposition from then-President Álvaro Uribe, who accused them of being “terrorists.” [...] We did not want people to just read the information given and “take a side.” *We wanted to, somehow, make visitors realize that there were several motivations for each side to do what they did*. We aspired to activate critical thinking, rather than polarize opinion. (Castro and Sánchez, 2013. Italics added)

The description offered by the director and the museographical adviser portrays an institutional environment in which the Museo de la Independencia—but the observation might be extended to others dependent of the national government like

the Museo Nacional—are perceived as communicational and political tools of the government instead of independent public institutions.<sup>259</sup> That subordination of the museum to the government’s political agenda and animosities against former M-19 members led, therefore, to a quest for neutrality which, again, led to avoiding the most relevant issues of the public discussion about the Palace of Justice events. But the statement quoted above shows that the museum officials were ready to go beyond the construction of silences, publicly declaring that the crime committed by state agents convicted with regard to the Palace of Justice events was “excessive use of force”, although they had in fact been found responsible of torture, execution and forced disappearance of evacuees and M-19 members.<sup>260</sup> Taking into account the well-established participation of state agents in human rights violations during the counterassault, the Museum officials’ purpose of “mak[ing] visitors realize that there were several motivations for each side to do what they did”, results outrageous. If they succeeded, visitors to the Museo de la Independencia would understand the motivations of the M-19 for taking hundreds of civilian hostages and for using them as human shields and bargain chips, President Betancur’s decision to exclude a negotiated liberation that would have saved the lives of most of the more than hundred persons killed in the events, and the motivations of the state agents who

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<sup>259</sup> That perspective was actualized at the end of 2018 by President Iván Duque (2018-2022) with the appointment of a new director of the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, the institution responsible for the elaboration of comprehensive studies of the social-armed conflict and its impact, and the formulation and implementation of memorialization projects. Duque, who represents the political right related to former President Álvaro Uribe, appointed Darío Acevedo, a historian who denies the existence of a social-armed conflict and characterizes modern Colombian history with the frameworks provided by the National Security Doctrine (Pacifista, 2019). The appointment caused local and international criticism but was not reversed by the government (Calle, 2020). In the second half of 2020, Acevedo gained notoriety for publicly defending former President Uribe when he was indicted for manipulating witnesses with the purpose of hiding his participation in the conformation and coordination of paramilitary groups involved in numerous human rights violations such as massacres and forced displacements (Ortíz, 2020).

<sup>260</sup> JTP, 2010; JCUPC, 2011; TSDJB, 2012.

tortured and executed at least one Justice (Carlos Horacio Urán), executed guerrillas who had surrendered, tortured evacuees, and subjected to forced disappearance a still undetermined number of civilian survivors.<sup>261</sup>

As I have pointed out at the beginning of this section, the quest for neutrality of the curators of both exhibits was also apparent in their avoidance of the most controversial aspects of the public discussion mentioned in the preceding sections of this chapter. Thus, they constructed silences around the legal question of the condition of guerrillas and state agents as perpetrators of diverse crimes, the unofficial but credible versions already quoted about the seizure of power by the military, and the fact that many survivors were tortured and forcibly disappeared by state forces—a process started on the second floor of the house in which the Museo de la Independencia is located (Gómez *et al.*, 2010: 173, 177, 183, 265). In that way the curators of both expositions constructed specific narratives grounded in the factual concealment of elements such as the responsibility of the M-19 and President Betancur for the hostage-taking and counterassault, the overwhelming dimension of the military operation and its devastating outcome, and the tortures, executions, and forced disappearances perpetrated by state agents. That rhetoric and museographic invisibilization of direct and indirect perpetrators was matched by the universalization of victimhood in lists on which guerrilla combatants, hostages, and state agents were represented as victims in the Museo de la Independencia, and as “deceased people” in the Museo Nacional. Thus, the curators equated those who suffered the overwhelming counterassault in a state of defenselessness or military inferiority to those who died fighting as members of a force that launched a devastating attack against a guerrilla commando of about thirty people.

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<sup>261</sup> See *supra* and TSDJB, 2014; Corte IDH, 2014.

By doing so, the curators of both exhibits produced simplistic representations of the Palace of Justice events as a “bad thing”, independent of the actors who shaped them as perpetrators or collaborators, and those who suffered them as victims. While their universalization of the category of “victim” evokes the line of argument defended in Germany by those devoted to proving that World War II also left countless victims among the German armed forces,<sup>262</sup> the allegedly neutral narratives about the Palace of Justice events that contain them emerge as complex constellations of silences, avoidances and denials. These were, as I have pointed out at the beginning of this section, the central attributes of both exhibition units, and the main differences between them and the narrative and pictorial representations considered in the rest of this work, whose authors have focused on the attribution of responsibilities for the devastating effects of the assault and counterassault.

Nowadays, seven years after my last visit to the Museo de la Independencia, the institution seems to reflect a different approach to the memorialization of the events, probably under the influx of the condemnation of the Colombian state by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2014 for human rights violations committed during the counterassault and the continued violation of the victims’ rights in the aftermath of the event (MI, 2020). These changes, as much as the sustained silence of the Museo Nacional in the new historical context established by the peace accord that led to the demobilization of the FARC-EP in 2016, requires specific field and archive research.

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<sup>262</sup> Such a perspective caused in 1986 the still developing controversy known as “*The Historikerstreit*” and has been criticized by Jürgen Habermas (1988), Stephen Brockmann (1990) and Dominick LaCapra (1994), among others. The more extended reproach addresses the denial and acquittal produced by the classification of the dead proposed by revisionist historians, who classify both the people who were murdered by genocidal Nazi practices or fell in disadvantageous encounters with German invasion troops, and the German soldiers who were killed in combat despite the military superiority of the forces which they belonged to, as “victims”.

## Conclusions

This work deals with a comprehensive constellation of narrative and visual, frequently counterposed, representations of the causes, course and results of an attack carried out on the Palace of Justice of the Republic of Colombia by a guerrilla commando on November 6, 1985, and the subsequent counterattack launched by the state security forces, as well as with the local memorial traditions in which the production, circulation and reproduction of these representations has taken place over the past three and a half decades.

The plan of the M-19 commando that stormed and occupied the Palace of Justice, located on Bogotá's main square, in the vicinity of Colombia's presidential palace, was to take justices, judges and employees of the highest courts hostage and submit the President of the Republic to a public "people's trial", presided by the kidnapped justices, for his alleged failure to comply with agreements made in peace negotiations held with the guerrilla group. However, instead of exercising restraint because of the prominent position of the hostages, as anticipated by the guerrillas, the state security forces deployed a large-scale counterattack, in which around 100 persons were killed, numerous human rights violations perpetrated against civilians and guerrillas, between ten and twelve people disappeared, many of them after having been evacuated by state agents, and the Palace of Justice was destroyed.

The events, which lasted more than twenty-seven hours and were partially broadcast in real time by radio and television crews, had a great impact on Colombian society and led to a debate about the responsibility of state agents for the enormous death toll, the human rights violations perpetrated by them against guerrilla members and civilians, as well as the whereabouts of people who could not be found dead or alive. Although the events took place in a country that by that time had seen violent political clashes between different groups for almost four decades already, they

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resonated broadly across the society because they took place on the country's most important public square, in the center of the capital of the Republic, in front of the general public and the media, and hit particularly prominent targets: the seat and highest representatives of the Judiciary. Accordingly, the end of the Palace of Justice recapture by the security forces was the beginning of a still ongoing public debate about what happened and how those who participated in the assault and counterassault could be classified as "perpetrators", "victims", "heroes" or "martyrs". That debate is at the same time a cause and an effect of diverse processes of cultural creation that have given place to a broad repertoire of narrative and visual, often counterposed representations of the events, for example as a "holocaust", "massacre", "battle" or "successful defense of the democratic system". These political disputes of various kinds about what happened and who are those responsible for it, have led to the inscription of the events in material and immaterial culture as a breakpoint in modern Colombian history and one of the crudest episodes of the long-lasting social-armed conflict.

In this dissertation, I have developed as the main theses the cultural background and contents of these debates and presentations. I have substantiated the thesis that the narrative and visual representations considered express a variety of local traditions of counter-hegemonic memorialization of political violence that can be traced back to at least the first half of the 20th century. My analysis of these traditions has been at the center of the dissertation for three reasons. On the one hand, because it has made it possible to situate and understand the aforementioned constellation of representations of the Palace of Justice events in and within their own historical and cultural contexts. One of the most relevant comparative results of that effort has been the observation that the name "Palace of Justice Holocaust", attributed by a sector of Colombian society to the events, expresses a local tradition of attribution of negative sacrificial

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meanings to politically motivated violence through the usage of the figure of “holocaust”, that precedes the representational tradition developed internationally around the Nazi judeocide since the second half of the decade of 1940. Second, because considering the aforementioned pre-existing traditions of counter-hegemonic memorialization has made it possible to deepen the field of memory studies in Colombia by broadening the perspective beyond the chronological limits set in the decade of 1990 by scholars who have erroneously situated at that time the emergence of a social field of counter-hegemonic memorialization in the country. Third, because these two undertakings have enabled me to develop theoretical discussion and historical analysis beyond the intellectual-centric illusion that mistakenly equals the emergence of an intellectual field of counter-hegemonic memorialization of political violence in Colombia to the coming into existence of a corresponding social field, by shedding light on empirical evidence that shows that such a social field can be traced back at least to the decade of 1920. Furthermore, the observations made possible by these undertakings have revealed that what has been mistakenly identified by other authors as the onset of a social field of counter-hegemonic memorialization in the decade of 1990, was actually a reorganization of an already old social field within the novel frameworks provided by local reception of human rights discourses, and by experiences of collective, institutional struggle for accountability and memorialization of state-sponsored human rights violations taking place in that period all across Latin America.

The research on which this dissertation is based was shaped by the method and perspective of classical anthropology, in as much as ethnographic fieldwork, comparative analysis of culture and the search for the perspective of actors have played a central role. Within that context, I made use of multi-sited fieldwork to follow the main actors of the social field of memorialization of the Palace of Justice events

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through diverse locations in the American continent and Europe between 2010 and 2014. I performed participant observation at work and leisure gatherings, secular and religious commemorations, conferences and roundtables, conducted mostly non-directive interviews with survivors, witnesses, activists and experts, attended lectures, theater performances, film screenings and court hearings, observed and documented permanent and temporary exhibitions on the streets, in galleries and museums, and documented narrative and visual representations of events from numerous publications available on the internet, in libraries, institutional and personal archives, and at second-hand bookstores. My choice for anthropological fieldwork expresses both my training and my opinion that speeches, writings, statements and other formal, ideological statements are not the only ways in which representations of political violence are shaped or made public, because, as other researchers have also noted, actions can speak a clearer language than words. The decision to conduct multilocal field research expresses my awareness of the fact that the existence of the memory struggles and processes of cultural creation that have taken place around the subject of the Palace of Justice events since 1985 are not limited to the borders of the political entity known as “Republic of Colombia”.

In its early stages, this work aimed at classical anthropological problems such as the influence of kinship and rituals in social life and identities, the ways in which actors construct and maintain hierarchies and group boundaries, and the strategies they use to advance their agendas in permanent confrontation with competing groups. But my understanding and later experience of the security risks to which many of these agents are regularly exposed when they confront the narratives and interests of active or retired state agents increased my initial concerns about the harmful effects such a research project could have on the lives of its protagonists. The ethical conclusions drawn from that realization made me abandon my original plan, focusing instead on

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the historical and cultural dimensions of the narrative and visual representations produced, actualized and made public by these actors. For the same reason, although I devoted sustained attention to the subjects mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph during the whole duration of the research project, I do not present in great detail the biographies, organizational forms and tactics of these actors in this work.

I made use of a twofold approach that combines social anthropology and cultural history with the purpose of preserving at the same time the integrity of the protagonists of this work and the anthropological perspective it was originally intended to have. That choice was also based on my understanding that scientific comprehension of the ways in which victims, perpetrators, bystanders and spectators experience and represent political violence can be deepened by considering the relationships between different fields of culture that violence gives place to, such as religious and historical thinking, or expressive patterns and traditions traditionally associated to legitimate and popular culture. The analytical path set by that approach led me to three main theses. The first is that the Palace of Justice events were a *dispersed tragedy* that impacted the lives of people from different social sectors and regions of Colombia, who reacted to them deploying a large number of initiatives in diverse fields of culture such as memorialization and legal struggle for truth and justice, and engaged in the construction and intergenerational transmission of a cultural trauma that, by the time of my fieldwork, made part of the historical common sense of a vast sector of Colombian society. The second is that the narrative and visual representations that are at the core of that cultural trauma express diverse local traditions of counter-hegemonic memorialization of political violence that can be traced back to at least the early 20th century, around seven decades prior to the point in which other authors have mistakenly dated the emergence of a field of counter-hegemonic memorialization in Colombia. The third is that the narrative and visual representations of political

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violence constructed and made public within these traditions express a wide variety of understandings of the causes and characteristics of the longstanding social-armed conflict and, therefore, analyzing that memorial and political diversity constitutes a way of giving account of the creative forces unleashed by such a destructive phenomenon as political violence. In the more restricted context of the main subject of this work, my comparative analysis of diverse narrative and pictorial accounts of the Palace of Justice events as a holocaust, a battle, a victory of democracy, the result of a coup d'état, or an alternatively vile or heroic arson attack commissioned by Pablo Escobar, highlights the polyphonic nature of the social field of memorialization of political violence in Colombia, and gives account of its relations with the broader Western culture, as well as with diverse local and continental representational and memorial traditions. At the same time, it constitutes a contribution to the field of memory studies in Colombia, where the memories of political violence constructed and made public from the right wing of the political spectrum have traditionally attracted scarce attention, and comparative analysis of the memories constructed by politically counterposed actors about the same events is still a pending task.

The theoretical discussions, analyses, and empirical evidence through which the theses presented in this work have been substantiated may be seen in a restricted way as elements that hold together an argument about the contents and cultural roots of the representational repertoire elaborated by multiple, and sometimes counterposed, actors about the Palace of Justice events over almost four decades. But their scientific utility lies beyond the limits of the battlefield on which the memory struggles analyzed herein are waged. The contributions of this work to the history of counter-hegemonic memorialization, and to the comparative analysis of memorialization in Colombia give account of the possibilities offered by combining, in the field of memory studies, the perspectives and concepts provided by disciplines such as cultural history and

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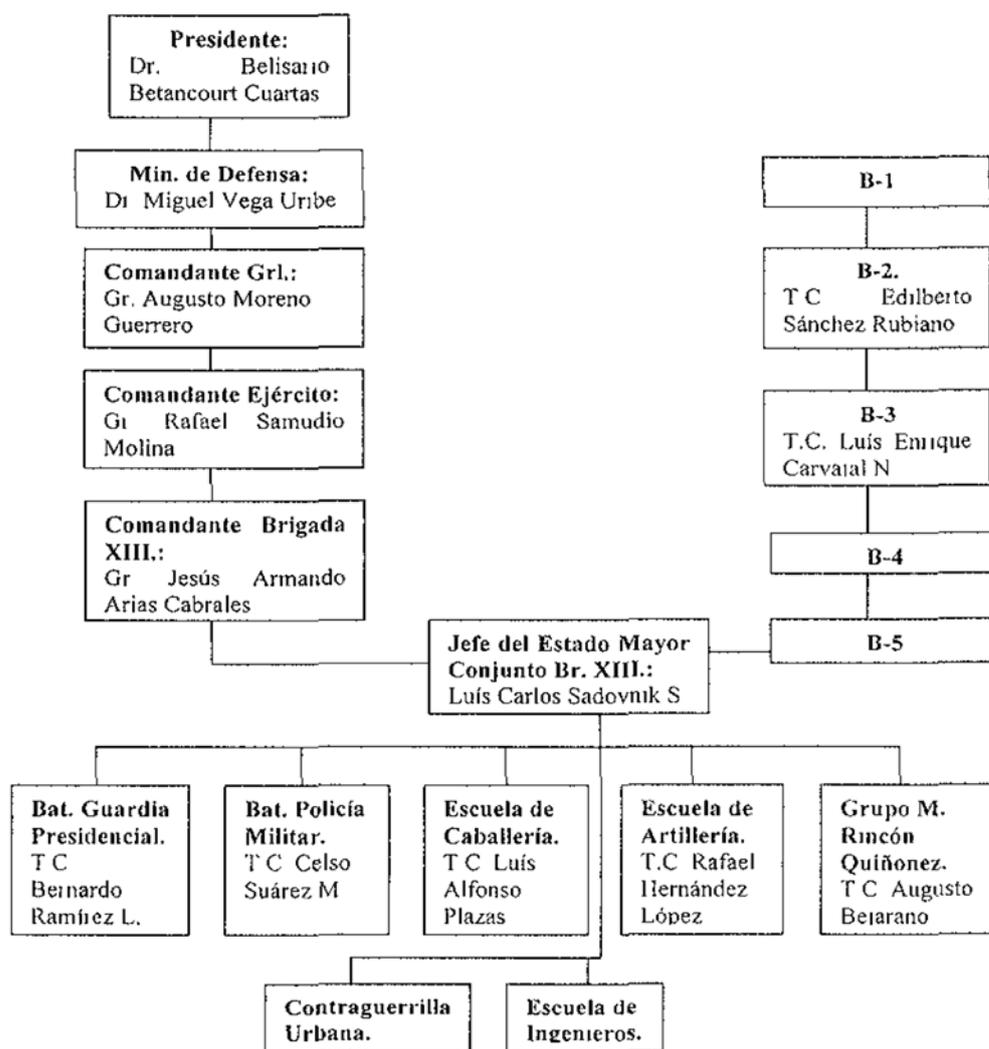
iconology with the theoretical framework, methods and epistemological agenda of classical anthropology. That is why this dissertation is not only a contribution to the scientific understanding of local representational traditions and modern polyphonic memories. It is an invitation to extend the scope of memory studies in Colombia to the search for the cultural roots of the so-called “memory boom”, and to tackle the comparative analysis of memories constructed across the political spectrum as a way to achieve a more complex understanding of the creative power of the destructive forces that still shape the reality of millions in the country, and in the Colombian diaspora.

## Appendices

### 1 Organizational Chart of the XIII Brigade of the Army (November 6 and 7, 1985). Taken from JTP, 2010: 124

La Brigada XIII para los días 6 y 7 de noviembre de 1985.

#### Estructura.



- 2** Beatriz González, 1994. *Tapen tapen*, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Bank of the Republic of Colombia art collection, Bogotá.



### **3 Transcription of the speech by President Belisario Betancur, broadcast on November 7, 1985 (Valbuena, 2015: 280-283)**

Buenas noches, colombianos:

Me dirijo a mis compatriotas, sin una sola excepción, para decirles palabras de aliento, palabras de esperanza, palabras de fe en esta hora dolorosa de tan dura prueba para nuestra querida patria. Sé que esa fe y esa esperanza pueden haber disminuido en algunos, al ver la respuesta negativa de ciertos grupos a la mano tendida para trabajar por el engrandecimiento de Colombia, si bien la han aceptado otros grupos guerrilleros con quienes se suscribieron también acuerdos que se están ejecutando para la consolidación de esa paz tan anhelada.

Lo primero que les pido a mis conciudadanos, en este momento, es que compartan con el gobierno la firmeza, la serenidad y sobre todo los sentimientos de solidaridad y la comprensión frente a las inocentes víctimas directas e indirectas de lo que ocurrió ayer y hoy para infortunio de todos; para verlo como algo que, al final, servirá para cimentar aún más la idea de que lo primero que necesita Colombia es el espíritu de convivencia, en el sentido de respetar y proteger conjuntamente la vida, honra y bienes de todos.

Desde el primer momento de esta terrible situación me comuniqué con los señores ex presidentes de la República, doctores Alberto Lleras Camargo, Carlos Lleras Restrepo, Misael Pastrana Borrero, Alfonso López Michelsen, Julio César Turbay Ayala; hablé con los candidatos presidenciales, doctores Virgilio Barco Vargas, Álvaro Gómez Hurtado y Luis Carlos Galán; y con directivos del Congreso, a todos los cuales expuse con serenidad la manera como se estaban desarrollando los acontecimientos en el Palacio de Justicia de Bogotá, y la injusta retención de los honorables magistrados de la Corte Suprema de Justicia, del Consejo de Estado, funcionarios y aún visitantes.

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Y de todos, absolutamente todos, lo mismo que del Senado de la República y la Cámara de Representantes, instituciones que han seguido funcionando en medio del dolor, recibí voces de gran claridad en el sentido de apoyar la decisión de buscar soluciones que garantizando la vida de los protagonistas y garantizándoles jueces imparciales, invocara su reflexión para que depusieran las armas.

Igualmente, desde el primer momento tomé contacto con compatriotas que ofrecen credibilidad a los guerrilleros, a fin de que les hicieran reflexiones a la comprensión, para no proseguir este absurdo camino que desgarrar a nuestra querida patria. Hice lo mismo con gentes de la radio para que, a través de las cadenas de emisoras se invitara a esa reflexión, a pensar en el bien de nuestros conciudadanos.

Sea este el momento de agradecer a los medios de comunicación la forma ponderada, tranquila y patriota como han venido llevando a la Nación y al mundo, el detalle de los acontecimientos; y espero que así continúen, dando con ello un repetido testimonio de su responsabilidad y de su amor a esos valores superiores que son tan queridos y necesarios.

Este ataque contra la institución suprema de nuestra justicia; la quema de parte de sus archivos, entre ellos sobre el narcotráfico, el incalificable crimen contra pulquérrimos magistrados que antes que nada son jueces serenos e imparciales y justos; contra una Corte Suprema libre, libérrima y tan independiente que inclusive echa atrás decisiones de gobierno, como ha sucedido más de una vez, este acto sólo se explica por una perturbación de la mente, por una perturbación de espíritus a los cuales esperaba que les llegara la reflexión. Y la seguridad de que –como ayer mismo lo manifestamos a los propios dirigentes guerrilleros a través del señor presidente de la Corte, al inolvidable magistrado Alfonso Reyes Echandía, y del director de la Policía Nacional les ofrecíamos juicios y jueces imparciales y serenos que, bajo la garantía de la Corte y de sus magistrados, tomarían decisiones objetivas y ecuánimes.

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Estos hechos, con su inhumana, delirante y aislada espectacularidad, paradójicamente sirven para demostrar cuán fuertes son nuestras instituciones, cuánto repudia nuestra patria los extremismos.

Porque sabe eso, porque sabe que tiene la inmensa responsabilidad de ceñirse a tales guías, el gobierno es firme en su defensa de los principios y de las instituciones que los encarnan, y puede por lo mismo dedicarse a la búsqueda de las mejores soluciones a problemas que aparentemente no ofrecen sino una salida.

Esa inmensa responsabilidad la asumió el Presidente de la República que, para bien o para mal suyo, estuvo tomando personalmente decisiones, dando las órdenes respectivas, teniendo el control absoluto de la situación, de manera que lo que se hizo para encontrar una salida fue por cuenta suya y no por obra de otros factores que él puede y debe controlar. En desarrollo de este concepto, repito que insistí hasta el último momento en que los guerrilleros cesaran su acción bajo la promesa de que sus vidas serían respetadas y de que se les haría un juicio con todas las garantías que ofrece nuestro estado de derecho.

La unidad nacional está más fuerte que nunca, y el gobierno responde a ella aumentando sus esfuerzos para corregir lo corregible, por ejemplo, con respecto a las relaciones entre los partidos políticos entre sí y con el gobierno; si puede haber más claridad en las últimas; si debe irse más allá de lo que hoy tenemos para que la unidad nacional de que hablo tenga nuevas expresiones positivas, el gobierno hará lo que le corresponde. En tal sentido, en el curso de unas cuantas horas me reuniré con los ex presidentes de la República. Pero está equivocado el que juegue temerariamente con la idea de que puede aprovechar supuestas debilidades o divisiones entre quienes tenemos el compromiso de llevar al país por buen rumbo: porque de esta prueba sale el gobierno más unido entre sí y más unidos con las Fuerzas Armadas.

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Los hechos de ayer y de hoy han sido obra de la irreflexión de gentes a quienes no ha bastado la generosidad expresada a través de actos del Congreso y del gobierno; y que no supieron entender el proceso de paz como gesto magnánimo del Estado, sino como muestra de debilidad.

Colombia y el mundo entero deben saber que nuestro sistema político es consciente de su solidez y fortaleza, y de su capacidad para incorporar a la vida democrática a todos los colombianos, aún a aquellos que lo quieren destruir o cambiar con el uso de las armas. Los terroristas conocen esta realidad. Por ello han transformado su acción guerrillera en actos anarquistas que pretenden desestabilizar las instituciones, amedrentar la voluntad ciudadana e interrumpir el progreso y desarrollo político del país. La utilización del terrorismo como medio de acción refleja el aislamiento progresivo de los grupos subversivos de la opinión pública, máxime cuando esos grupos buscan el apoyo del narcotráfico. A pesar de lo ocurrido, el Estado no debe perder su vocación de paz y de reforma pública. Y no la perderá.

En la situación que hemos vivido ayer y hoy, el Presidente de la República, para hacer honor al juramento prestado, tenía que defender las instituciones patrias y acudir a los instrumentos de tutela de la soberanía que la misma Constitución pone en sus manos.

Nada ha sido tanpreciado para el gobierno como la vida de todos nuestros compatriotas, sin distingo alguno de clases, credos, o posiciones políticas. Pues bien, las decisiones que el gobierno ha tenido el deber de tomar en este delicado trayecto histórico, no han tenido otra mira que ese interés nacional. Por ello, ahora es más necesario que nunca que todo el pueblo colombiano respalde con su comprensión, con su prudencia, con su objetividad, las medidas que el bien común aconseje.

Algo más: el gobierno no podía negociar lo que no es negociable. Tal, la respetabilidad de nuestras instituciones. Nada se debe hacer bajo el signo de la

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amenaza, así lo que se pida parezca minúsculo; pero el gobierno no quería que se sacrificaran más vidas humanas, porque lo guía la compasión, sentida y entendida en su más alto significado, y aún el inagotable afán de paz. Si, la paz; otra vez golpeada en un incidente gravemente solitario, porque el país sigue su marcha. La paz, demostrando en su calvario lo grande que es, lo urgente que nos resulta a todos.

Aunque algunos no la quieran o no la vean con claridad, esa paz ahí está y triunfará sobre las fuerzas de la locura. Y para eso seguimos tendiendo puentes de reconciliación; los reconstruiremos cada vez que sus enemigos los destruyan; porque si así no fuera, no tendríamos entidad como pueblo civilizado y como Nación digna.

Reciban la Corte Suprema de Justicia y el Consejo de Estado, reciban todos los jueces, todos los trabajadores de la administración de justicia; reciban todos sus familiares, mi más ferviente condolencia, mi admiración más sincera. Le han servido a Colombia. Merecen gratitud de esta patria amada. Merecen gratitud de su Presidente, el cual se descubre reverente ante los magistrados caídos frente al altar de la ley y ante el dolor de sus familias.

Reciban los miembros de las Fuerzas Militares, de la Política, de las fuerzas de seguridad, nuestra voz de respeto, de admiración, de amistad. Nuestra voz de tristeza y de solidaridad, los familiares de los sacrificados al servicio de la patria y de la paz.

Ahora mismo comenzamos a reconstruir el Palacio de Justicia. Entre tanto, el Consejo de Estado funcionará en la Casa de la Moneda y la Corte Suprema en la Hemeroteca, donde antes estuviera.

El gobierno no quiere aparecer como soberbio y altivo. Tiene conciencia de su deber de defender las instituciones democráticas a las cuales se han acogido los colombianos, y ha actuado, en consecuencia, con serena firmeza, en la convicción de que no podía ceder a esta clase de presiones desorbitadas y fuera de la ley.

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Si algún movimiento no tiene derecho a quejarse de falta de publicidad para sus actos, aspiraciones y programas, es precisamente el que ahora ha pretendido ejercer un poder de coacción brutal para lograr sus propósitos. Ha tenido toda suerte de oportunidades y no pocos reproches han recibido el gobierno y el Presidente por permitir el ejercicio de la libertad de expresión en un marco democrático.

Pido al pueblo colombiano compartir la serenidad del gobierno en estas horas de prueba. Quiero agradecer a todos los sectores que han expresado su solidaridad a este gobierno democrático, surgido de la libre voluntad popular y que en medio de las duras crisis que le ha correspondido afrontar, ha permanecido inalterable en su compromiso de servir a la Nación con dignidad, entusiasmo y sencillez.

Quiero repetir que el proceso político y electoral continuará imperturbable, para que los colombianos escojan libremente a sus legisladores y a sus gobernantes. Y quiero, en fin, anunciar que el gobierno social proseguirá en beneficio de nuestros compatriotas más necesitados. Nos sentimos acompañados por una América que nos mira con admiración y con respeto.

Seguiremos al pie de la paz. Con serenidad. Con tranquilidad. Nos sabemos acompañados por una gran Nación. Por unos maravillosos compatriotas. Por un gran pueblo.

Sé que ustedes, queridos compatriotas, están tristes, están acongojados. Sé que están adoloridos. También yo lo estoy. Reciban, sientan mi compañía, mi solidaridad, mi amistad, sobre todo los tiernos afectos de quienes han sido sacrificados en tan absurda tragedia, los que han sufrido en su propia carne; los familiares, todos, a quienes el dolor les llena de justa indignación, los familiares y allegados de los soldados, oficiales, agentes, servidores públicos caídos; los familiares de los guerrilleros, que todos son nuestros compatriotas, cobijados por la misma bandera, aunque tengamos puntos de vista tan distintos sobre el destino de nuestra patria.

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Pido al Dios de Colombia luz y sabiduría para superar los escollos que se yerguen sobre la marcha ordenada y en paz de la Nación. Y que la Providencia ilumine a todos.

## 4 Persons disappeared during the Palace of Justice events who have been located or are still missing

Elaborated by the author with information from the sources mentioned and the press.

Last update, November 29, 2020.

Lastname	Name	Role	Found	Place	Exhumation	Identification	New missing person
Missing persons according to the Truth Commissions on the Palace of Justice Events (Gómez <i>et al.</i> , 2010: 261).							
Anzola	Gloria Stella	Visitor	No	Alien grave	2019	2019	María Rozo
Beltrán	Héctor Jaime	Canteen staff	Yes	Alien grave	2016	2017	Julio Andrade
Beltrán	Bernardo	Canteen staff	Yes	Alien grave	2017	2017	Jorge Echeverry
Castiblanco	Ana Rosa	Canteen staff	Yes	Mass grave	1998-1999	2001	None
Esguerra	Norma	Visitor	No				
Franco	Irma	M-19 member	No				
Guarín	Cristina	Canteen staff	Yes	Alien grave	2015	2015	María Ferrer
Lizarazo	Gloria Stella	Canteen staff	No				
Oviedo	Lucy Amparo	Visitor	Yes	Mass grave	1998-1999	2015	None
Portela	Luz Mary	Canteen staff	Yes	Alien grave	2015	2015	Libia Rincón
Rodríguez	Carlos	Canteen manager	No				
Suspes	David	Canteen staff	No				
Other missing persons according to data published by Serrano and Upegui (1986) and Gómez <i>et al.</i> (2010).							
Almonacid	William	M-19 member	Yes	Mass grave	1998-1999	2014	
Beltrán	Mónica	M-19 member	Yes	Mass grave	1998-1999	2014	None
Castillo	Noralba	M-19 member	Yes	Alien grave	2017	2017	None
Garzón	Cristina	M-19 member	Yes	Mass grave	1998-1999	2014	None
Gutiérrez	Nurys	Secretary	No				
Jacquín	Alfonso	M-19 member	Yes	Alien grave	2017	2017	None

Persons declared missing after forensic analyses proved that third persons were buried in their graves.

Lastname	Name	Role	Person found in their grave
Andrade	Julio César	Justice	Héctor Jaime Beltrán Fuentes
Concha	Cecilia	Justice	Hombre sin identificar
Echeverry	Jorge Alberto	Justice	Bernardo Beltrán
Ferrer	María Isabel	Secretary	Luz Mary Portela León
Ramírez	Blanca	Justice	Lidia Mondol de Palacios
Rincón	Libia	Secretary	Cristina Guarín
Rozo	María Janeth	Justice	Gloria Anzola de Lanao
Serrano	Pedro Elías	Justice	Unidentified woman

Total of located persons: 11

Total of persons still missing: 15

**5 Memorial plaque at the façade of the Ginnasio Liceo Statale Michelangiolo. Via de la Colonna 1, Florence, Italy**



“The faith in the imperial destinies of the fatherland was confirmed heroically in Ethiopia by the war volunteers lieutenant Luigi Michelazzi–gold medal–, and sergeant Leonardo Magnani–silver medal– with the generous holocaust of their youth. This school that tempered their souls for magnanimous undertakings inscribes proudly their name and example. 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1937 – Fifteenth year of the fascist era.”

## **6 Statement by the M-19 leadership on the Palace of Justice events. November 11, 1985**

### **Declaración del M-19 ante el holocausto en el Palacio de Justicia**

Colombianos:

Hoy la nación reclama adolorida una explicación del holocausto en el Palacio de Justicia el jueves 7 de noviembre de 1985, y hoy -más que nunca- se plantea la necesidad urgente e inaplazable de lograr la paz para Colombia.

La batalla del Palacio de Justicia tuvo por escenario el corazón político-administrativo del país, y todos presenciamos las escenas consecuentes a la decisión de tierra arrasada y aniquilamiento total. Pero la opinión pública no conoce aún toda la verdad y el gobierno pretende justificar su acción con argumentos ajenos a la realidad y al sentir nacional.

Esta actitud sólo nos enfrenta al abismo de su odio y sinrazón. Y aleja más aún las posibilidades de construir la paz por caminos distintos a la guerra. Por eso, hoy la conciencia democrática de nuestra nacionalidad tiene que exigir la verdad, solo la verdad y nada más que la verdad sobre los hechos sociales, políticos y militares que nos enfrentan con nuestro destino colectivo inmediato.

Por nuestra parte, asumimos la responsabilidad de nuestra acción con mirada limpia, dignidad, y con el dolor profundo por el sacrificio de hombres y mujeres que no participaron en el enfrentamiento directo, de nuestros combatientes y de los compatriotas que pelearon en las filas de la oligarquía. La enfrentamos con la serenidad y firmeza que inspiró esta demanda armada por los derechos de la nación, de la patria y del ciudadano, y con la integridad de un comportamiento manifiesto en toda nuestra actuación pública, en las tomas de pueblos y ciudades, en la Embajada de la República Dominicana y en el respeto inmenso hacia los prisioneros de guerra.

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1. Nuestras razones son las de la nación entera. Hoy la patria que vivimos no es la que soñamos. No es la que anhelamos con claros horizontes de justicia y plenitud, de desarrollo, libertad y respeto a los derechos de la vida. Padecemos, en cambio, los rigores de esta guerra que desató la minoría gobernante contra las mayorías, intensificada con la negación a buscar los caminos de la paz mediante la concertación nacional y el diálogo por el cambio.

Hoy la paz es camino por andar, bandera grande y limpia y tarea de las mayorías que necesitan y quieren el cambio democrático. No es argumento para la injusticia, promesa incumplida, ni excusa para el engaño, la represión y el holocausto.

La incompetencia y la amoralidad de este desgobierno no pueden ser ya jamás motivo de comentario individual o de la protesta aislada. Hoy es urgente y necesario que la capacidad creadora, el coraje para mirar de frente la realidad y la decisión mayoritaria de asumir los retos del presente nos conduzcan al logro de la paz que se fundamenta en la justicia social, la soberanía y la participación de todos en la conducción del destino colectivo.

Nuestra patria no merece ni resiste seguir así. Nuestra patria no es tierra de ignominia ni tierra de prepotencias oligárquicas ni de minorías criminales con políticas de tierra arrasada. Por eso, y a pesar de la violencia cotidiana que azota a las grandes mayorías, no salimos del asombro y del dolor por el sacrificio de más de cien colombianos en el Palacio de Justicia. Por eso, en las luchas y en las demostraciones armadas de la rebeldía se abrazan los combatientes de la libertad con hombres y mujeres que, sin armas en la mano, levantan su voz de cordura, su reclamo de reformas sociales y su demanda de replantear a fondo el proceso de paz que aún no comienza.

2. Y por eso mismo llegamos ante la Corte Suprema de Justicia, única reserva moral y democrática de los poderes públicos.

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Llegamos ante la Corte Suprema de Justicia para presentar las demandas de una nación que se desangra y se asfixia, por las políticas de un Ejecutivo y un Legislativo que van en contravía al logro de la paz.

Buscábamos, ante este tribunal de honor, exponer nuestras razones y enjuiciar públicamente la violación de los acuerdos de tregua y reformas sociales. Demandábamos a este régimen por la violación de la Constitución nacional, la entrega de la soberanía económica y jurídica, y por defraudar la esperanza nacional.

Llegábamos, ante la Corte Suprema de Justicia, para convocar a la nación entera a participar en este juicio como parte demandante y demostramos nuestra confianza en la moralidad y el espíritu amplio y democrático de los honorables magistrados y consejeros de Estado, para que ellos arrojasen luces a este proceso.

Llegamos ante la Corte Suprema de Justicia invocando el derecho que nos rige, porque como ejército del pueblo abrazamos la defensa del cuerpo constitucional y luchamos por su vigencia.

Fuimos a la Corte Suprema de Justicia en búsqueda de más amplios horizontes para el ejercicio de la democracia y con la decisión de abrir nuevos caminos a la posibilidad irrenunciable de lograr la paz mediante el diálogo, la concertación y la participación de todos.

3. Y fue una demanda armada porque hoy los derechos del hombre y del ciudadano tienen que ser garantizados con la fuerza de las armas del pueblo.

Porque los derechos de las mayorías son desconocidos y constantemente violados por la minoría que nos gobierna. Porque hoy las mayorías tienen que pelear para ejercer la democracia. Porque el Gobierno de Betancur se lanzó al aniquilamiento de fuerzas que son esperanza del cambio y traicionó la vía más justa y novedosa de buscar la paz para la nación cual era el Diálogo Nacional.

Por la verdad y la democracia nos tomamos el Palacio de Justicia. No para exigir prebendas o beneficios propios, no para atacar al tribunal de justicia ni a sus representantes. Nunca hemos atentado, ni lo haremos jamás, contra los trabajadores de la justicia. Por el contrario, fuimos ahí como tribunal de honor y de leyes, porque la nación tiene suficientes razones para enjuiciar política y judicialmente a este Gobierno y porque la Corte Suprema y el Consejo de Estado habían actuado con conciencia y dignidad. Hace apenas tres meses se condenó al actual ministro de Defensa y al Estado colombiano como responsables de torturas y violaciones a los derechos humanos.

4. Los hechos:

a. Desde el primer momento de la toma, tanto el Gobierno como los honorables magistrados, conocieron nuestras razones y también nuestra decisión de defender las vidas de las personas retenidas aun a costa de las propias, ante eventuales asaltos al Palacio de Justicia. A todos los medios de comunicación y al propio Gobierno llegó nuestra proclama, pero no se permitió su difusión.

b. Nuestra defensa estaba organizada con base en el enfrentamiento militar y no en la toma de rehenes. Para ello, los combatientes del M-19 tomaron posiciones en la parte baja de la edificación y en los pisos segundo, tercero y cuarto, concebidos los dos últimos como última línea de defensa.

c. De parte nuestra, nunca hubo ultimátum ni amenazas al Gobierno ni a las personas retenidas. Desde el comienzo buscamos conversaciones, pero en ningún momento planteamos la disposición a la rendición humillante y vergonzosa. Sin embargo, el Gobierno -amparándose en la desinformación y el engaño- tomó su decisión ciega y brutal, que no fue ataque contra los combatientes de la columna Iván Marino Ospina que ingresaron en el Palacio de Justicia, sino una operación de aniquilamiento masivo, de holocausto total y generalizado.

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d. El ingreso de las tanquetas al Palacio, antes de cumplir dos horas de ocupación, aisló a los combatientes situados en la parte baja de los que sostenían posiciones en los pisos altos. Sin embargo, la resistencia en los sótanos y en el primer piso se mantuvo hasta el momento del incendio, mostrando el temple y el heroísmo de los oficiales de Bolívar en forma jamás vista en este país.

e. La perentoria exigencia del doctor Alfonso Reyes Echandía, presidente de la Corte, escuchada por Colombia entera, no conmovió al Gobierno; el clamor de las familias de los magistrados y funcionarios, así como las voces valientes de algunas personalidades que rompieron el cerco tendido a la libre expresión, tampoco fue atendido por el señor Betancur ni por sus ministros de despacho. No hubo lugar a nada distinto de la prepotencia y el odio desplegados ante una nación estremecida con la sucesión de hechos de aniquilamiento total.

f. En las horas de la noche del 6 de noviembre, el Gobierno en pleno aprobó el arrasamiento total del Palacio de Justicia, en vista de que el Ejército y la Policía habían fracasado en sus intentos de asalto. La decisión fue la de incendiar la sede del poder jurisdiccional, por acción de comandos del GOES, situación que causó numerosas víctimas, entre ellas, el presidente de la Corte, y que obligó a civiles e insurgentes a buscar refugio en los baños de los pisos tercero y cuarto.

g. Nuestras fuerzas, así como la mayoría de las personas retenidas en los pisos superiores de la edificación, sobrevivieron al incendio, lo cual permitió enfrentar el asalto de nuevos comandos en la madrugada del jueves 7. Pero esto también dio lugar a una nueva decisión gubernamental: la de minar el Palacio, como recurso máximo contra la heroica resistencia de sus ocupantes.

h. Poco antes de las 14 horas del jueves, Betancur decretó la llamada "hora de reflexión", nada distinto que un llamado perentorio a la rendición, so pena de hacer explotar las cargas colocadas en diferentes puntos del edificio. El mundo entero

presenció el desenlace fatal y el Gobierno tiene que enfrentar su decisión con la sola verdad. Porque las siete tanquetas, el empleo indiscriminado de los cañones de 57 mm, el uso de rockets, granadas y gases, la provocación de incendios y explosiones, fueron la única respuesta a las diferentes soluciones planteadas. En ningún momento el Gobierno aceptó la fórmula negociada ni dio lugar a pausas o a minuto alguno para la reflexión.

Tal es la más reciente demostración de una política cuyos efectos sufren a diario millones de colombianos enfrentados al marginamiento y a la desatención de sus necesidades como negación de los derechos básicos del hombre. Esta política de aniquilamiento es la que deja el saldo trágico de desapariciones y asesinatos en todo el país, así como de bombardeos indiscriminados y despojo en las zonas rurales donde se produce la confrontación armada. Esta política se traduce hoy en la decisión de arrasar el país en aras de una institucionalidad que el mismo Gobierno irrespeta y falsea.

5. La nación en armas demandó al Gobierno por el incumplimiento de sus compromisos ante el país y el propio Gobierno se autocondenó. El Gobierno no sólo desatendió invocaciones obvias a la aplicación del Derecho de Gentes -cual es el cese del fuego- como lo planteara el doctor Reyes, sino que arrasó con todo y con todos los que estaban en el Palacio de Justicia, optando -antes que cualquier solución negociada- por aniquilar el poder jurisdiccional de la República.

Y ahora minimiza su responsabilidad con nuevas muestras de cinismo, mentiras y actitudes criminales:

a. Como si todavía quedara lugar para el asombro, el Gobierno pretende distorsionar los objetivos de la Operación "Antonio Nariño por los Derechos del Hombre" y negar su carácter político, aduciendo falsos compromisos entre la democracia en armas y el narcotráfico

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b. Desde las guaridas de un imaginación criminal y negando toda lógica, quiere hacer creer al mundo que provocamos el incendio de nuestro albergue, el cual alojaba también a otro centenar de personas.

c. Tal vez inspirados por su desprecio a la vida humana, afirman que los guerrilleros se ataron cargas de dinamita y disfrazan así las explosiones que las Fuerzas Armadas propiciaron para consumir el holocausto.

d. Su cobardía dicta las infamias con que se proponen manchar el honor de hombres y de quienes combatieron limpiamente, para adjudicarles -después de su muerte- conductas inescrupulosas que se riñen con las declaraciones de los sobrevivientes, los propósitos del operativo y la confianza nacional en la integridad de los héroes de la democracia y la libertad.

e. El decomiso de materiales grabados y filmados, por parte de las autoridades militares, sólo busca ocultar las evidencias de los crímenes posteriores a la culminación del operativo. Pero la nación sabe del secuestro y asesinato de guerrilleros y funcionarios y se pregunta por la suerte de quienes continúan desaparecidos.

El Gobierno de Betancur tiene que responder por el asesinato del comandante Andrés Almarales, a quienes los militares sacaron vivo del Palacio de Justicia, para entregar luego su cadáver. El Gobierno tiene que responder por la vida de Alfonso Jacquin, Irma Franco y Marcela Sosa, apresados vivos y hoy desaparecidos; tiene que dar cuenta de la suerte de Luis Otero y Guillermo Elvecio Ruiz, también desaparecidos, así como de los siete combatientes y un número indeterminado de civiles -cuya lista encabezan los nueve empleados de la cafetería del Palacio- quienes fueron introducidos en las tanquetas que estaban dentro de la edificación y trasladados a la Brigada de Institutos Militares y a cárceles clandestinas, donde están siendo brutalmente torturados. Y que también explique los motivos para dictar la falsa

información acerca de la participación, en la toma, de los compañeros Vera Grabe, Libardo Parra, Afranio Parra y Rafael Arteaga.

6. La nación tiene derecho a exigir responsabilidades y sentenciar al desgobierno de las minorías.

En el Palacio de Justicia -nuevo símbolo de estos tiempos difíciles- se mantuvo en alto la bandera nacional. No en vano lucharon y se hermanaron los mártires de la democracia y los combatientes por ella. Porque existe la posibilidad cierta y alcanzable de mejor vida para los colombianos, la que impulsan hoy campesinos y obreros, abogados y sacerdotes, estudiantes y pobladores, guerrilleros y demócratas, que con palabra limpia y acción justiciera hemos decidido reemplazar el mal gobierno y somos avanzada de las inmensas mayorías que anhelan el cambio, la democracia, la justicia y la soberanía.

No más prepotencia minoritaria, no más militarismo de tierra arrasada, no más torturadores en el Gobierno. Enfrentemos todos a los nuevos "pacificadores" con el temple moral de esta nación cuya historia enlaza la resistencia de los combatientes de la democracia en el Palacio de Justicia con la de quienes en el sitio de Cartagena prepararon las condiciones de las armas de libertad de Simón Bolívar.

Y si hoy Belisario Betancur y Vega Uribe ocupan el lugar de los pacificadores de antaño, también se levantan fuerzas vivas, diversas en sus métodos de lucha y en sus opiniones, pero que se encaminan hacia la construcción de un Gobierno de democracia que dé paso a un nuevo ordenamiento social en el que la justicia ya no tenga que ser reclamada con las armas, ni la democracia construida en combates. Y por sobre todo, en el que la vida, el honor y el respeto a la persona se anteponga al odio y a los intereses pequeños de los altos poderes.

La Operación "Antonio Nariño por los Derechos del Hombre", realizada por la columna Iván Marino Ospina del M-19, llevaba una demanda nacional ante los más

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altos tribunales de justicia. Hoy la nación le da continuidad, pero no como demanda sino como sentencia por la decisión política y militar del Gobierno, que arrasó a quienes estaban ahí, y también a la conciencia moral de la nación, con el golpe mortal a la institución jurisdiccional.

La voz viva del presidente de la Corte, exigiendo al Gobierno el cese del fuego y el comienzo de conversaciones, permanece como acusación y condena eterna a quienes ordenaron y ejecutaron el holocausto total. Y en el altar de la patria se levanta la bandera de la democracia y la dignidad de hombres como el mismo doctor Reyes Echandía, y de todos nuestros combatientes encabezados por Luis Otero, Alfonso Jacquin, Andrés Almarales, Guillermo Elvecio Ruiz, Ariel Sánchez, José Domingo Gómez.

Esta dolorosa pérdida de hombres, de conciencias, no será vana. Está en camino la democracia. Perdió la minoría gobernante la autoridad para seguir dirigiendo los destinos de la nación. Y como hoy lo hacen los trabajadores de la justicia, Colombia entera ha de reclamar desde cada localidad, cada sector social, cada gremio, cada color y cada creencia, por las garantías inaplazables de los sagrados derechos de la vida.

A las naciones del mundo y a los hermanos pueblos de nuestra América les decimos que Colombia será de otra manera. Porque la conciencia, la fuerza, el heroísmo, vuelven a reencontrarse con nuestra historia, y es destino de los pueblos la dignidad, la libertad y la victoria. Porque apostamos al futuro y a la vida de este país joven y fecundo. Y porque hoy reafirmamos ante la nación y ante el mundo que no cejaremos en esta lucha hasta que la libertad, el bienestar y la felicidad de la patria estén asegurados.

Por la paz haremos hasta lo imposible.

Colombia, 11 de noviembre de 1985

## **7 Unabridged excerpt from interview with Professor Elvira Sánchez Blake, Chicago, May of 2014**

Elvira: –...Yo ese día no sé lo de Belisario. Ese día Belisario todavía contestaba [...]. Él sí contestó el primer día, y el sí llamó y él sí estuvo pendiente, y el sí no sé qué, él sí apareció... el no estaba... Fue al otro día. Nosotros terminamos... o sea, como nosotros nos quedábamos muchas veces en el palacio [presidencial] cubriendo eventos todavía como si uno... entonces uno ahí medio dormía algo, medio no sé qué, entonces al otro día pues siguió la cosa y uno como periodista... yo no sé, yo era joven, y bella y todo, uno podía pasar de un día a otro y de verdad, el cansancio y todo... Sí, así seguía...Entonces ahí... ahí teníamos cafetería y todo, entonces ahí seguimos, ¿no? con los compañeros, con los que estaban ahí, con todos.

Al otro día fue cuando fue lo, lo de... Y llegó la gente a trabajar, normal, el staff, todo eso y la cosa seguía, la cosa seguía, y ahí fue como... todo el tiempo nos llamaban los periodistas de todas partes [preguntando]: ¿Qué pasa? ¿Por qué el presidente no dice nada? ¿Por qué el presidente no dice nada? Ahí fue cuando se calló. Ahí fue cuando ya no hubo...

Hagai: –Ah, ya al día siguiente...

E.: –Sí, el jueves. Fue cuando ya... ¿Qué dice? ¿Por qué el presidente no responde? ¿Por qué el presidente no responde? ¿Por qué el presidente no responde? Me acuerdo de que yo contestaba llamadas, y llamadas, y llamadas, y [los que llamaban preguntaban] ¿que por qué el presidente no responde?

H.: –¿Y qué decías?

E.: –¡No sabemos! ¡Es que no sabíamos! No había nada, no decía nada, no había ningún comunicado, nada...

H.: –¿Pero no estaban en el mismo edificio?

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E.: –¡Sí! En la oficina de la... En la presidencia, en el Palacio de Nariño, pero no había ninguna comunicación del presidente. El presidente siempre estaba en el tercer piso, nosotros no era que estuviéramos uno al lado del otro. Él estaba en el tercer piso y nosotros en el primer piso.

H.: –¿Y no se podía circular...?

E.: –Ahí es donde te voy a decir. Entonces como llamaban tanto y no sabíamos qué hacer... Porque siempre que había una cosa era obvio que el presidente hiciera un comunicado o que hubiera algo, o que... No. Y el jefe de prensa tampoco. ¡No sé!, es que el presidente... ¡No sé! Nadie sabía, y era rarísimo que no contestara, que no dijera nada, que nada de nada. Y las súplicas de... estas del presidente de la Corte Suprema, que contestara, que... eso había sido la noche anterior, y ese día ya no volvió a decir nada, ya no... Pero todo el mundo... ¿Qué pasó, qué pasó, qué pasó? ¿Qué pasa, qué pasa, qué pasa?... No, ¡Nada, nada, nada! Entonces ahí fue cuando yo, de aburrida y de lo que fuera porque no teníamos nada que hacer, de verdad, estábamos ahí como... Me fui para la... La parte de... eso se llama la plaza de armas, que era donde uno podía subir al segundo y tercer piso. El tercer piso era la oficina del presidente y uno podía... Eran unas escaleras de caracol y uno podía ver desde aquí... Más o menos la oficina, y uno sabía si estaba el presidente o no porque estaban los soldaditos, o no se qué, y a veces no estaba nada entonces uno sabía que no estaba... uno se podía más o menos mirar desde ahí. Entonces yo me asomé a la escalera y entonces ahí estaba uno de los edecanes, uno de los militares, y entonces... Él normalmente era muy amable conmigo, entonces [yo le dije] “Hola mayor, ¿qué más?”, no sé qué “¿Qué pasa? ¿Por qué el presidente no dice nada?” Ah, porque lo primero que le dije fue “Quiero pasar”, y él dijo “No, no puede pasar.” Y entonces yo [pregunté] “¿Por qué?”.

H.: –Y ya no amable ni nada...

E.: –No, ¡no! [Dijo:] “¡No puede pasar! ¡No puede pasar!” Y yo [pregunté] “¿Pero por qué?” [A lo cual él respondió:] “¡Son órdenes!”. [Yo pregunté:] “¿Qué pasa, por qué... por qué el presidente no está...? ¿Por qué no dice nada? Me están volviendo loca, todo el mundo [pregunta] que qué pasa...” ¡No!... [Y él dijo]: “Es que el presidente ya no es presidente señorita periodista”. Esa frase, esas palabras. “El presidente ya no es presidente. El que está a cargo es mi mayor [quiere decir general] Vega Uribe”. Esas fueron las palabras. Claro, me quedé así [estupefacta]. Y él muy estoico y muy todo no me dejó pasar, y yo me asomé y vi todos los militarotes ahí... ¡Toda la plana mayor de los militares!, ahí al lado... en la oficina de la presidencia, en la oficina del presidente. Entonces yo me devolví para mi oficina y les comuniqué a mis compañeros: “Les cuento que estamos bajo un golpe de Estado”, y todos pues por un lado... por un momento hubo como estrés, y por otro lado empezaron [a decir cosas como]: “¡OK mi mayor!... Empezaron a hacer bromas sobre el asunto, como si fuera para hacer bromas. [Decían:] “Entonces de ahora en adelante [debemos decir] ‘¡OK mi mayor! ¡Sí mi coronel!’”. Y yo me quedé ahí como... Y mi papá me llamaba y me llamaba y me llamaba... mi papá estaba que se moría... le iba a dar un infarto de que su niñita estuviera ahí, en medio de esa situación [ríe], te puedes imaginar... Y yo le conté a mi papá. Y mi papá se quedó [estupefacto]... El fue... Él no... No... No... Su mayor miedo de toda la vida era que hubiera un golpe militar porque él había vivido el golpe militar de Rojas Pinilla. Él había estado bajo eso... Y para él había sido un trauma y él siempre decía “lo peor que le puede pasar a este país es un golpe militar”. Entonces él se quedó... Me acuerdo que yo se lo conté a él, y seguimos ahí, y entonces ya fue cuando empezó la radio a decir “Están saliendo!”... No sé qué... Ya están no sé cuándo... Y Juan Gossain [dijo] “¡El presidente de la Corte Suprema de Justicia está muerto! ¡El presidente de la Corte Suprema está muerto!” Y lo gritaba, lo gritaba, lo gritaba, lo repetía, “¡Atención, atención!”. Y eso aparece en el video de la toma. Y

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cuando yo escuché esas palabras fue como... ¡Uy! [se estremece]. Fue tan... ¡Qué tensión! “¡El presidente de la Corte Suprema de Justicia ha muerto! Y están saliendo” Entonces ya empezaron a salir, a salir, a salir los... Y uno veía ahí por la televisión... por la radio... Entonces ahí fue el momento en qué... Yo no sé mis compañeros qué hicieron o yo no te puedo decir, porque yo a veces pienso ¡Y por qué mis compañeros no hacían nada tampoco! ¿No? Yo me fui otra vez, y me asomé por la bendita escalera y ahí ya no había nadie. Una o dos horas antes estaba lleno de militares y de soldaditos y de todo de pronto estaba solo, desierto. Y entonces me subí las escaleras, así como tu-tu-tu y de pronto [miré] en la oficina del presidente y [todo estaba] solo, desierto. Y subí hasta el tercer piso, y entonces, eso de que uno a veces así ve las puertas [hace el gesto de mirar por un lado] y no, no había nadie... seguí caminando y llegué al Consejo de Ministros. Se llamaba así “Consejo de Ministros”. Y entonces ahí fue que... ¡No había nadie! ¡Es que no había nadie! Y yo decía “¡Pero aquí no hay nadie...! Qué pasa?” Estaba vacía esa parte, no el edificio sino esa parte... de pronto había gente, las secretarias, las no sé qué, pero no los militares y eso, no... Y de pronto abrí la puerta del consejo de ministros, y así como estamos tu y yo estaba el presidente y me dijo “¿Qué pasó?”

H.: –Estaba sentado o venía saliendo?

E.: –Él venía saliendo. Me imagino que estaba en la puerta. Yo no sé si es que la puerta... la puerta no estaba con seguro porque yo la pude abrir, pero yo no sé si desde dentro... ¡No sé, no te puedo explicar! Yo abrí la puerta y el presidente salió así, y estaba con otra gente, que tampoco sé qué gente estaba ahí. [Y preguntó:] “¿Qué pasó?” Entonces yo me quedé [estupefacta, y respondí]: “¿Cómo así que qué pasó? Presidente, ya todo terminó.” [Y el presidente preguntó:] “Y el presidente de la Corte?”. [Yo respondí:] “Murió.” Y él se agarraba la cabeza y preguntaba “¿Está segura, está segura?”. [Mi respuesta fue:] “Lo dicen todas las emisoras”. Hasta ahí llegó nuestra

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conversación. Él se agarró, se agarró, se agarró y yo me fui, porque yo me dije “¿Yo qué hago aquí?” ¡Yo le di la noticia al presidente, yo! Eso es lo que te puedo decir. Nadie me puede decir a mi que no fue verdad. Yo no me lo soñé.

## **8 Excerpt from interview with Isabel Guerrero. Fusagasugá, Colombia, November of 2013**

Hagai: –Digamos que le tendrías que explicar a un extranjero que no sabe nada de la historia de Colombia quién era Pablo Escobar. ¿Qué le dirías?

Isabel: –Pablo Escobar era un hombre muy rico que ayudaba mucho a los pobres. En esa época le donó varios barrios a la gente pobre de Medellín. El problema es que los políticos no lo querían. Tu sabes, lo mismo de siempre...

H.: –¿Tu has escuchado algo sobre su participación en lo que pasó en el Palacio de Justicia?

I.: –¡Sí! Lo leí en un libro de esta vieja... ¿Cómo es que se llama? Una que era reina de belleza...

H.: –¿Virginia Vallejo?

I.: –Esa, Virginia Vallejo. Ella era la amante y escribió un libro. Ella dice que el problema es que los políticos tenían unos papeles en el Palacio de Justicia y lo querían hundir, y tenían papeles también contra [Gustavo] Petro y el otro del M-19, el que tiene el problema del habla... ¿Cómo se llama? No me acuerdo del nombre...

H.: –¿[Antonio] Navarro?

I.: –¡Ese! Bueno, los políticos tenían unos papeles sobre ellos y los querían usar para hundirlos, entonces se metieron al Palacio y los quemaron. El problema es que los militares se metieron como siempre, y mataron un montón de personas.

H.: –¿Te parece que meterse al Palacio de Justicia para quemar esos archivos fue bueno o malo?

I.: –Fue Bueno porque si no los políticos habrían usado esos papeles para hundirlos como siempre hacen. A ellos no les gustaba el M-19 porque también ayudaba a los pobres.

H.: –¿Te hace pensar Pablo Escobar en otros personajes de la historia de Colombia?

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I.: –Sí, en Efraín González.

H.: –¿Quién?

I.: –Efraín González. Él era un guerrillero, pero de antes de esa época. Él robaba a los ricos y le daba a los pobres, pero como siempre pasa, los policías y los militares le montaron la persecución hasta que lo mataron. A Pablo Escobar también lo mataron. Y a otro que era del M-19 también, Pizarro. Ese hombre era un berraco, y muy inteligente. Yo estaba trabajando cuando escuché por radio la noticia del asesinato. Al rato entró un compañero y me dijo: “–¡Mataron a su jefe!”

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