

# The Pain and Power of Memory

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CALI, COLOMBIA — It looks like just another store front in this burgeoning city of two and a half million people in southwestern Colombia. But the Memory Gallery retails raw remembrance. A sign at the entrance advises visitors: “A people’s knowledge of the history of their oppression and their resistance forms a part of their patrimony.” Photographs of men, women and children search out your eyes from the gallery walls. They are all victims of the state, murdered by the Colombian armed forces or by “paramilitary” forces acting on behalf of the government or the trans-national corporations who call the tune in this troubled country. Each face represents many more victims of assassinations or forced disappearances in recent years, whose names are lost to memory and whose bodies have never been recovered.

“It is better to die for something than to live for nothing,” in the words of Eduardo Umana Mendoza, whose smiling face beams down from his memorial plaque. He was a human rights lawyer murdered in his forties. Most of the victims represented in the Memory Gallery died for expressing their opinions or for trying to organize against repression. Some were killed as a warning to others. Some were simply guilty of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

After eight years of planning and research, the Memory Gallery opened in Cali in 2007. One of the organizers, Freddi Caicedo, said it is hard for human rights activists and families of victims to find spaces to remember them. Landlords and rental agents don’t want to rent their buildings for such a purpose. They are afraid. Project organizers also travel to universities and street locations with photographs, encouraging others to share their own stories, to remember their own dead. “Without remembering, the crimes will continue,” said Caicedo. But with or without remembering, the crimes continue.

Between 1982 and 2005 paramilitary forces perpetrated more than 3,500 massacres and stole more than six million hectares of land (a hectare equals two-and-a-half acres) in Colombia, according to Memory Gallery statistics. Colombia now contains more than four million displaced persons or internal exiles. Who was robbed? Mostly poor farmers and indigenous groups, growing food for their own use. Who took over the land? Large corporations, running high-profit mono-crop agribusiness.

Though supposedly demobilized in 2002, paramilitary forces are still blamed for about six hundred murders a year. About a third of the national legislature is estimated to be under their control. Also since 2002, the National Armed Forces have committed more than 950 executions. In January 2008 alone, paramilitaries committed two massacres, murdered eight people and “disappeared” nine others, while the Army executed sixteen people without benefit of any judicial process. At least twenty union leaders have been murdered so far this year.

The U.S. government enables the violence, repression and dispossession that constitute Colombia's "permanent crisis." In the name of fighting leftist guerillas and the war on drugs, the U.S. government-funded Plan Colombia supplies the Colombian armed forces with sophisticated weaponry and military training.

U.S. support funds few social programs or schools. Eighty percent of the Colombian gross national product goes to war. Paramilitary forces do not fight narcotics traffickers, but poor farmers. Coca eradication campaigns poison huge tracts of land on which small farmers grow subsistence crops. The pseudo drug war despoils the land, forcing small farmers to migrate to cities, freeing up that land for corporate control. Meanwhile illicit drug production and export continues unabated.

Colombian activists have condemned more than thirty prominent multi-national corporations for employing paramilitaries to harass and murder workers, farmers, union leaders and student protestors. The list of these human rights abusers contains some familiar names: Coca Cola, Chiquita Brands, Del Monte, Nestle, Occidental Petroleum and others. How can these companies — and the U.S. government — literally get away with murder? U.S. media parrot the Bush administration line that Colombia (and the trans-national corporations) are fighting for freedom.

Who will tell the people that the opposite is true? Your U.S. tax dollars support kidnapping, torture and murder on a massive scale in Colombia. Eight years ago there were 70,000 soldiers in all the Colombian armed forces combined. Now the police and military number 450,000, made up partly of dispossessed impoverished job-seekers. As the U.S. outsources war to Halliburton and Blackwater, Colombia does the same with paramilitaries. In many ways Colombia seems merely a less inhibited, because less scrutinized, version of Bush America.

On a quickie visit in July — miraculously coinciding with the high-profile release of Ingrid Betancourt and other FARC hostages — John McCain declared his support for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, despite Uribe's scandalous human rights record, his phony, ineffectual "war" on drugs and his attempt to subvert the country's judicial branch. No reporter challenged McCain or Uribe about any of it.

Information is just one more important resource the authorities want to control. Colombia's prodigal natural wealth has proved to be its curse, from the days of El Dorado, the fabled lost city of gold, which drove the invading Spaniards into a frenzy of exploitation, enslavement and genocide of native peoples.

With U.S. backing, on behalf of the multi-national corporations, including major narco-traffickers, the Colombian government continues the rapacious tradition of seizing lands and water sources which once benefitted many, in order to enrich its own patrons, the mighty few. Formerly a major sugar exporter, Colombia must now import sugar for its domestic use. The huge tracts of sugar cane here are grown now for use as bio-fuels, a more lucrative, if less nourishing enterprise.

A couple hours' drive outside the city of Cali, the picturesque town of Trujillo lies in a verdant valley, its church steeple pointing heavenward. But Trujillo's bucolic façade masks a hidden horror. Over the course of eight years, the twenty thousand residents of this town suffered a slow-motion massacre, the tortures, disappearances and murders of 342 people. Major drug traffickers in the region allied with the Army and Police to get rid of anyone they wished, with no fear of prosecution.

At the town's own memory gallery, a sign declares: "Trujillo, a drop of hope in a sea of impunity." Here too the faces of the murdered victims — many very young — beckon us and implicate us in their unfair destinies. Several widows, one of whom also lost two sons, fourteen and sixteen, came out to see the American visitors. Still emotional about their losses, they were eager — almost desperate — to share their stories.

The people of Trujillo have begun an ambitious memorial project. When the Colombian government offered to pay reparations to the town, the families of the victims bought a large tract of land, an entire hillside, to build a memorial. Our guide was a twenty-two year old woman whose father was disappeared when she was four. At the time her pregnant mother also had a three-year-old and an eleven-month-old. Her father was twenty-six when he was taken, along with his two brothers, partners in a carpentry business. Why were they tortured and killed? Perhaps they saw something they shouldn't have. Perhaps they complained too loudly.

The Trujillo memorial wall winds up a hill beside a stone path, with names and dates of death or disappearances. Children were busy on the day of our visit, scraping and whitewashing the walls. Many of the murdered were young: 17, 39, 26.... Villagers who marched to demand a better road and a health clinic were labeled agitators and murdered. One old man, the town character, was ordered killed by troops to prove their loyalty to their commanders. Nine people are included in the memorial who died of broken hearts, after the torture and murder of their children.

Trujillo's priest, Father Tiberio Fernandez Mafla, organized worker co-ops to help his parishioners make more money. When the disappearances began, Father Tiberio denounced the kidnappings from the pulpit and demanded the safe return of the victims. Returning from a funeral, he too was detained and disappeared, along with his niece. His decapitated body, missing hands and feet and genitals, was found in the river. Cali's Memory Gallery is named in his honor.

A fellow visitor to Trujillo, Tom Clements, said he hoped the next U.S. president would tell Alvaro Uribe that Plan Colombia will not survive, nor will any Free Trade Agreement be signed, until genuine reparations are made to the victims of state-protected terror in Colombia, including the end of impunity for the known perpetrators, starting in Trujillo. Tom's idea is morally sound, but unlikely to happen.

The suffering, the courage and the determination of the Colombian people, in Trujillo and Cali and many other places, is inspirational and heartbreaking. A Memory Gallery sign says: "Neither forgiving nor forgetting, we seek truth, justice and fundamental healing."

The United States government and leading U.S. corporations, too long complicit in the spread of terror and injustice in Colombia, should spearhead the drive for that truth, justice and healing. They/you/we can't claim they don't know.

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