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MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | MAPS - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 10 April 2021



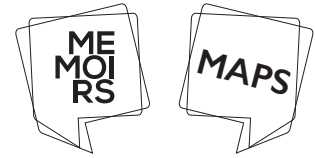
acrylic on paper | Almogera Abdulbagi | 2020 | courtesy of the artist and the Downtown Gallery

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FIRES AND VICTIMS: A FIRST APPROACH TO COLOMBIAN POST-CONFLICT POSTMEMORY

Felipe Cammaert

In a recent newspaper article, published in October 2020, Ricardo Silva Romero (Bogotá, 1975), one of the most important writers and columnists in the Colombian press today, reflected on the place of his generation in the - unfortunately long - history of Colombian violence. Commenting on local political actuality based on statements by Colombian President Iván Duque (who stated in an interview that he wanted to be «the president who made the new generations able to rethink the present»), Silva Romero elaborates an ironic reply in which, states:



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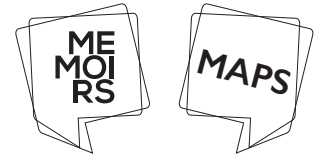
[...] neither have we set the fire that is consuming Colombia: we are not guilty of this violence in pure state, nor of terror before the truth, nor of lame justice that is slow to come, nor of massacres, nor of embezzlements, nor of paramilitaries, nor of guerrillas, nor of political murders, nor of drug traffickers, nor of bombs, nor of thugs, nor of kidnappings, nor of conspirators, nor of bombings. (1)

In addition to dismantling - with the lucidity and elegance that are characteristic of him - the jargon and the commonplaces proper to political speeches, Ricardo Silva Romero carries out in this text a crucial conceptual operation that, in my opinion, contains the germ of what could be qualified as postmemory in the Colombian post-conflict.

When the author of the chronicle, significantly entitled «Fires», chooses the first-person plural to refer to his generation, he is, in a way, highlighting one of the most important elements associated with postmemory: access to the ownership of experience (2). Here, the writer not only detaches himself from the acts of violence, but, above all, imposes a generational border concerning the direct actors (victims and perpetrators) of the Colombian conflict.

But before further reflection on the issue of violence in Colombia, I think it is important to bring to light some reflections of António Sousa Ribeiro, published in this same space, and that came to my mind when I read the chronicle of Silva Romero. In the text entitled “Postmemory and the condition of the victim” ([MEMOIRS Newsletter](#) 95, 4/04/2020), Sousa Ribeiro reflects on the effect of trivialization of some concepts associated with studies on trauma, memory and violence, and in particular the trivialization of the notion of victim, in the face of the recent proliferation of publications in these fields. The text speaks, in this sense, of a process of objectification which is consubstantial to the category of the victim, as well as of the gesture of testimony “as a gesture of authorship that, through the projection onto the level of discourse, frees the victim from the silence which reifies him or her”.

Sousa Ribeiro draws attention to the fact that, in postmemory, the category of victim is not only the result of a simple succession of common events and circumstances that the prefix «post» could suggest. On the contrary, he stresses the urgent need for two fundamental elements to be present in the configuration of the ownership of experience for the heir to traumatic memory - in this case, the victim: firstly, a gap that causes the victim to have the mental disposition to access this past that, in principle, is alien to him; and, secondly, a (pro)active attitude, according to which this process needs a manifest epistemological construction. In the words of Sousa Ribeiro:



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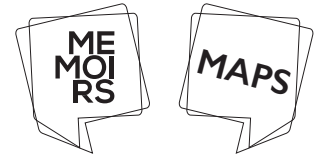
On the contrary, the notion of a gap, the existence of an interval, not just in time, but also at the level of the identity assumed and the position taken towards the past is inherent to the concept of postmemory. The construction of postmemory implies a gesture of construction of knowledge - its initial drive is, almost always, the need to interrogate the silence of the previous generation, to understand all the enigmas that have been accumulating within a frequently dysfunctional family relation.

Going back to the chronicle of Silva Romero, the proposal that his generation should rethink the present contains, in my opinion, some of the distinctive elements of postmemory, and, in particular, the appropriation of the ownership of experience mentioned by Sousa Ribeiro. On the one hand, the Colombian writer detaches himself, in his text, from the origin of the violent phenomena that have plagued Colombia in the last 50 years, when he contrasts the «we» of the present to the «they» of the past in the excerpt cited above. This creates, in fact, a distance, not only temporal, but, above all, conceptual, in the face of the violent reality from which it wants to demarcate itself. On the other hand, the text «Fires» contains a gesture of conscious and manifest appropriation that, in my opinion, symbolizes access to the ownership of the experience in the context of postmemory:

But the truth is that it fell to us to put out all these fires. [...] The truth is that it fell to us to be this generation of generations that has to face the task of dismantling violence. [...] It was not by our own hand that we arrived at this point, it was not for us to write this country that stifled citizenship, taking away all its leading role, but it is our duty not to put ourselves at the service of any of the states of this violence that continues to stifle the present.

In a symbolic way, Ricardo Silva Romero appropriates, on behalf of his generation - and in an authorial gesture that is very common in the public representations of postmemory -, the legacy of violence in Colombia. However, the writer proposes to «write» another collective narrative, away from the discourses of violence: a narrative of reconciliation.

At the same time, Silva Romero takes upon himself, but also upon the generation of descendants of a country deeply marked by violence, the responsibility for the duty to put out the fires. Thus, the writer not only defines himself as a victim, but also as an active subject of a paradigm shift. This positioning recalls, in a way, the notion of «structural implication» of Michael Rothberg (and that was also commented [here](#) by Miguel Cardina), which extends the responsibility to other subjects besides the victim and the perpetrator (3), in much later space-time contexts than those in which the violence took place.



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Although the Colombian conflict is still a living reality (the implementation of the 2016 peace agreements with the FARC is a complex task and is far from being completed), there are currently some material conditions to consider an approach to conflict from the perspective of postmemory. After all, and as Gonzalo Sánchez wrote in the prologue to the most important report on violence in Colombia, the memory of the Colombian conflict has coexisted with violence itself, although it has only recently become a priority for national reconciliation:

Memory took root in Colombia, not as a post-conflict experience, but rather as an explicit manner to denounce wrongs and affirm differences. [...] As the Colombian experience emphatically shows, memory does not necessarily follow conflict as the result of political or social occurrences; both memory and conflict are simultaneous features of a highly fractured society. (4)

In a way, the conditions for the emergence of a postmemory of the Colombian conflict were met with the 2016 peace agreements. In my opinion, Silva Romero's text is a significant example of this attempt to «build knowledge» in the «existence of an interval» that Sousa Ribeiro speaks about concerning the victims, and that causes the heirs of the conflict to begin to build a collective narrative of reconciliation against the violent past that has consumed them (us) for decades.

Translated by [António Sousa Ribeiro](#)

(1) Ricardo Silva Romero, «[Incendios](#)», *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, October 8th 2020.

(2) On the notion of “ownership of experience”, see e.g.: Ribeiro, António Sousa; Ribeiro, Margarida Calafate. «Os netos que Salazar não teve: Guerra Colonial e memória de segunda geração». *Revista Abril - Revista do Núcleo de Estudos de Literatura Portuguesa e Africana da UFF*, v. 5, n. 11, nov. 2013: 25-36. Cammaert, Felipe. “Titularidade da experiência e pós-memória nas literaturas pós-coloniais europeias”. *Revista Letras Raras*, 9-2 (2020): 161-179.

(3) «We are, like the foreigner, structurally implicated subjects, and our implication concerns the way the deeds of the past continue to shape the relations of the present. [...] Though we may not be responsible for such acts of aggression in the sense of having caused them, we are 'implicated' in them, in the sense that *they cause us*». Rothberg, Michael. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019: 79.

(4) Gonzalo Sánchez, «Prologue», in: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, [BASTA YA! Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity](#), Bogotá, 2016: 19.

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