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The Political Struggle Over Historical Memory: State Hegemony versus the Territorialization of Archives

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ABSTRACT

This article examines places of memory as mechanisms of political contestation in transitional justice contexts, with focus on Colombia. Memory operates not as preservation of the past but as a site of struggle over interpretive authority and political legitimacy. Historical acceleration does not produce uniform temporal experience; in contexts of state violence, the past remains directly constitutive of present conditions. Historical memory operates across three analytical dimensions—material, functional, and symbolic—yet institutional frameworks that reduce memory to territorial fixity exclude ephemeral practices that generate political efficacy through ritual repetition. The central argument is that memory constitutes a mechanism through which marginalized groups exercise political agency by producing alternative historical intelligibility that contest state monopolies on narrative interpretation. This contestation reshapes victims' status: from those to whom violence occurred toward those whose interpretations shape collective understanding. Recognition of contested territorial memories operates as a necessary condition for democratic stability and guarantees of non-repetition, contingent upon whether institutions incorporate victim narratives as valid historical claims and whether victims exercise interpretive authority. Memory proliferation in public discourse expresses emergent subaltern political subjectivities rather than institutional instability.

Keywords: places of memory, political agency, historical memory, transitional justice.

INTRODUCTION

The category of places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) constitutes a fundamental analytical axis for contemporary historiography and sociology, inscribed within the broader phenomenon of the acceleration of history (Nora, 1989; De Carvalho et al., 2020). Yet Nora's framework assumes historical acceleration produces uniform temporal experience across social groups. This assumption requires qualification: in contexts of recent state violence, the past is not experienced as distant or irreducible. Rather, institutional violence produces specific temporal experiences in which the past remains directly constitutive of present political conditions. The dissociation between past and present is therefore not universal but differentiated according to access to institutional power and status as victim or perpetrator.

The erosion of organic contexts of social memory transmission—what Nora (1989) designates as *milieux de mémoire*—generates an archival imperative: memory ceases to function as spontaneous social practice and becomes subject to historiographic reconstruction. When memory enters institutional frameworks—archives, monuments, official registries—it becomes subject to explicit rules of preservation, interpretation, and access. These rules embody decisions about what remains legible, who possesses interpretive authority, and whose experiences are

recognized as historically valid. This transformation of memory from lived experience to institutionalized form is central to understanding how memory functions as a mechanism of political agency.

Nora's (1989) distinction between memory—as phenomenological and affective experience—and history—as intellectual reconstruction—requires modification in contexts where institutionalized memory becomes explicitly political. When victims demand recognition and state narratives face contestation, marginalized groups claiming the right to establish places of memory assert demands for political legitimacy. Memory and historical narrative become inseparable from questions of citizenship and reparative justice, such that memory constitutes a claim to recognition as a subject whose experiences are valid historical facts.

Memory as political contestation

Despite the analytical centrality that places of memory have maintained in the literature (Piveteau, 1995; Carrier, 2020), their application to scenarios of persistent conflict or post-conflict—as in the Colombian case—requires reevaluation through the lens of political agency and historical contingency. In transitional contexts, places of memory operate as spaces of symbolic and material contestation in which the meaning of the past is disputed against state-orchestrated official narratives (Tileaga, 2018). Their meaning is not inherent; it is produced through ongoing struggles over interpretive authority among state actors, victim organizations, and other political groups who mobilize places of memory according to differing institutional interests. The analytical question shifts from what a place of memory means to how competing actors produce meaning through claims on such places.

Beyond the implementation of technical devices—such as commissions or reparation programs—transition, following Teitel's genealogy (2003), constitutes a juridical and political construction determined by the political limits of each historical period. Transition operates as a structured process whose constraints and possibilities depend on the distribution of power at a given moment (Acemoglu & Robinson, 1999). What is institutionally permissible—which memories receive official recognition and which narratives are incorporated into state archives—is determined by political feasibility. This explains why transitional justice mechanisms inevitably reflect the compromises and power asymmetries of their founding moment (Kastner, 2017).

Transition constitutes a sociopolitical arena of contestation in which the legitimacy of the emergent order is determined through the institutional management of the past (Massino, 2024). The state's institutional management of memory operates through decisions about which memories are preserved, how they are classified, and what interpretive frameworks apply to them. State institutions exercise authority over the interpretation of collective history. When victim narratives are incorporated into state archives, they are reformulated according to institutional classification systems and official interpretive frameworks. This institutional absorption of memory functions as a redistribution of political legitimacy: contestation over memory directly determines questions of political legitimacy and which groups achieve recognition as legitimate political subjects.

Despite the polysemy that characterizes academic debate on this concept, Colombian institutional frameworks have delimited the category of place of memory through a strictly territorial referent. The Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) operationalizes this definition as follows: "To speak of a place of memory is to refer to a memory initiative that incorporates the spatial dimension—that is, one that has direct relation to territory and to events that occurred there, and that can be clearly identified in the physical space where it is located permanently". (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2025, p. 12). This institutional definition restricts the category from abstract philosophical meaning to a specifically localized and verifiable form.

This restriction generates analytical problems: by requiring that places of memory be clearly identified in physical space and permanently located, the definition excludes forms of memory that do not correspond to these criteria—ephemeral commemorations, oral traditions transmitted without fixed spatial referents, or memory practices that move across multiple locations (Mackie, 2026). The institutional exclusion of such practices reveals how territorial fixity operates as a non-neutral descriptive criterion, which assumption requires examination.

The Colombian institutional framework assumes that geographic proximity to an event confers evidentiary status: the physical location of a massacre, disappearance, or violation provides the factual basis for historical reconstruction. This assumption overlooks how geography itself is politically constructed. The boundaries of a territory, the way it is classified and named, and the access granted to different groups constitute political determinations (Raffestin, 2013). When memory initiatives are bound to specific territories, they become subject to territorial governance, which may restrict or facilitate access, interpretation, and public engagement. The place of memory, in this institutional formulation, operates as a political space whose use and meaning are determined by territorial jurisdiction.

The efficacy of places of memory depends on what Jelin (2002) termed the works of memory—practices executed by agents in the present that assign new political meanings to the past within those places. Jelin's framework reorients historiographic research away from factual reconstruction and toward examination of the processes through which material and symbolic vestiges are produced, legitimated, or disarticulated. The concept

of efficacy operates differently for victim organizations seeking recognition, for state institutions seeking narrative control, and for perpetrators seeking rehabilitation. These efficacies conflict with one another. Jelin's framework accounts for this pluralism but does not specify criteria for distinguishing when memory institutionalization consolidates political subordination from when it enables genuine contestation. Analysis must differentiate between memory work that reproduces state hegemony and memory work that challenges it.

The state apparatus possesses institutional capacities—as resources for archival preservation, authority to designate official sites, control over educational curricula—that memory entrepreneurs typically lack. When Jelin (2002) identifies negotiation as an operative mechanism, she accounts for the fact that institutionally powerful actors cannot unilaterally determine how the past will be remembered; they must contend with competing memory claims. The state's structural advantages mean that its capacity to institutionalize certain narratives and exclude others substantially exceeds that of non-state actors. However, it should be noted that this structural advantage does not guarantee complete control over collective consciousness or the persistence of subaltern memories. Such memories have the potential to break the institutional silence and force a reconfiguration of the public agenda. (Jelin, 2017). Understanding memory as political agency requires, in any event, acknowledging that contestation occurs within asymmetrical distributions of power (Saldanha, 2013).

This framework becomes cardinal for the central argument: memory constitutes a mechanism through which marginalized groups exercise political agency. Jelin's (2002) analysis establishes the conditions under which this is possible. Because places of memory are not fixed in meaning but subject to ongoing reinterpretation and contestation, they provide opportunities for actors excluded from dominant political institutions to make claims on the state and on the historical record. The works of memory executed by victims' organizations, indigenous communities, and other subordinated groups constitute political interventions in the present that reshape which voices are recognized as legitimate contributors to the historical narrative and which groups achieve recognition as legitimate political subjects. Memory, then, operates as a mechanism of political visibility and claim-making (Wang, 2017).

These elements establish a definition of the place of memory as a unit of signification—material or ideal—which, through human will, political intentionality, or processes of historical sedimentation, constitutes a symbolic referent for the memorial archive of a collectivity (Nora, 1989). This definition operates across three analytical dimensions: the *material* (physical existence such as archives, monuments, sites, or demographic inscription such as generational cohorts), the *functional* (ritual or pedagogical functions directed toward communicative transmission of social meanings) (Kent, 2015), and the *symbolic* (semiotic density and capacity for memory persistence against forgetting) (Nora, 1989).

This schema provides analytical clarity yet requires examination of its internal coherence. The distinction between material and symbolic dimensions assumes a separation that does not sustain in practice: material forms—monuments, archives—do not embody pre-formed symbolic meanings. Material configurations actively shape what can be remembered and how it can be interpreted (Rigney, 2024). A monument's physical location, scale, materials, and accessibility constrain and enable specific interpretations. The functional dimension also cannot operate as neutral transmission; ritual and pedagogical practices produce meanings through their performance. As a result, the three dimensions are constitutively interdependent.

The persistence of memory against forgetting must be reframed as an interdependence; dimensions are constitutively interdependent. Memory and forgetting to operate as complementary processes: forgetting is not absence of memory but an active process through which certain past events are rendered unintelligible or their significance is systematically diminished (Augé, 1998). Places of memory selectively reconstruct what will be preserved and what will remain erased. Viewing memory as a political agency means realizing that the decision to remember one event is effectively a decision to hide another from future history.

The operational value of this tripartite definition becomes apparent when applied to transitional justice contexts. Places of memory must simultaneously function across all three dimensions: they must possess material form (capacity for preservation and access), functional utility (rituals of commemoration, pedagogical programs), and symbolic capacity (capacity to represent victim experiences in ways that challenge state narratives). These dimensions, however, may enter into tension. A monument designed with pedagogical function may fail to generate the symbolic meanings sought by victim organizations. A place whose symbolic significance derives from geographic proximity to an atrocity may be rendered inaccessible through material conditions (controlled access, restricted territory). The analytical framework indicates where political contestation necessarily occurs.

Places of memory incorporate ephemeral memorialization practices that do not require durable material traces or inscriptions (Mackie, 2026). Practices such as moments of silence or symbolic processions function as places of memory, efficacious through ritual repetition. For political analysis, recognition of intangible memorialization practices as mechanisms of citizenship is significant: these practices determine concretely who is recognized as a citizen and how citizenship is exercised (Liu, 2022).

This observation goes beyond the institutional definition of places of memory advanced by the Colombian state. That definition stipulated material permanence and geographic specificity as necessary criteria. Yet Liu's (2022) analysis, along with that of Mackie (2026), shows that memory practices operate effectively without such material anchoring. The contradiction is not merely empirical—that some memory places lack materiality—but theoretical: the three-dimensional schema (Nora, 1989) assumes that materiality, functionality, and symbolic dimension can be treated as analytically separable, yet intangible practices, demonstrate that functionality and symbolic dimension can generate efficacious memory without material substrate. This challenges the assumption that memory always requires physical inscriptions.

Places of memory are products of processes of selection and exclusion inherent to the dynamics of forgetting: social memory is reconfigured through the dissolution or displacement of its original mnemonic contents (Augé, 1998). The notion that memory possesses an original state—a set of meanings constituted at the moment of the event—which subsequently undergoes transformation through erasure or displacement overlooks how the past never exists in a state of pure mnemonic content. It is always already interpreted and selective. What Augé (1998) designates as displacement of original contents constitutes an ongoing process through which the past is repeatedly reconstructed according to present exigencies. The forgetting that operates in memory work is active reconstruction. The place of memory, therefore, constitutes a sign whose meaning is not fixed but continuously subject to reinterpretation and contestation through political struggles in the present.

Jelin's (2002) concept of works of memory allows analysis to move beyond a contemplative perspective on the past. Within this framework, places of memory—as material and symbolic anchors—constitute sites of disputes over meaning and demonstrate processes of territorialization of remembrance. The examination of these sites exceeds historiographic description and establishes a foundation for guarantees of non-repetition and the structuring of political culture. As repositories of memory, these places facilitate transition from immobilizing trauma toward social agency, legitimating demands for justice and symbolic reparation measures (Coetzee, 2019).

In transitional justice terminology, non-repetition refers to institutional mechanisms intended to prevent the recurrence of mass violence (Davidovic, 2021). Places of memory establish public legibility of past violence and attribution of responsibility—necessary conditions for preventing repetition, which are insufficient without institutional reform, accountability mechanisms, and transformation of the distribution of coercive power (Laplante, 2008). Places of memory constitute public recognition of past harms and create conditions under which demands for institutional change can be articulated and heard. Their efficacy depends on whether these conditions generate institutional responsiveness.

This analysis connects to the preceding discussion of political agency. Memory work (Jelin, 2002) operates within political structures and provides platforms through which excluded groups assert claims on the state and demand recognition as legitimate subjects. This reconfigures who is acknowledged as a bearer of rights and whose experiences count as historically valid. Memory work operates within rigid institutional frameworks. To understand memory as a form of political agency, the tension between the power it grants and the organizational rules that contain it, must be analyzed. The study of places of memory as mechanisms of power directed toward configuring national identities constitutes a political reorientation within the socio-historiographic framework. Nora's (1989) distinction between memory as social praxis and history as intellectual reconstruction establishes the basis for recognizing multiple memories in competition for institutional validation. This dynamic manifests as "a constellation saturated with tensions that condenses or crystallizes into memories of differing depths" (Accossatto, 2017, p. 169).

Institutional Management and State Monopoly: Memory Control

The formulation that national identity provides coherence against fragmentation presupposes that national coherence is desirable and that social fragmentation constitutes a problem to be resolved. In contexts of political conflict, what dominant groups characterize as fragmentation represents to subaltern groups the emergence of alternative political identifications that reject state-defined national unity (Bhabha, 1990). The project of configuring national identity through memory places may subordinate these alternative identifications to state frameworks. Analysis of memory and identity requires specification of which actors pursue which configurations and what interests are served by particular configurations. Within this framework, the place of memory operates as prospective encoding—a mechanism of transmission ensuring that certain cultural frames of meaning persist in future temporal trajectories (Erll, 2012).

This analysis addresses the temporal dimension of memory and political agency: how do present memory struggles shape possibilities for future political action? Memory work institutes cultural frames that future actors will either attempt to sustain, modify, or dismantle (Becker & Colombo, 2025). Places of memory operate across temporal scales—they reference past events, structure present political identifications, and establish constraints

and possibilities for future political claim-making. To view memory as a form of political agency we must endorse that it operates in more than one timeframe at once.

Colombia's transitional justice design—within which the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) operates—integrates places of memory, archives, and collections whose function exceeds technical custody and record preservation. These repositories act as mediations of memory that contribute to the construction of national narratives. The shift from traditional monuments—characterized by vertical institutional imposition—toward places of memory conceived as axes of community participation signals a reconfiguration of how memory is instituted. In this framework, these spaces function as centers of symbolic reparation (Valderrama López, 2022). Yet the assumption that institutional memory work automatically produces pluralism and democracy must be examined. Pluralism within state-controlled institutional frameworks operates under constraints: memory narratives selected for institutional recognition undergo processes of standardization and simplification. What appears institutionally as pluralism—for example, the incorporation of multiple victim narratives—may function to depoliticize memorial claims by transforming contestatory memory work, into officially managed diversity. The state's institutional embrace of pluralism may represent integration of subaltern narratives into a framework that neutralizes their political force (Lajeunesse, 2026). Determining whether institutional pluralism represents genuine recognition or co-optation requires analysis of institutional mechanisms and power distributions (Crawford, 2016).

The reorientation from traditional monuments to places of memory as axes of community participation involves a shift in how memory is instituted. Traditional monuments involved unilateral state decision-making about what would be commemorated and how (Carretero, 2007). Yet participation operates within institutional parameters: who is recognized as a legitimate participant, what forms of input are solicited, and how institutional decisions incorporate or dismiss participant input. Community participation constitutes an effect of specific institutional arrangements (Acosta, 2023). Some places of memory may include genuine deliberative participation; others may involve token consultation that leaves decision-making power concentrated with state or institutional actors. Analysis must examine institutional mechanisms through which participation occurs and assess what forms of power and voice such mechanisms enable.

Memory functions as a device of control and identity structuration, deployed through institutions of political socialization, fundamentally the school (Carretero, 2007). In the Colombian context, this dynamic manifests in the confrontation between official historiography and the territorial memories of victims, whose demands for institutional validation represent efforts to disrupt the hierarchies of national narrative (Khan, 2026). Yet what does disruption entail at the institutional level? Victim organizations that submit memory claims to the CNMH do not necessarily seek to overthrow state historiographic authority; many seek recognition and incorporation within official institutions (Torres Ayala, 2020). The distinction between challenging state narrative authority and seeking inclusion within state institutions is significant. Some memory work operates through institutional contestation—attempting to reformulate what is recognized as valid historical knowledge within state institutions. Other memory work operates through extra-institutional practices—establishing parallel memory sites and narratives that do not depend on state recognition. The Colombian case involves both forms.

Carretero's (2007) analysis of schools demonstrates that curriculum functions to transmit particular versions of national history to students, thereby shaping how new generations understand national identity. This constitutes ideological reproduction: institutional transmission of approved narratives produces subjects who understand themselves as members of a particular national community structured according to official historical accounts. Yet this mechanism is not total. Students may resist, reinterpret, or reject official narratives; communities may transmit counter-narratives alongside or against official ones; memory practices may operate outside institutional frameworks entirely. The political significance of memory work emerges from the fact that these mechanisms of control are persistently contested and never completely effective.

A standardized national narrative persists as a central component of the struggle over the monopoly of historical interpretation. State apparatus seeks to subordinate the plurality of social records and memories to a logic of unidirectional representation, instrumentalizing history for political legitimation and social cohesion. Carretero (2007) observes: "History, despite efforts to accommodate it within universal laws, is never entirely predictable nor comprehensible, which explains why it has been used to locate in the past the script of the future, why modern states have delineated their press and communications policy on the *leit motiv* of progress" (p. 35). This observation identifies a mechanism: states construct historical narratives depicting past events as inevitably producing the present political order, thereby naturalizing contingent political arrangements as predetermined historical trajectories. Yet states must continually reassert their narrative authority through institutional investment, for history is not entirely controllable. This necessity creates space for subaltern actors to challenge state monopolies through competing memory claims.

States construct historical narratives that depict past events as inevitably producing the present political order, thereby presenting contemporary arrangements as the necessary outcome of history (Hobsbawm, 1992). This procedure functions to naturalize contingent political outcomes: what results from specific decisions and power

distributions appears as the predetermined trajectory of historical development. Yet alternative historical narratives—produced through memory work by excluded groups—offer different readings of past events that suggest different possibilities for the future. The state's attempt to monopolize historical interpretation does not eliminate contestation; it provokes counter-narratives. States establish institutional mechanisms that privilege certain narratives while rendering others illegible or dismissible. Narratives conforming to official categories are incorporated; those exceeding or challenging these categories are classified as subjective, insufficiently documented, or not yet ready for official recognition (Zapata & Jurado, 2019).

If the school institution operates in political socialization where the state seeks to mitigate identity fragmentation through totalizing historical narratives (Carretero, 2007), transitional justice mechanisms in Colombia—specifically the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Truth Commission—function as ruptures in that official canon. The proliferation of memories in public space expresses participatory citizenship; it does not constitute a factor of instability (Torres, 2014). The competition among narratives for institutional validation represents a praxis of political autonomy in which the production of meanings about the past actively challenges state policies of narrative fixation and structures of historical control. Yet not all participatory mechanisms produce transformation. Genuine participatory citizenship requires that participation generates transformative effects on institutional frameworks, not just that citizens participate in memory-making practices.

The Political Ontology of Memory: Reparation and Agency.

Participatory mechanisms can function as mechanisms of incorporation that absorb subaltern voices while leaving institutional authority and narrative hierarchies intact. Determining whether memory proliferation constitutes genuine political autonomy requires analyzing whether subaltern memory work: (1) generates pressure on official institutions to recognize previously excluded narratives; (2) establishes alternative memory institutions or practices that operate independently of state control; or (3) both. The Colombian case involves combinations of these forms—some victim organizations work within transitional justice institutions while others establish autonomous memory sites outside state frameworks (García Alonso, 2022).

The production of meanings about the past emphasizes how the past is interpreted and made significant in the present, opening space for multiple valid interpretations. The same historical event—a massacre, a disappearance, a period of violence—can be interpreted differently according to how victims, perpetrators, state institutions, and civil society actors make sense of it. These interpretations are politically operative claims that reshape how the past is understood and what conclusions are drawn about justice, accountability, and future political possibilities. Memory work that produces alternative meanings contests state monopolies on historical interpretation. Historical memory, in this line of thought, constitutes a political operation of historiographic reconstruction, precipitated by the erosion of organic contexts of memory transmission (Nora, 1989).

This operation responds to deliberate intentionality materialized in archives, monuments, and institutional participation mechanisms. The systematic collection of records facing the risk of suppression or permanent disappearance grounds the emergence of archives under an ethical horizon (CNMH, 2025). Consequently, documentary management constitutes a work of memory oriented toward consolidating guarantees of non-repetition. Especially in contexts of state violence, the configuration of archives breaks with political arbitrariness over what is historizable and the imposition of silence (Da Silva Catela, 2004). The transition of documents from repressive function—as incriminating evidence—toward a reparative function—as support for memory—reconfigures this ethical horizon, transmuting material records into imperatives of justice (Da Silva Catela, 2002). Archive work by victims' organizations and human rights groups contests state custodianship and establishes alternative access and interpretation frameworks.

When historical research prioritizes the processes through which collectivities exercise agency over their own vestiges and traces, historical memory operates as political practice. This enables minorities and victims to assert legitimacy traditionally omitted from official accounts. A distinction emerges between historical memory and academic history: historical memory orients toward restitution of cultural meaning and reconfiguration of sociopolitical bonds disrupted by conflict, using what Erll (2012) designates as iconic intensification of reality. Memory constitutes transformative praxis that transmutes trauma and memorial records into communicable and political contents (Jelin, 2002).

The capacity of victims to assert legitimacy depends on institutional receptivity. Memory work produces pressure on institutions to recognize previously excluded claims; success depends on political conditions: balance of forces, institutional vulnerabilities, and availability of mechanisms (truth commissions, trials, reparation programs) through which victim claims can be institutionalized. Works of memory enables subjectivities affected by conflict to transition from passive receivers of violence toward exercising political agency. This transition materializes in symbolic elaborations—archives, museums, territorial narratives—that possess capacity for public sphere incidence. Reconstruction of the past is conditioned by social frameworks (*cadres sociaux*) of memory and

language structures that guarantee the intelligibility of remembrance: "it is language and the entire system of social conventions that permits us at each moment to reconstruct our past" (Halbwachs, 1952, p. 199). When victims narrate their experiences and these narratives gain institutional circulation, the past becomes reorganized in public consciousness. Victims transition from those to whom violence occurred toward those whose interpretation of violence shapes historical understanding and political claims.

The institutionalization of places of memory and technical management of archives redefine the political ontology of the social in transitional contexts. The erosion of organic contexts of transmission—the shift from *milieux* to *lieux*—generates historical memory as deliberate praxis against institutionalized amnesia and state narrative hegemony. In the Colombian context, this dynamic transforms archives and memory sites into components of symbolic reparation that enable transition from victimization toward political agency. Recognition of contested territorial memories functions as a guarantee of the right to truth and constitutes the necessary ethical-juridical-political foundation for democratic stability and the efficacy of guarantees of non-repetition. This guarantee is contingent: it depends on whether institutions incorporate victim narratives as valid historical claims and whether victims exercise interpretive authority in defining those claims. Yet memory proliferation in public discourse expresses emergent subaltern political subjectivity.

The work of memory—executed by victims, communities, and civil society organizations—produces conditions under which marginalized groups assert claims to historical legitimacy, reconfigure their political status, and participate in the determination of collective meaning about the past. Recognition of both the contestations that occur and the structural limits within which such contestations operate is key to articulate memory with political agency. The recognition of contested territorial memories constitutes an indispensable—if incomplete—foundation for democracy in post-conflict contexts. Historical memory, in this articulation and tenet, operates simultaneously as mechanism of historical reclamation, as political visibility, and as the material-symbolic basis through which marginalized groups reconfigure themselves as legitimate subjects of political life.

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