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Methodological Quilts: Political Transnationalism as History of the Present

Julia Carrillo Lerma

Abstract

Population sub-recordings, silence(s), and distrust are among the many challenges faced when approaching the study of migration qualitatively. These are more notorious when the focus is set on political migrants – their transnational practices and framing process. Which sources to collect and mobilize? What methods appear as more appropriate to interrogate them? As a research subject, political transnationalism in contexts of marginalization and high distrust, calls for a multidisciplinary approach given the assortment of sources that are difficult to identify by a lack of classification (archives), as well as low levels of trust (individual participants) and of visibility (associations). The study of political transnationalism calls for the mobilization of all possible sources – giving equal importance to the written, the oral, and the observed. Drawing from evidence from the study of Colombian political migrants in France and the United States, this paper illustrates how this is possible through the lens of the history of the present.

Introduction

Population sub-recordings, silence(s), and distrust are among the many challenges faced when approaching the study of migration qualitatively. These are more notorious when the focus is set on political migrants – their transnational practices and framing process. Which sources to collect and mobilize? What methods appear as more appropriate to interrogate them?

This text is based on a case-study taking the Colombian 'diaspora' to examine how diasporas participate in conflict transformation in the homeland via engaging in memory works[i]. The *Mesas de Paz*[ii] held by diverse migrants' associations (early to mid-2013, worldwide) and the *Festival para la Paz*[iii] (an initiative reuniting different collectives in France which took place on February 2014) served as entry points. Research data was obtained through fieldwork encompassing participant observation of inter-associational and consular activities, the collection of oral testimonies from members of Colombian migrants' associations in Paris (FRA) and in the New York City – DC - Boston line, as well as on primary written sources compiled in different institutional archives (i.e. Depository of Congress and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in Bogota (COL).

The study of Colombian political migrants (as a diaspora) in France and the United States, and their participation in conflict transformation in the homeland through memory works, provides an entry point into the perks of examining contemporary international migration and transnational practices through the lens of the *history of the present*[iv]. It does so, given the subject's temporal proximity, as well as the sources available and gaps evidenced through multi-sited fieldwork. Research on the subject faces multiple challenges, ranging from high levels of distrust (stemming from the protracted nature of the country's conflict) to data mismatch when it comes to counting Colombians abroad (in general) and those crossing borders due to political persecution and politicide (in particular). To this adds an assortment of sources made hard to identify by a lack of classification (archives), an important place for silences and the un-say-able within migrant narratives (individual participants) and of fluctuating levels of visibility (associations). It is the combination of this factors which calls for a multidisciplinary approach – placing equal importance on the written, the oral, and the observed.

Colombian migrant communities are commonly described as heterogeneous, with divides resulting from social, regional, generational, ideological, gender, and ethnical cleavages that exist in the country of origin. While focusing on a particular subset of this population (political migrants), it was pivotal that the cross-section represented the diaspora's diversity. Accordingly, the sample was constituted following four criteria: political migrants, first-generation, all migratory waves, and all genders. By focusing on first-generation migrants, the research examined the particularities of this population's relation with the sending

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state. Looking for variations in the process of claiming the status as political migrant (i.e. levels of support, decision to claim – or not – asylum, etc.) was the purpose of including all migratory waves (Borrero & Carrillo Lerma, 2005). All genders were included in an effort to guarantee participatory equality, and guided by an interest in assessing the role of gender in associative interactions.

Data Mismatch & Population Sub-recording

There have been varied attempts at statistically measuring the extent of Colombian migration. The demographic and econometric studies that have been carried out are based on data from National Censuses (1963, 1973, 1985, 1993, and 2005), household surveys, departure records from *Migración Colombia*[v], and consular registries (Díaz, 2006). Censuses and surveys show that 58% of households in Colombia have a certain migratory experience (*i.e.* at least one family member currently resides abroad, or is a returning migrant). It has also been possible to determine that there are five dependants living in Colombia per individual migrant (Magnan-Penuela, *n.d.*). Nonetheless, it has been impossible to determine an exact figure of the population abroad via quantitative methods, and the exact number of Colombians overseas remains unknown. Additionally, figures for a same country may vary significantly. For instance, data pulled from the 1993 National Census showed 1.3 million Colombians living in the US (4% of migrant population at the time). In 2004, econometric research carried out on Colombians in the United States puts the figure somewhere below 1 million migrants (500,000 to 700,000) (Gaviria, 2004). Whereas data from the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2005 showed 4.5 million Colombians were living in the US and the National Household Survey (based on remittances) established the number at 604,527; researchers estimated the numbers of Colombians in the US to be at 2,135,300 (out of which only 553,800 were regular migrants) just a year before (Diaz, 2006; Echeverri Buriticá, 2011). Consular records in New York show that there were 3 million Colombians living in the Tri-State area in 2010[vi]. Researchers estimate the irregular-regular migration ratio is at 3:1 for Colombians in the US (Díaz, 2006). Colombian migrants in France were estimated at 60,000 by Gincel (2005). For the same period (around 2007) consular registries, based on resident permit demands submitted to the *prefecture de police*, situate the number at 30,000 (Villegas, 2007). Data from the Spanish Catholic Mission in Paris (16th district) shows some 50 to 80 new irregular migrants coming in (weekly) looking for help (Santi, 2005).

Furthermore, attempts at measuring migration from the receiving countries' end have yielded dissimilar results. For instance, according to the Colombian government, there were 200,000 Colombians living in Ecuador in 2006 (including refugees and undocumented migrants). For the same period of time the Ecuadorian government, however, measured 600,000 Colombians in the country (Ramírez, 2009).

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These figures, nonetheless, do not include irregular migrants or asylum seekers. The percentage of irregular migrants is estimated at levels as high as 70% - 80% (Gincel *n.d.*; Villegas, 2007). Data for asylum seekers is collected by UNHCR and its partners in the field. Nonetheless, these records are also incomplete. It is estimated that 30 % – 40% of people in situation of refuge are left out of the official recording process (Villa & Riaño, 2009; Mejía Ochoa, 2009). This exclusion results from either a denial of the status, or the failure to claim it. Sub-recording is linked to both lack of information about how the system works, and fear, whereby invisibility is chosen as survival strategy (Villa, 2008).

The lack of precise data results in a deficiency of appropriate policies and programs. Sub-recording also leads to the political instrumentalization of migration issues. Speculation, paired with the mediatic construction of the Colombian as a 'menacing other' and of Colombia as an 'aggressor state', oft-times results in the escalation of binational tensions with the bordering states (Ramírez, 2009).

Understanding the Transnational Activism and Diaspora Politics of Colombians Abroad with the Tools of a Historian of the Present

Examining Colombians abroad as a diaspora implied forging spaces for voicing and recognition of individual memories, as well as exploring the controversies that animate its politics as a complex mnemonic community. Doing this, in a context where over-lapping forms of violence have created ingrained mistrust, required crafting an approach with varied pieces of methodological fabric. Additionally, it was important to keep in mind that the resulting patchwork needed to be useful in conveying a complex reality, as well as in guaranteeing the respect and the well-being of all involved. Mobilizing the multidisciplinary toolkit available to historians of the present (*i.e.* participant observation, oral history, and archival work) allowed for critically engaging with immediate history and phenomena which are still unfolding, and from and to which we are, as noted by Bloch, to wait for reactions (Bloch, 1995).

Participant Observation

Colombians abroad avoid the consular registries for many reasons - including a will to severe ties with the country due to apathy, fear of being reported to local authorities (the case of irregular migrants), and suspicion that their information will be forwarded to government agencies (of both home and receiving countries) and used for surveillance. Moreover, the visibility of the associations is directly related to the political contexts of the sending, as well as the receiving states. When positive political contexts in the homeland (*e.g.* the carrying out of peace negotiations) match a favourable environment in the receiving state, the effect is a heighten desire for Colombians abroad to openly and actively participate. Thus, both the number of activities held and of actual (and potential) members increase, facilitating identification and contact. When peace efforts in the homeland are interrupted, associative life also loses vigour (this was the

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case in 2002, when peace negotiations between the Colombian Government and FARC-EP at *El Caguán* failed). When the political contexts of the receiving societies become unfavourable (*e.g.* in the aftermath of 9/11, or during the mid-eighties in Europe) associative life decreases and adopts a covert nature.

In this context, the figure of the sponsor, or gatekeeper, becomes more decisive in gaining access to the field. The characteristics of the field also represented a limitation in terms of the methodological approach because they determine the methods that can be mobilized for research (*e.g.* participants do not engage in dynamics such as referral and snowball sampling). Since the different levels interactions among associations were among the phenomena observed, it was key to abstain from any behaviour that could be interpreted as affiliation to any particular grouping. Consequently, an important moment in the establishment of the sponsor – sponsee relation was the reiteration of gratitude, while clarifying that membership to a particular association would compromise the research.

Oral History

The use of oral sources often poses the question of the validity of the testimonies collected (IHTP, Cahier No. 21). The testimonies collected were examined in their spaces of voicing and of silencing. Silence was not equated to forgetting, but taken as a mark of the say-able and un-say-able at a given moment in time (Pollak, 1986; Pollak & Heinich, 1986), as well as positioned as structuring parts of the discourse (IHTP, Cahier No. 21) and respected as a mark of participant sovereignty (IHTP, Dossier No. 75). Memories of the Colombian 'diaspora' were fathomed as migrant memories, thus "characterized by cultural suppression, alienation, and marginalisation" (Kleist & Glynn, 2012).

Those who 'were there' (Rousso, 2012) provided their 'living memories' of their militant and migratory experiences. The narratives were apprehended and integrated as *situated truths*, that is, a product of empathy developed with the researcher (IHTP, Cahier No. 21) at a given time – or "the product of two subjectivities which meet", in the words of Passerini (Passerini, 1983, 2011), and within a specific structural context (peace negotiations between the Santos administration and the FARC-EP).

Archival Work

Primary written sources were compiled through archival work in different institutional archives (i.e. the Depository of Congress, Institutional Archives of the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in Bogota (Colombia). Additional written sources were gathered throughout the research process: press, associations' records, and privileged records.

Governmental sources were key to establishing the relationship between the Colombian government and the diverse categories of Colombian nationals abroad (and the bases for the construction of these typologies)

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through a discourse analysis of the Law Records, Decrees, MFA Ministerial Circulars and Resolutions on the different diaspora engagement policies launched from the 1960s until the early 2010s, as well as of the processes and debates that led to their adoption.

Conclusion

The mobilization of the multi- and trans-disciplinary toolkit available to historians of the present provided the necessary means to comprehend the construction of a Colombian diaspora and the community's role in the transformation of conflict in the homeland. By mobilizing primary written (national, institutional, and press archives) and oral sources (oral history, semi-structured interviews), and participant observation of community-building activities and political events this work contributed to bridging gaps in research on the subject by locating:

- **The mnemonic battles behind silence(s) producing an idea of unitary narrative of exile and uprooting within the Colombian diaspora.** While the research fathomed memories of the Colombian 'diaspora' as migrant memories, thus "characterized by cultural suppression, alienation, and marginalisation"[vii], combining oral history and participant observation allowed to uncover how resistance, non- conformity, and any deviation from prevailing diasporic accounts often result in the questioning and exclusion of alternative narratives from and within the field of counter-memories.

- **The genealogy of the country's engagement policies.** Previous work on the transnationalization of the Colombian state mobilized finalized versions of the laws, bills, and decrees tending to nationals overseas, aiming at expanding the migrant community's participation in the country's destiny (mostly through a constant inflow of remittances via official channels[viii]). The combination of interviewing political elites and archival work was key to identifying power struggles and negotiations among policy- and decision-makers, via pinpointong 'monkeys'[ix] in legal texts and the diverse narrative strategies to legitimate 'curbing dissidence' components in the country's diaspora engagement policies.

- **The new relation of History with the unfolding present as its object of study.** One of the outputs of the research was a fully standardized corpus of sources on contemporary migration and diaspora participation in the homeland's peace-building efforts. Among the key questions historians working on and with the present constantly face (from within and outside the discipline) is the legitimacy of working on events and processes still unfolding. The study of the Colombian diaspora shows that, even though mindful of preserving the archives pertaining to their militant 'pasts', groups are not observant of creating archives of their more current activities[x]. An accountable and conscious

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creation of sources for further and future study of social and political phenomena is a crucial task to historical methods and practices.

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[i] Carrillo Lerma, Julia (2016), « Diaspora » colombienne: vivre le conflit, construire la paix, réécrire la mémoire/ A Colombian "Diaspora": From Living and Leaving a Conflict to Engaging in Peace-Building and the Rewriting of Social Memories of Violence. *PhD Dissertation*. Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po) and The New School for Social Research.

[ii] The Mesas de Paz (MdP) were organized with the support of the Colombian Senate's Peace Commission both in Colombia and abroad. Representatives of the Peace Commission attended the sessions, but associations interested in participating in the process needed, however, to guarantee funding for the event. In many cases, they received direct seed funding and logistical support from NGOs in countries of settlement working on peace and conflict issues. Each MdP was autonomous in deciding the issues to be included in the event's agenda, provided that they were among the five issues included in the agenda for negotiations with FARC. Consequently, it was commonly decided that the Paris MdP would only focus on: Victims, Political Participation, End of Conflict and Post-Conflict – the three items that were perceived as touching upon the lives of Colombians abroad, thus allowing for a more meaningful contribution by participants to the political context in the homeland.

[iii] The Festival por la Paz en Colombia - Memoria y Justicia Social (FdP) was conceived as a cultural and artistic event, a space for debate and exchange of ideas and experiences. It was a civil society initiative, emerging from different collectives and individuals in Paris (students, workers, artists, among others), seeking to convey a message in support

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peace-building and to show their support for the diverse initiatives around the construction of collective memory and social justice currently taking place in Colombia. Officially, the FdP portrayed itself as apartisan. Among its goals were: to raise awareness among the French and international public about the situation facing Colombia today; and give visibility to the peace talks between the government and the FARC, as well as to the internal struggle of the Colombian people for social justice. It was a three-day event including debates, artistic performances, music shows, and food festivals.

[iv] The *history of the present* aims at working with a time that is 'close'. The proximity of the time is defined by the presence of the witness (the individual who 'was there'). 'The past' is neither fully completed, nor achieved. Temporalities, periodizations, and sequences in HTP are uncertain and constantly debated, as they are set depending on what particular national traditions define as their 'latest catastrophe' (Rousso, 2012). The history of the present requires testimonies collected to be treated as archives, that is, fully detailing and classifying them, as well as planning and enacting preservation measures (IHTP, Cahier No.21). According to H. Rousso, there are four elements comprising the HTP apparatus: 1) The witness: Historical actors transformed into such by the work of the historian (who also transforms testimonies into oral sources); 2) Memory: Which stems from the existence of alternate interpretations of the past by the living actors; 3) The event: Which denotes a shift in the approach to processes which are both immediate and unfinished; and 4) Social demand. The HTP also allows for pluridisciplinary approaches to objects of research and places sources obtained from testimonies, full immersion, and classical archival research on a similar value-level. (IHTP, Bulletin No.75)

[v] Formerly DAS (*Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*), the Colombian equivalent of the Department of Homeland Security.

[vi] Fieldwork: Participant Observation/NY, Presidential elections 2010.

[vii] Assman, quoted in Kleist and Glynn (2012), pg 15.

[viii] Guarnizo and Díaz (1999) note that remittances, especially those sent through informal channels, are constantly suspected of serving money-laundering purposes

[ix] Idiomatic expression used to denote modifications made to a legal text during in-House debates that result in modifications according to corrupt interests.

[x] The only exceptions are files on cases of human rights violations created with the purpose of being presented to decision-makers in their respective countries of residence and international organizations. (Fieldwork: Group Interview. Washington DC, 18 April 2014).

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