

Documentary Comics as Medium of Historical Memory in Colombia:
Covers, Paratexts, and Graphic Narratives in three Contemporary Works

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Richard Vargas

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Abstract

This dissertation examines documentary comics as a medium of historical memory in Colombia within the context of the armed conflict and the narratives of victims from marginalized communities. It conceptualizes historical memory as a mechanism that upholds victims' rights to truth and memory, and analyzes how institutions such as the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* and *Fundación del Sinú* have incorporated victims' testimonies in comics. Within this framework, victims—primarily peasants—are understood as a community engaged in the collective reconstruction of their past and in processes of social transformation. Focusing on three documentary comics—*Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica* (Chalarka, 1985), *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b), and *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* (CNMH, 2018a)—the study investigates how historical memory is represented through verbal-pictorial elements in covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives. Methodologically, it draws on the distinction between story and discourse and combines close and wide reading strategies to analyze both content and form. The dissertation argues that documentary comics function as collaborative platforms for historical memory reconstruction, where victims and researchers work cooperatively to create narratives that challenge dominant accounts and foreground the agency of rural communities affected by violence.

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1. Introduction

Out of a population of approximately 52 million in Colombia,¹ the armed conflict has internally displaced 8.4 million people since 1985,² resulting in more than 9 million victims to date.³ Although the number of forced displacements has gradually declined,⁴ current figures remain alarmingly high. These statistics offer valuable insights into the conflict's magnitude, but they provide only a partial view. A comprehensive understanding requires an exploration of the root causes, the temporal and spatial dynamics of violence, the populations most affected, and the parties responsible. Thus, examining the impact on rural populations is essential. This necessitates consideration of the testimonies and memories of these communities, an approach that both deepens understanding and challenges prevailing narratives about the Colombian conflict.

Understanding Colombia's violent past necessitates acknowledging and valuing the memories of rural communities. Unfortunately, their testimonies and experiences have often been overlooked and even suppressed (Banquez-Mendoza, Martínez-González, Amar-Amar, & López-Muñoz, 2022). It was not until the signing of the 2016 peace agreement between the guerrilla group FARC – EP⁵ and the Colombian state that these stories began to receive the recognition they deserve as a crucial element in representing and shaping the historical memory within the frame of the armed conflict in Colombia. Furthermore, the peace agreement established the framework for the Truth Commission in Colombia, formally created on April 5, 2017. This Commission aimed to uncover the truth about the conflict in the country from the perspectives of victims, allowing them to share their individual and collective memories during the conflict (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2018, 9th paragraph; Kalach Torres, 2016, p. 118; Ruiz et al., 2021, p. 127).

¹ According to calculations by the Department of Statistics in Colombia (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística - DANE), Colombia has 52'939,527 inhabitants DANE (2023).

² Figures of Human Rights Watch (2023).

³ There are currently 9'572,044 people registered as victims of the Colombian armed conflict in the unique record of victims of the Colombian government. For more information, see Unidad para las Víctimas (2023). This figure underscores the profound impact of the internal armed conflict on Colombian society, revealing that 18.2% of the population has been affected (Función Pública, 2023). Notably, it is the peasant population that bears the brunt of the impact (Observatorio de conflictividades y DDHH, 2023, N. pag).

⁴ The dynamics of displacement over the years reveal a nuanced picture. In 2002, 807,276 people experienced forced displacement. Fast forward to 2022, the number significantly decreased to 290,119. However, the challenge persists, as in 2023 alone, the count has already reached 99,423 displaced individuals. For more information, see Observatorio de conflictividades y DDHH (2023).

⁵ *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – EP* (Revolutionary Colombian Armed Forces – Army of the People).

Victims' testimonies and personal accounts contributed to the *Informe Final: Hay futuro si hay verdad*.⁶ This report was officially presented to the full chamber of the Colombian Constitutional Court on August 4, 2022. The report is unique “in Colombia for the reconstruction of the collective memory of the armed conflict”⁷ (Franco, 2023, p. 3, my translation).

The *Informe Final* explicitly adopts the concept of the “reconstruction of collective memory.” This choice requires clarifying the distinction, as used in this dissertation, between the “construction” and “reconstruction” of historical memory. At the core of this debate lies the question of whether memory is actively created or instead recovered and reassembled from fragments of the past. While some scholars argue that both individual and collective memory, as well as historical memory, are fundamentally social constructions, this dissertation aligns with the notion of “reconstruction” (Aymard, 2004; Tuch, 1999).

The term “construction” implies the creation of a narrative from the ground up, whereas “reconstruction” emphasizes the recovery and preservation of existing traces of truth (cf. Aymard, 2004, pp. 7–16). This perspective acknowledges that the past cannot be fully accessed; rather, it must be approached through the assembly of available evidence. In this sense, reconstructing historical memory involves restoring an understanding of the past through archives, oral testimonies, and cultural artifacts, including comics. Accordingly, this dissertation adopts the concept of “reconstruction” to highlight a bottom-up approach grounded in surviving fragments, voices, and material traces. At the same time, it does not entirely reject the idea of construction, since the interpretive frameworks used to organize and give meaning to these elements remain, in themselves, constructive processes.

The Truth Commission also published a volume titled “Call for a Great Peace” (*Convocatoria a la Paz Grande*).⁸ As the Framework for Peace emphasizes truth and reparations for victims, including victims' perspectives, it has proven essential for ensuring historical accountability. This growing recognition has led to the use of various cultural artifacts and artistic expressions, empowering victims to share testimonies and preserve their memories.

After the peace agreement was signed, particularly in 2018, three comics were released online. Their goal was to make stories of conflict-affected communities accessible to Colombians. These works are *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*

⁶ In English: Final Report: There is a future if there is truth (my own translation).

⁷ The original reads, “[l]a Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición—mejor conocida como la Comisión de la Verdad— hizo una labor sin precedentes en Colombia para la reconstrucción de la memoria colectiva del conflicto armado.”

⁸ To access all volumes of the Final Report, see Comisión de la Verdad (2022b).

(Chalarka, 1985), *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b), and *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* (CNMH, 2018a). They address peasant land dispossession and the unequal distribution of rural property in Colombia. These works also challenge the dominant narratives about the conflict.

Dominant narratives have largely been constructed and disseminated by mass media outlets and the political elites who have historically governed the country, shaping public perception in ways that often privilege official accounts while marginalizing alternative voices. They also frame the conflict as mere clashes between armed groups instead of a deep historical and socio-political struggle (Schmidt, 2023).

The three comics mentioned above have gained prominence. They foreground processes of historical memory reconstruction⁹ developed by research groups such as the Circle of Research and Social Action (*La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social*; henceforth, *La Rosca*) and The Caribbean Foundation (*La Fundación del Caribe*), which used the methodology Participatory Action Research (PAR)¹⁰ to create *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*. Likewise, the National Center of Historical Memory in Colombia (CNMH – *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*)¹¹ commissioned *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*.

Through the interplay of visual and narrative elements, these works recover and amplify the testimonies of rural communities, addressing issues such as land dispossession and unequal property distribution while challenging dominant, elite- and media-driven narratives that reduce the conflict to armed confrontations rather than recognizing its deeper historical and socio-political roots.

This dissertation examines the representation of memory processes in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*. It analyzes how individual and collective memories contribute to the reconstruction of historical memory in Colombia. The analysis considers the comics as cultural artifacts by evaluating their covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives.

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As introduced in the abstract, this dissertation distinguishes between the “construction” and “reconstruction” of historical memory. While construction refers to the interpretive shaping of narratives about the past, reconstruction emphasizes the recovery and reassembly of surviving fragments—archives, testimonies, and cultural traces. This study privileges the term reconstruction to highlight a bottom-up approach grounded in these remnants, while acknowledging that any act of reconstruction inevitably entails interpretation and thus retains a constructive dimension.

¹⁰ The research methodology known as PAR was introduced by Orlando Fals Borda and used by *La Rosca* and *La Fundación del Caribe* to investigate Colombian peasantry and peasants’ struggles for their land and rights on the Atlantic coast.

¹¹ The CNMH has been characterized using various methods to elicit and recount the past among victims of the conflict in Colombia. For more, see Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2013).

1.1. Literature Review

Research on comics about war-like conflicts has focused mainly on seminal graphic narratives¹² set in North America, Europe, or Asia. Recently, Latin American comics about socio-political and historical conflicts have attracted scholarly attention.¹³ However, few studies have examined comics from the region that depict communities' memories amid socio-political crises.¹⁴ Even less is known about how Colombian comics depict memories of marginalized communities. It also remains unclear how these grassroots recollections in comics contribute to historical memory.

Few scholarly works acknowledge the significant role of comics in representing the Colombian armed conflict from multiple perspectives. Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste (2007), for example, analyzed the comic series *Hombres de Acero*¹⁵ (Osorio, 1999), focusing on the assignment of national and heroic characteristics to Colombian soldiers within graphic narratives. Fernández L'Hoeste interrogates the visual representation of main characters, noting that the depictions of soldiers in *Hombres de Acero* are physically exaggerated, with exceptionally large and muscular bodies reminiscent of G.I. action figures produced by the Hassenfeld Brothers (later Hasbro) in the United States during the Cold War (cf. 2007, p. 149). He further identifies parallels between the physical portrayals in *Hombres de Acero* and those of warriors in the American comic *G.I. Joe*, created by Joseph Breger in 1942 for the magazine *Yank* and the newspaper *Stars and Stripes* (cf. 2007, pp. 149–150). Fernández L'Hoeste argues that the first three issues of *Hombres de Acero* depict critical aspects of the Colombian armed conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including massacres and the forced displacement of civilians.

Due to his depiction of conflict-related issues, comics artist Osorio Monsalve received death threats. Consequently, the narrative, thematic, and storyworld elements—including settings, situations, and characters—underwent significant changes and ceased to reflect Colombia's violent reality at the time (cf. Fernández L'Hoeste, 2007, pp. 145–148). The genre, which initially functioned as non-fiction comics, shifted toward a hyper-fictional form.

¹² Thus far, several case studies have examined works by prominent graphic novelists such as Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Marjane Satrapi, as shown by Adams (2008), Mickwitz (2016), and Chute (2016).

¹³ See recent studies compiled in Scorer (2020); Catalá-Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer (2017); Grunow (2018).

¹⁴ Some studies have analyzed comics that narrate socio-political and historical events and crises in Cuba (Catalá-Carrasco, 2017), Argentina (Balleta, 2017), Nicaragua (Berth, 2017), and Peru (Drinot, 2017; Milton, 2017; Escobar Cifuentes, 2018).

¹⁵ According to Fernández L'Hoeste (2007), this comics series, *Men of Steel*, in English, was commissioned by the Colombian army to improve its image in regions affected by violence between the end of the 1990s and early 2000s. Although *Hombres de Acero* initially appeared in 1985 as a collaborative work between cartoonist Carlos Alberto Osorio Monsalve and the Colombian armed forces, the newspaper *El Tiempo* published several issues based on the original comic in 1999 (cf. 2007, p. 141).

Fernández argues that this transformation sought to legitimize Colombian military actions in line with the State's role in maintaining peace within political and violent contexts (cf. 2007, p. 150). He concludes that, although *Hombres de Acero* appears to support an official narrative encouraging victims to identify with the Colombian State, the State has not taken substantive measures to address the needs and concerns of marginalized communities (cf. 2007, p. 152).

Felipe Gómez (2017) examined the graphic narratives *Los Perdidos* (Guerra & Neira, 2012) and *Virus Tropical* (Gaviria, 2015) to analyze representations of Colombian identity (*Colombianidad*), and the interplay of violence, displacement, and memory. Gómez contends that, when considered together, these comics provide complementary perspectives on national identity: one foregrounds the experiences of victims of the country's violent conflict, while the other challenges stereotypes about Colombians and traditional conceptions of femininity (cf. Gómez, 2017, pp. 51–66). Further, Gómez (2019) investigated *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* (CNMH, 2018a) and *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b), both of which are included in the present dissertation's corpus. His research focuses on portrayals of forced displacement in these works, arguing that they continue a tradition in Colombian literature of addressing the mass displacement of rural populations.¹⁶ Gómez concludes that these graphic narratives contribute valuable visual elements that enhance understanding of the Colombian armed conflict (cf. 2019, p. 10).

Joanne Rappaport (2018) analyzed the graphic narrative *Tinajones*,¹⁷ which documents peasants' struggles for land in the Colombian towns of *San Antero* and *San Bernardo del Viento* from the 1920s to the 1970s. Rappaport's primary objective was to examine how *Tinajones* engages with Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology,¹⁸ introduced in Colombia by the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (Barranquilla, Colombia, July 11th, 1925 – Bogotá, Colombia, August 12th, 2008) in the early 1970s. She underscores the value of graphic narratives as collaborative research spaces where peasants and scholars jointly construct sequential visual accounts rooted in lived experience. This approach positions both activists and peasants as historical subjects rather than mere objects of study (cf. 2018, p. 140). Rappaport observes that the content of *Tinajones* did not originate from a pre-existing script

¹⁶ According to Giraldo (2013), authors who have written about forced displacement in Colombia include Laura Restrepo, Alfredo Molano, and Arturo Alape (pp. 12-13).

¹⁷ *Tinajones* is part of a collection of four graphic narratives entitled *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*, made between 1972 and 1974, and commissioned by ANUC (Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia). In English, the National Association of Colombian Peasant Users (cf. Chalarka, 1985, pp. 3–4).

¹⁸ PAR is a participatory research methodology in social sciences that promotes “a dialogical, self-reflective and participatory approach [...] between the researcher and researched with the explicit purpose of empowering the oppressed and helping them to overcome their oppression” (Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 59).

but emerged through an interpretive process involving peasants, leaders, and researchers (cf. 2018, p. 145). She concludes that the comics artist serves as an epistemological bridge, integrating interviews, reports, and archival documents into the verbal–visual narrative as historical evidence (cf. 2018, p. 148).

Laura Catalina Andrade Quintero (2020, 2021), building on work by Felipe Gómez, analyzed the comics *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas* and *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* as documentary comics to examine the operation of institutional discourse from the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (CNMH) (Andrade Quintero, 2020). She also investigated how both works utilize “images of the witness and its testimony [...] to establish [...] a kind of polyphonic narrative” (2021, p. 31). A key finding is that *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* present divergent perspectives. While the CNMH does not adhere to a single official discourse in producing these comics, their content does not explicitly assign responsibility to the Colombian state for the events depicted. Instead, both works provide contested narratives centered on victims’ experiences, foregrounding victims’ testimonies and voices through scripted narratives and drawn images (cf. Andrade Quintero, 2020, p. 82).

Juan Felipe Peña Guzmán (2021) analyzed several comics, including *Bogotázombie: Se levantan los muertos – el 9 de abril*¹⁹ (González, Navarro, & Montoya, 2013), *Los Once*²⁰ (Cruz, Jiménez, & Jiménez, 2014), *Caminos condenados* (Aguirre, Díaz, Guerra, & Ojeda, 2016), and *Tanta sangre vista* (Baena & Pantoja, 2015). His study examines graphic representations of significant events in Colombia’s violent history and their effects on civilians, as well as the role of comics in shaping younger generations’ understanding of the conflict. He concludes, first, that these four comics operate as hybrid forms combining scholarly content with graphic storytelling, thereby providing young readers with foundational insights into the historical processes of the Colombian armed conflict (cf. 2021, pp. 67–68). Second, he highlights the political dimension of the medium, arguing that comics can serve as a means of “political

¹⁹ Title in English: *Bogotázombie: the dead rise – April 9th* (my translation). It is a comic that contains different covers of Colombian newspapers to reconstruct the history of the riots that occurred after the murder of the presidential candidate of the Liberal Party, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, on April 9th, 1948, in Bogotá, Colombia. These massive, widespread riots became known as “*El Bogotazo*” (The Bogotazo). The graphic narratives in this work are based primarily on national newspaper headlines. In this work, reality and fiction mingle, showing a zombie-like attack following the violent death of Gaitán.

²⁰ Title in English: *The Eleven* (my translation) is based on the takeover of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá by militants from the M-19 guerrilla movement on November 6th, 1985. This comic recounts the story of one of the eleven individuals forcibly disappeared during the military’s retaking of the courthouse. The main characters are mice, while the guerrillas are portrayed as crows and the military forces as Dobermanns.

denunciation [...] of social injustices [...] that involve the Colombian State”²¹ (2021, p. 68, my translation). Thus, comics are positioned not only as vehicles for disseminating knowledge about the conflict but also as tools for raising awareness of socio-political injustices.

These studies offer insights into how the Colombian conflict is represented in comics. However, the capacity of comics to convey historical memory from the perspective of rural communities remains insufficiently explored. As Laura Catalina Andrade Quintero observes, significant questions persist regarding the construction of collective memory within these graphic narratives, and several dimensions remain unaddressed (cf. 2020, p. 84). Limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the depiction of rural populations’ experiences, especially concerning the historical violence endured within their territories. The prevailing focus has often been on the Colombian State’s perspective, treating it as the sole official memory.

An important research gap involves the use of comics as documentary material to represent the perspectives and testimonies of marginalized populations (Andrade Quintero, 2020). Further investigation is required to understand how comics develop a unique visuality associated with Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1929/1984) concept of the “polyphonic narrative.” This framework is evident in documentary comics through verbal-pictorial strategies that foreground the independent voices of communities affected by the armed conflict (Andrade Quintero, 2021).

The relationship between individual enunciation and collective narratives requires further examination to elucidate how personal experiences are positioned within broader social, temporal, and spatial contexts, while maintaining autonomy from the author’s voice or ideology. Additionally, the use of ‘symbols and visual elements’ in both the graphic narratives and the covers or paratextual components of comics merits exploration for their role in representing the past. Thus, a critical area for future research is the role of the verbal-pictorial elements of comics, as multidimensional cultural artifacts, in memory processes and in facilitating the recovery and communication of the experiences of conflict-affected peasants in Colombia.

Comics scholarship has primarily focused on “graphic narratives,” defined as “a storytelling via words and images” (Gardner & Herman, 2011, p. 3). Considering this narrative dimension, the present dissertation posits that understanding a graphic narrative requires examining the intersection between the *Erzähler* (narrator) and the *Erzählung* (narration). Thus,

²¹ The original reads, “[L]os cómics y novelas gráficas son un medio de denuncia política [...] a las injusticias sociales [...] que involucran al Estado colombiano”.

a graphic narrative in comics constitutes a story conveyed through words and images, presenting settings, characters, actions, and events in a static and sequential manner across comic panels.²²

Other components of comics, such as covers and paratextual elements, have not been thoroughly examined regarding their roles in guiding reader engagement and memory processes related to historical memory. While color and composition in the visual arts significantly influence viewers' initial impressions, suggest meanings, and evoke emotional responses (Mirzaei, 2025), their specific functions on comics covers remain underexplored, especially in the context of reconstructing individual and collective memories. Although previous research has addressed panel layout as a narrative device within comics pages (see for example, Kuhlman, 2020; Cohn & Campbell 2015; Groensteen, 2013, pp. 43-50; Eisner, 2008, pp. 39–102; Peeters, 1998; Harvey, 1996, pp. 152–172), limited attention has been given to the composition of covers and their role in framing the graphic narrative and shaping readers' interpretations in works addressing historical memory.

1.2. Research Questions

In view of the research gaps mentioned above, this dissertation has as its main research question the following inquiry:

How do documentary comics depict historical memory in Colombia, and how does this type of memory manifest in the verbal-pictorial elements of covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives? Furthermore, what insights can these elements provide about the role of documentary comics in shaping and preserving historical memory in Colombia?

As the literature review indicates, prior research has primarily concentrated on the representation of settings, characters, violent events, and their impact on the civilian population, as evident in works by Fernández L'Hoeste (2007), Gómez (2017), and Peña Guzmán (2021). In comics, the interplay between verbal and visual elements is central to representing the Colombian conflict.

Building on existing scholarship, this dissertation examines the interaction of these elements across covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives. The primary aim is to deepen current understandings of comics as a medium for constructing and conveying historical memory,

²² For further definitions of this concept, see Barrero (2015); Bartual Moreno (2015); Berning (2013); and Gardner and Herman (2011).

particularly from the perspectives of rural communities. Additionally, the study positions comics as valuable documentary and research sources. The central contribution is to demonstrate how the medium uniquely articulates memory at individual, collective, and historical levels.

While visual media like photography and film are often seen as accurate “records of the past” (Erll, 2011/2016, pp. 134–137), memory itself is inherently limited, fragmented, and subjective—qualities that comics, with their static and visual components, are particularly well-suited to express. At this point, it is pertinent to consider Hillary Chute’s question, “[w]hy, after the rise and reign of photography [and cinema in memory studies], do people yet understand pen and paper to be among the best instruments of witness” (2016, p. 2) and, therefore, of historical memory.

To address the key research gap concerning the use of comics as collaborative tools for historical memory work between scholars and peasant communities, this dissertation analyzes *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*. These works are examined not only as narratives but also as complex cultural artifacts that integrate covers, paratexts, and graphic storytelling. The analysis demonstrates how comics function as media for documenting marginalized testimonies and representing Colombia’s socio-political realities.

To examine the primary research question comprehensively, this dissertation formulates the following three sub-questions as supporting pillars:

1. How do the diverse verbal-pictorial forms found in the covers of comics serve as initial visual tools for introducing topics regarding historical memory work and enticing readers to explore their corresponding graphic narratives?
2. How do paratextual components of comics function as scaffolding to organize, contextualize, and introduce memory work, research, recollections, and testimonies in Colombian peasant communities, thereby influencing the reconstruction of historical memory?
3. How do graphic narratives convey individual and collective memories and experiences through verbal-pictorial components that aid in the construction of historical memory in Colombia?

1.3. Hypotheses

This dissertation contends that documentary comics serve as a medium of articulation, facilitating the collaborative reconstruction of historical memory between researchers and marginalized rural communities. Through analysis of covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives from three comics, this study demonstrates how these works incorporate testimonies and lived experiences of historically excluded groups, including peasants, Indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendant communities, into broader historical memory work. The comics examined—*Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*—were produced with the support of institutions and research groups such as the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (CNMH) and initiatives inspired by Orlando Fals Borda and his Participatory Action Research (PAR). These works exemplify the role of comics in mediating collective memories of conflict by transforming them into verbal and visual narratives. The comics document grassroots perspectives on historical violence and provide structured, accessible media. They further illustrate how memory processes, referred to as “mnemonic modes” in this dissertation, contribute to the recovery and narration of marginalized memories. The central hypothesis is supported by three sub-hypotheses derived from the research sub-questions:

1. Covers act as visual gateways offering symbolic representations of key themes, settings, and characters that unfold in the graphic narratives of comics and that are related to historical memory in Colombia.
2. Paratextual elements such as introductions, table of contents, bibliographies, and other paratexts play a significant role in introducing, explaining, and organizing material, historical, and research framing for graphic narratives that portray memories from below. Consequently, they provide critical background information that frames and guides the readings of graphic narratives that elicit memories, recollections, experiences, and testimonies within comics.
3. Graphic narratives convey multifaceted portrayals of historical memory. They not only narrate but also dramatize mnemonic modes understood as different approaches to evoke the past from marginalized communities so that their accounts can be better understood and experienced by readers.

Answering the questions above aims to enhance understanding of historical memory in Colombia, understood as a collaborative effort among institutions, academics, and peasant communities to recover, document, and preserve marginalized memories that might otherwise be overlooked.

1.4. Primary Corpus

During the Colombian peace process (2011–2016), a wide range of comics were produced that engaged with and critically depicted the armed conflict. While many of these works explore sociopolitical issues, this dissertation excludes several due to differences in audience, narrative complexity, and degree of fictionalization. First, comics aimed primarily at children or young audiences—such as *Dientes de león: El camino del acompañamiento* (Lessmes & Pantoja, 2016), *Caminos condenados* (Aguirre et al., 2016), and *Los Once* (Cruz et al., 2014)—are not included as case studies. Although visually appealing, these comics employ simplified graphic narratives that provide only a superficial depiction of the conflict. The use of panels to display historical imagery, dialogues within speech balloons, and framing devices lacks the structural and thematic complexity required for an adult audience, resulting in a limited engagement with the depth of the conflict.

Second, comics based on fictional literary works, such as *Tanta Sangre Vista* (Baena & Pantoja, 2015) and *La Vorágine* (Pantoja & Jiménez, 2018)²³ are also excluded. Although embedded in historical settings, these works fictionalize real events and omit direct testimonies of victims. Characters and events are largely shaped by the authors' interpretations of novels rather than firsthand accounts, limiting their value for a study focused on collective memory and lived experience.

This dissertation's primary corpus includes *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica* (Chalarka, 1985), *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b), and *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* (CNMH, 2018a). Hereafter referred to as *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*, these works were chosen based on three key criteria: accessibility and distribution, collaborative production, and content grounded in testimony and rural experience. First, these comics are freely accessible in digital format through platforms such as the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), Colombian universities, and institutional repositories. This accessibility reflects a commitment to democratizing historical memory in Colombia. Unlike commercially marketed “graphic novels”—a term originated in the U.S. as a marketing strategy for bookstore sales (cf. Barrero,

²³ The first work is based on the historical fiction novel *Tanta Sangre Vista* (Baena, 2007), which explores political, economic, and social conflicts in Colombia during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The second adapts the literary classic *La Vorágine* (Rivera, 1924/1993), a work that portrays the brutal conditions endured by Colombian settlers and Indigenous communities subjected to exploitation in the Amazon rubber industry at the turn of the 20th century. However, the comics adaptations of these novels omit significant events and narrative depth. While they are visually engaging, the resulting works are notably brief and lack the complexity required for a comprehensive engagement with the historical realities they reference.

2013, pp. 191–192)—the three works in this study resist commodification. Offered freely online as educational and communal resources, they ensure broad access to the narratives of marginalized communities, including audiences with limited financial means.

Second, each selected work was created through collaborative efforts aimed at reconstructing historical memory, involving researchers, comic artists, rural organizations, and victims of the armed conflict. This collective approach to authorship stands in clear contrast to autobiographical comics (Johnson, 2017; El Refaie, 2012; S. Smith, 2011; Merino, 2010), which are typically produced by individual creators who serve simultaneously as researchers, illustrators, narrators, and often protagonists. Such works focus on personal experiences, offering a limited perspective that may not adequately represent the broader collective memory of marginalized communities, which this dissertation seeks to address. Moreover, their narratives tend to reflect a singular voice, lacking the polyphonic richness needed to convey multiple, independent testimonies. For these reasons, this dissertation prioritizes comics developed through community participation, in which knowledge, memory, and lived experience are co-constructed through a shared, creative, and collaborative process.

Finally, the corpus centers thematically on historical injustices such as land dispossession and rural marginalization. These comics incorporate direct testimonies from victims and emphasize both suffering and resilience. Rather than portraying victims as passive subjects, the graphic narratives highlight agency, resistance, and solidarity within rural communities. This balance reflects the broader goals of historical memory reconstruction, recognizing pain and suffering while also affirming collective dignity and strength.

Although originally published in 1985, *Historia gráfica* achieved significant visibility following the 2016 peace agreement. The work reinterprets the conflicts over rural land in northern Colombia, particularly along the Atlantic coast, and underscores the complex tensions between rural farmers (*campesinos*)²⁴ and large landowners, which include foreign corporations, local politicians, and wealthy individuals. These landowners have reportedly engaged in corrupt practices such as unlawful land acquisition, inequitable land tenure, and persistent abuse of rural communities (Villarreal-Escallón, Córdoba-Campaña, & Verdugo-Escallón, 2026).

²⁴ This dissertation employs the Spanish term *campesino(s)* as a synonym for peasant(s). This terminology extends beyond a mere categorization of Colombian peasants as a community and instead acknowledges them as a resilient, localized ‘social movement.’ As noted by Claudia Eugenia Toca Torres, countries such as Colombia, Chile, and Argentina have historically experienced social movements comprising workers, *campesinos*, students, the middle class, environmental advocates, and human rights defenders. Cf. (2013, pp. 32–33). Furthermore, the use of *campesinos* in English-language academic literature highlights the peasant movement and its organizational structure, as demonstrated by Rappaport (2020).

Historia gráfica is a compilation of four illustrated booklets produced between 1972 and 1974 that chronicle and narrate the struggles of Colombian peasants against land and labor exploitation in different towns along the Atlantic coast. The first booklet, *LoMagrande: El Baluarte del Sinú*, addresses illegal land appropriations by powerful socio-economic elites. The second, *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, showcases conflicts between the ruling classes and large landowners who oppose peasants' efforts to reclaim their land. The third, *El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinú*, details the labor exploitation of peasants by large landowners. The final booklet, *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en la lucha por la Tierra*, highlights the political participation of *campesino* women in the struggles to recover rural lands. Covering the period from the Spanish conquest to the twentieth century, *Historia gráfica* provides critical insights into how peasants' collective memories inform understandings of Colombia's history of conflict from their own perspectives.

Sin mascar palabra is set in the rural area of *Tulapas*, in the Gulf of *Urabá*, in the northwest of Colombia. Peasants occupied this region in the 1950s to escape violence and the latifundia established by affluent stockbreeders. After a legal allocation of rural land, the community got the right to be their legal proprietors. However, in the 1990s, paramilitaries and affluent businesspersons from the region of *Córdoba* took over peasants' lands violently. This work underscores that the massive displacement of peasants from their territories was not just confined to the 1950s or the 1990s. These graphic narratives rather reveal that forced displacement in rural Colombia has been an enduring and violent phenomenon, with origins traceable to the establishment of livestock farms (*haciendas ganaderas*) along the Sinú River since the 19th century (CNMH, 2018b, p. 6).

La Palizúa unfolds in a small community in the department of Magdalena in the north of Colombia. Its narratives are temporally situated in the 1980s, when diverse groups of peasants settled in a small area in Magdalena. Peasant settlers named this region *La Palizúa* because the colonists used natural resources, mainly sticks (in Spanish, *palos*), to organize and construct their settlements. Later, *La Palizúa* extended to the territories of *Santa Martica*, *La Boquilla*, *Las Planadas*, *Mulas Altamacera*, and *El Mulero*. During the 1990s, paramilitary groups, believed to be acting on orders from powerful landowners, began invading the territories peasants had previously cultivated. By 1997, these armed groups forcefully displaced peasant communities out of *La Palizúa* through violent means.

1.5. Key Concepts

The following section outlines central concepts, including memory in its communicative, cultural, and historical dimensions, as well as narrative community. It further advances a conceptualization of the key processes involved in memory reconstruction—here termed “mnemonic modes.” Finally, it introduces comics as a medium, with particular attention to documentary comics, analyzed across three interrelated levels: covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives.

Memory

Memory can be considered as “an umbrella term for all those processes of a biological, medial, or social nature which relate past and present (and future) in sociocultural contexts” (Erll, 2011/2016, p. 6). From this perspective, individual memory concerns the physiological and cognitive aspects of human memory, while collective memory encompasses the sociocultural processes of memory construction, dissemination, and representation. In the case of historical memory, it refers to the interplay of individual and collective memories, in which particular social groups or communities reconstruct their past through narratives, in this case, comics’ graphic narratives.

Communicative and Cultural Memory

Approaching violent past events by keeping in mind the testimonies of entire communities that experienced conflicts first-hand and offering symbolic reparations to victims have been indispensable components in the reconstruction of historical memory in violence-inflected societies. This collective reconstruction falls within “the framework of what Jan and Aleida Assmann have called ‘communicative memory’” (Erll, 2011/2016, p. 4), which is often referred to as the “short-term memory of society” due to its reliance on “living bearers [of memory]” who actively share and communicate their recollections and experiences (cf. J. Assmann, 1995, pp. 127–129, as cited in Welzer, 2010, p. 285). Referring to communicative memory as “short-term memory” suggests the existence of a “long-term memory” within societies. Cultural memory plays a significant role in preserving collective memories and experiences, especially within communities impacted by violent historical events.

Communicative memory depends almost exclusively on people acting as “bearers of memory.” However, when people pass away, their memories and experiences can and should be preserved in alternative forms. As Astrid Erll affirms, “[w]ithout eyewitness to history, societies are dependent on media-supported forms of remembrance” (2011/2016, p. 4). These

forms become “carriers” or “reminders” of memory. Accordingly, memories of individuals and communities are “exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms” that can in turn “be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another” (J. Assmann, 2010, pp. 110–111). The concepts of “communicative memory” and “cultural memory” should be understood as complementary for historical memory reconstruction; they represent different but interconnected ways of remembering.

In the context of historical memory, cultural memory extends communicative memory, ensuring the endurance and preservation of shared experiences and histories. However, as Jan Assmann points out, the intervention of institutions is crucial for the “preservation and re-embodiment” of cultural memory (cf. J. Assmann, 2010, p. 111). They play a vital role in maintaining and safeguarding memories and experiences in cultural artifacts. Likewise, institutions are responsible for organizing, storing, and often updating these recollections to keep them relevant and accessible for others, especially for future generations. This institutional involvement is particularly important for communities affected by violent historical events, where preserving their stories is essential for accessing and understanding the past.

Historical Memory

Historical memory in Colombia plays a crucial role in confronting the legacy of decades-long conflict, marked by violence, exclusion, and systemic marginalization. It seeks to recover and dignify the silenced voices of victims—particularly indigenous and rural communities—whose experiences have been distorted or erased by dominant socio-political and economic narratives (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 23). Hegemonic narratives have perpetuated the outdated “colonial stereotype” that rural territories and their inhabitants are merely objects of “conquest and exploitation” (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2020, paragraph 4). Consequently, reconstructing the past through the perspectives, testimonies, and lived experiences of rural communities is crucial for uncovering historical truths and promoting a more equitable and inclusive understanding of Colombia’s history.

Historical memory in Colombia should be understood and approached as a collective effort to confront the country’s violent past by recovering and amplifying victims’ voices, involving collaboration between victims, society, the state, and institutions. Accordingly, this memory seeks to uphold the right to truth, foster reparation, promote national reconciliation, and non-repetition (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 13–14; Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 14). Historical memory should be reconstructed collaboratively, centering the experiences and testimonies of those most affected by the conflict. This approach

embraces historical memory as a collaborative work for “plural spaces [...] to contribute to [...] historical clarification, truth telling, [and] dignifying the memories of the victims when memory constitutes a critical and disputed terrain” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 13).

Historical Memory Work

The Argentinian sociologist and social researcher Elizabeth Jelin employs the metaphor of ‘memory work’ to argue that memory, especially in its collective dimension, entails active involvement in the process of societal construction and transformation (cf. Jelin, 2002, p. 14). In the same line of thought, Annette Kuhn conceptualizes ‘memory work’ as “an active practice of remembering that takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory” (2010, p. 6). Both perspectives highlight the reconstructive, active, and transformative aspects of ‘memory work’ as a fundamental element and effective tool for historical memory. Innovative “communitarian initiatives” also play a key role in empowering [the] collective process of reconstructing historical memory in Colombia, contributing to “the still weak road to sustainable peace” (Ruiz Romero, 2012, p. 556).

Drawing on the frameworks established by Jelin and Kuhn, this dissertation adopts the term ‘historical memory work’ to describe historical memory as a collaborative process involving researchers and peasant communities. These groups employ various strategies to activate, elicit, and narrate the past from the perspective of marginalized communities. The primary objective is to document the memories of individuals affected by the armed conflict in Colombia (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013; Riaño Alcalá & Uribe, 2016; Schultze-Kraft, 2022). Historical memory thus prioritizes the narratives of marginalized groups, often described as ‘memories from below’ or ‘memories from the margins’ (M. Brown et al., 2023, p. 464).

Narratives from marginalized and victimized communities form the foundation for reconstructing complex and diverse accounts of the past (cf. Mantilla-Blanco, 2025, pp. 673–674). As Markus Schultze-Kraft notes, “historical memory work is geared [...] towards generating comprehensive narratives of past violence and injustice based on the memories of those who have suffered it” (2022, p. 40). Collaborative historical memory work involves presenting victims’ narratives as “informants of the past” and utilizing mnemonic strategies to elicit and convey both individual and collective memories, thereby facilitating their reconstruction, representation, and transmission. Paul Thompson observes that “informants [of the past] cannot be asked to lie on their backs, to open their minds in free association, to talk” about their oral histories “or to report daily with notes on their [memories,] dreams and

fantasies” (2000, p. 174). Methods for eliciting and narrating the past enable victims to activate, articulate, and share their experiences, thereby presenting their testimonies within a broader, more coherent context.

Narrative Community

The need to narrativize, communicate, and document memories and testimonies—particularly those of individuals affected by socio-historical crises—underscores the importance of cultural artifacts and diverse media channels in the study of collective memory (cf. Erll & Rigney, 2006, p. 112; Jelin, 2002, p. 2; Kuhn, 2010, pp. 6–7, 2020, p. 186). Victims of the Colombian conflict, who recount their memories and testimonies of a violent past with scholarly support, form what has been termed a “narrative community” (*Erzählgemeinschaft*) (A. Nünning, 2013, p. 19).

A narrative community refers to groups—such as these victims of the Colombian conflict—who collectively reconstruct and share their experiences through narratives. As Ansgar Nünning and Wolfgang Müller-Funk explain, rather than merely representing reality, these communities collectively create narratives. They are fundamental in shaping how identity is understood at every level: they structure personal memory, influence how individuals see themselves, and help define the shared values and experiences of communities. Through storytelling, groups—whether regional, national, ethnic, or gender-based—develop a collective sense of who they are, making narratives essential to both individual and collective identity formation (cf. Müller-Funk, 2008, p. 17; A. Nünning, 2013, p. 15). Within this framework, documentary comics such as *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* function as cultural artifacts that advance the work of historical memory in Colombia.

Documentary Comics

Comics are conceptualized as media of communication that employ both verbal and pictorial elements articulated in sequences (cf. Domsch, 2018, pp. 13–14; Groensteen, 2013, pp. 84–85; Kukkonen, 2013, p. 4; Mikkonen, 2017, p. 14; Schüwer, 2008, pp. 407–408). This framework supports the analysis of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* as works within the documentary comics genre, which combines visual storytelling with factual representation to depict real events and lived experience. Scholars such as Schmid (2021), Mickwitz (2016), Chute (2016), and Adams (2008) define documentary comics as a “graphic record” that brings together historical data, archival material, and personal testimony within meaningful historical contexts, spanning forms such as autobiographical, biographical, travel, and journal comics. The present study also includes ethnographic comics (O’Sullivan & Kozinets, 2013), which

incorporate ethnographic research methods and foreground participant voices and cultural context through collaborative or immersive storytelling.

This study adopts a broader perspective beyond the conventional focus on graphic narratives—stories conveyed through the interplay of images and text—to examine additional textual elements, or “paratexts” (Genette, 1997b), that shape comics as material and visual cultural artifacts. In his seminal work *Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree* (*Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*), Gérard Genette reminds us that, “[the] subject of poetics [...] is not the text considered in its singularity [...], but rather the *architext* or, if one prefers, the *architextuality* of the text” (Genette, 1997a, p. 1).

Traditional analyses of comics have centered on graphic narratives, where images and written language combine to convey plot, characters, setting, and themes. These narratives are typically regarded as the main text, often overlooking paratextual elements that are integral to comics as media. In documentary comics, however, paratextual elements are essential for framing graphic narratives, enabling their interpretation as reality-based collective and cultural artifacts.

Graphic narratives addressing historical memory—encompassing both individual and collective experiences—require framing through covers and paratexts to ensure coherent and comprehensive storytelling. In documentary comics, which depict real events or incorporate authentic documents and testimonies, supplementary or parallel texts within the main narrative are essential. These paratextual elements both contextualize and guide the primary story, while also deepening the reader’s understanding of the depicted narratives.

Comics are recognized as visual and material artifacts comprising covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives that integrate verbal and pictorial elements, necessitating distinct reading strategies. Although Genette classifies covers as paratexts (cf. 1997b, pp. 23–24), this dissertation treats them as independent components, as they do not merely frame or mediate the text but actively shape interpretation through their visual, material, and communicative functions.

Covers in comics frequently function as independent sites of meaning-making, establishing thematic cues, aesthetic expectations, and reader positioning prior to engagement with the narrative itself, warranting scholarly analysis. Covers not only surround comics and related paratexts—such as introductions, tables of contents, and bibliographies—but also serve as standalone materials in non-reading contexts, including exhibitions, museums, and book fairs. While covers function as paratextual elements that introduce visual cues facilitating the interpretation of historical memory in graphic narratives (cf. Genette, 1997b, p. 23), their

graphic qualities also elevate them to autonomous artistic elements in cultural venues (Beaty, 2012; Molotiu, 2020; Munson, 2020). In these settings, covers offer an initial impression of the content before engagement with the graphic narrative.

Documentary comics also incorporate paratextual components. According to Gérard Genette, paratexts are accompanying elements that help transform a text into a book and shape its reception by readers (cf. Genette, 1997b, p. 1). Paratexts situated within the text, such as introductions and tables of contents (peritexts), and external references outside the text, such as interviews and reviews (epitexts), provide context and depth to the story (cf. Genette, 1997b, pp. 4–5). They influence how readers engage with and interpret graphic narratives. While peritexts will be the focus of analysis, epitexts also contribute to understanding the narrative’s impact. Genette’s concept, though initially applied to novels, is relevant to the study of paratexts in documentary comics.

Prior to analyzing graphic narratives and the relevant elements in the case studies, it is necessary to revisit the concept of comics. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon note that the terms ‘comics’ and ‘graphic narratives’ are often used interchangeably (cf. 2015, p. 5). In this study, these concepts are treated as complementary: comics are regarded as media, while graphic narratives are understood as storytelling forms that integrate visual and verbal elements,²⁵ with particular emphasis on the narrator’s role in conveying the memories and testimonies of marginalized rural communities affected by violence. A key characteristic is the employment of *mnemonic modes*—narrative strategies that evoke and transmit personal and collective memory. Despite their importance for understanding documentary comics, these modes remain underexplored, underscoring the need for a definition.

Mnemonic Modes

The reconstruction of historical memory is a collaborative process involving researchers, academics, and victims of the Colombian conflict, with the recollections and experiences of rural populations at its core. Given the traumatic nature of these memories—often shaped by uprooting, forced displacement, and massacres—historical memory work is essential. Researchers employ diverse methodologies tailored to the specific circumstances of peasant victims, enabling them to “elaborate, construct, change and interpret the events they experience” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 61). These approaches bring rural communities’ memories to the forefront and facilitate their sharing. The use of mnemonic

²⁵ For further definitions of this concept, see Barrero (2015); Bartual Moreno (2015); Berning (2013); and Gardner and Herman (2011).

modes is therefore crucial for conveying stories about the past, as these modes play a central role in activating the memories of marginalized communities.

From the phenomenological perspective of Edward Casey, “mnemonic modes” refer to the different ways in which memory is activated, operates, and is experienced. In his seminal work *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Casey, 2000), Casey emphasizes that remembering is not a passive retrieval of stored information, but an active, mental, and embodied process shaped by our lived experience and perception (cf. 2000, p. 89). Such a remembering process is above all social and cultural. That is, it is primarily done through social groups and frameworks (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). Accordingly, mnemonic modes are considered forms of social remembering used to activate memories of individuals that are generally “self-contained” and “opaque” (Casey, 2000, pp. 88–89). These modes are used so that individual and collective memories can take the form of a narrative, enabling them to be approached and understood by others.

Casey identifies three mnemonic modes in which memory manifests: *reminding*, *reminiscing*, and *recognizing*. The first, *reminding*, occurs when something triggers an association with the past. In this mode, “reminders”—whether mental cues or physical objects—help structure and activate memories. A simple recollection can spark an entire narrative of past events, while objects such as photos, postcards, diaries, or mementos serve as tangible reminders of what has happened (cf. Casey, 2000, pp. 90–91).

The second mode, *reminiscing*, involves more than just recalling the past; it allows us to relive and re-experience it. Casey describes reminiscing as “a matter of *actively re-entering* the “no longer living worlds” of that which is irrevocably past” (Casey, 2000, p. 107, emphasis by the author). In this mode, the past is not just remembered but emotionally and vividly re-engaged with. Furthermore, reminiscing often has a collective dimension, as it thrives in social settings, allowing memories to be shared and enriched through interaction with others. As Casey points out, through reminiscing, the past “*flourishes in the company of others*” (Casey, 2000, p. 113, italics by the author).

Finally, *recognizing* refers to acknowledging something from the past as if it were present, often described as “the presence of the absent.” This mode of memory is shaped by two key factors: availability and consolidation. *Availability* means that memories are not only stored but also “accessible”—they can be clearly identified and recalled (cf. Casey, 2000, p. 123), both individually and collectively. *Consolidation* refers to how memories shape and stabilize the present. In other words, the act of remembering helps give form and continuity to

our current experiences by integrating elements of the past into the present. It is in the present that what is remembered takes shape and acquires stability (cf. Casey, 2000, p. 124).

Mnemonic modes are posited to shape the organization of information within graphic narratives, offering a coherent framework for representing memories and experiences situated in historical contexts. They function as “means of lending coherence to the historiographic text or artifact [and to the narrated history] and interpreting a historical event” (Fulda, 2014, p. 227). Thus, when expressed through comics, mnemonic modes are transformed into graphic narratives.

Within documentary comics, mnemonic modes denote the visual and narrative strategies employed to represent individual and collective memories. Informed by Casey’s phenomenological perspective of memory as dynamic and relational, these modes parallel the methodologies of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and the National Center of Historical Memory (CNMH) in eliciting and conveying victims’ testimonies. When translated into the verbal-pictorial language of comics, mnemonic modes provide models for understanding how victims articulate and share their experiences within the broader historical narrative of the Colombian armed conflict.

1.6. Methodology

A useful paradigm to explore how documentary comics depict historical memory in Colombia is Seymour Chatman’s (1978) distinction between “story and discourse”²⁶, in which “[t]he aesthetic object of a narrative is the story articulated by the discourse” (Chatman, 1978, p. 27). Accordingly, the story—the *what*—refers to the content or events of the narrative, while the discourse—the *how*—refers to the way in which that content is presented.²⁷ Historical context provides the *story*. It operates as an extratextual layer which, although external to the comics themselves, remains linked with them. This historical background, together with mnemonic modes and victims’ memories, shapes the covers, paratextual elements, and graphic narratives of the three comics in the primary corpus.

²⁶ The binary “story and discourse” is also known by other terms or “cognates,” as Prince (2020) calls them, such as content and plane, narrated and narrating, fiction and narration, and fabula and *sjuzhet*. For a detailed discussion of these and other cognates, see Prince (1989/2020, p. 111).

²⁷ Following narrative structuralists in the Aristotelian tradition, such as Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gérard Genette, Seymour Chatman draws a distinction between the *what* and the *how* of a narrative. Using Chatman’s terminology, the *what* describes the *story*, while the *how* denotes the way the story is represented. In other words, the *discourse* depicts the *story*.

In this research, the historical context situates the conflict within a broader global historical, political, and sociocultural landscape, portraying it as a real sociocultural crisis. By grounding the comics of the primary corpus in a historical reality, the context facilitates the conceptualization, organization, and articulation of the central theme: the representation of historical memory work and marginalized memories through the medium of comics. Understanding this historical backdrop is critical, as it provides the real-world foundation for the memories of marginalized communities to be evoked, documented, and brought to life in comics.

The discourse relates to the formal and structural dimensions of the comics in question. It encompasses not only the graphic narratives themselves but also their covers and paratextual components, which play a crucial role in introducing, contextualizing, organizing, and narrating the story. This twofold idea of “story and discourse” has proven to be an indispensable analytical paradigm for understanding all narrative forms (cf. Herman, 2002, p. 13), including comics.

Adopting Chatman’s perspective on discourse, this research utilizes a case study approach to conduct textual analyses of the documentary comics *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*. These works are examined as media that extend beyond narration in both graphic and verbal forms, incorporating covers and paratexts to organize and document the memories of oppressed rural populations in Colombia. Through these case studies, the dissertation demonstrates how comics capture and convey historical memory work, encompassing the evocation and activation of recollections and collective memory, as well as the testimonies and experiences of marginalized rural communities affected by the conflict.

The interplay between story and discourse advocates for a dual focus on context and text-oriented approaches that highlight close and wide reading in the analysis of the comics in the primary corpus. According to Wolfgang Iser, “the reading and studying of [a] literary text (close reading)” goes hand in hand with the “co-reading [...] of other texts, literary and non-literary texts alike (wide reading), by means of which the broader historical and cultural context of the literary text under scrutiny can be approached” (2000, p. 200). Close and wide reading involves analyzing both the comics’ verbal-pictorial forms and the Colombian cultural, historical, and political contexts they represent. Accordingly, Iser emphasizes that a literary text inherently embodies its historical and cultural dimensions, making both the text and its context equally “readable” (cf. 2000, p. 200). It follows that both the verbal-pictorial forms of the analyzed comics and the contexts in which they are embedded deserve a parallel and complementary analysis.

This dissertation proposes a research design with three steps: (1) exploring Colombia's conflict and historical memory, (2) analyzing comics as a medium of memory, and (3) studying the case studies at three levels: covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives. The first step of the methodology situates Colombia's comics within their historical context to examine how they function as mediums of historical memory. It focuses on land tenure conflicts across four key periods—Colonial Times, the 19th-century Civil Wars, *La Violencia* (1940s–1970s), and *Las Violencias* (1980s–present)—to understand the socio-political forces shaping rural memory. This historical backdrop helps interpret the verbal-pictorial content of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*, highlighting the collective memory of marginalized communities. This step aligns with the concept of “Big History” as a framework for understanding the psychic and social dimensions of the past (cf. Salberg, 2024, p. 18).

The second step examines how the formal elements of comics—both visual (e.g., drawing styles, panels, frames) and verbal (e.g., captions, speech balloons)—contribute to the representation of memory at the individual and collective levels. It explores how these verbal-pictorial forms evoke, share, and narrativize personal and communal experiences. The third step involves a close and wide reading of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*, focusing on how each work constructs memory through distinct methodologies. *Historia gráfica* draws on Participatory Action Research (PAR) to depict peasant movements on Colombia's Atlantic coast, while *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* reflect CNMH-driven approaches to documenting rural memory. All three comics use graphic storytelling to foreground testimonies of violence, land dispossession, and resistance.

The third step entails a case study of the three selected comics, employing close and wide reading alongside multiple analytical approaches to examine their covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives. This methodology draws on Johannes C. P. Schmid's analysis of frames and framing in documentary comics, which posits that such works reinterpret global crises and critically assess methods of representing facts (Schmid, 2021). This approach facilitates the examination of the primary corpus as media composed of multimodal components with distinct symbolic forms²⁸ that contribute to the study of historical memory. It also enables systematic responses to the main research question and its three sub-questions.

²⁸ Frederik Tygstrup affirms that manifold representations and narratives are “what Ernst Cassirer baptized ‘symbolic forms’ – the images, narratives, and theories through which we make sense of facts. Symbolic forms are interpretative schemes that can turn whatever we apprehend and whatever happens to us into useful experience. This construction and reproduction of symbolic forms, in turn, is a privileged mechanism of worldmaking, as it transforms heterogeneous data and contingent events into—precisely—a world, a universe in which human agency and self-fashioning appear as meaningful and as significant parts of a communal environment (see Goodman; Cassirer)” (2010, p. 87).

The first element of exploration in the three documentary comics is their covers. The analysis focuses on color and the composition of verbal-pictorial components. The study of color draws on Michel Pastoureau's historical perspective, which examines how color and its combinations generate meaning and provide insights into the past (Pastoureau, 2009, 2017, 2023). Additionally, the composition of verbal and pictorial elements on the covers of these comics is explored using Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's concept of "visual composition" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 176). This framework analyzes how verbal and pictorial components interact to create a cohesive visual whole with its own distinct meaning.

The second element of analysis concentrates on paratexts, both textual (e.g., dedication pages, tables of contents, bibliographies) and verbal-pictorial (e.g., frontispieces, inside covers), which serve as material, historical, and research frames. Gérard Genette reminds us that paratexts provide "some degree of materialization, graphic or phonic, which [...] may induce paratextual effects" (Genette, 1997b, p. 3). While not inherently narrative, these elements enrich the reader's comprehension of the historical memory and rural experiences portrayed in the graphic narratives. This section analyzes paratexts through Genette's framework (1997b) and applies insights from Johannes C.P. Schmid's work on paratexts in comics (2021, pp. 65–122).

The third and final element of the study focuses on the graphic narratives in the comics as the primary medium for conveying historical memory and the experiences of Colombian peasant groups. These narratives illustrate how memories are evoked and activated, with methods varying among historically traumatized populations. For rural communities affected by conflict, these processes are essential for recovering, sharing, and narrating their past. Drawing on Casey's phenomenological perspective, three mnemonic modes—recognizing, reminiscing, and reminding—are identified as crucial for activating memories individually and collectively.

The close reading of the comics analyzes how memory is elicited and narrated through the visual and verbal depiction of narrators, characters, settings, and events across panels. This is supported by narratological theories specific to comics²⁹ and by the varied meanings these depictions convey.³⁰ Close reading is complemented by wide reading that incorporates Colombia's historical and socio-political context. The analysis also draws on phenomenological concepts of memory—particularly mnemonic modes—and engages with methodologies like

²⁹ The examination is supported by work on comics narratology by Mikkonen (2017); Gardner and Herman (2011); Domsch, Hassler-Forest, and Vanderbeke (2018); Petersen (2011), among others.

³⁰ Of fundamental importance for analyzing the formal aspects of comics and their meanings in the primary corpus is Scott McCloud's seminal work, *Understanding Comics – The Invisible Art* (1994).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and those used by the *Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica* (CNMH) to understand the reconstruction of historical memory.

The analysis and interpretation of the case studies focus on carefully selected extracts that are particularly significant for addressing the research questions. Randy Duncan points out that, “[s]ignificance is indicated by the frequency of appearance and occurrence at pivotal moments” in the graphic narratives of comics. Thus, images within panels are significant when they occur frequently to become “a visual motif. Such motifs usually have a direct connection to the theme[s] of the narrative[s]” (R. Duncan, 2012, p. 47). Within these graphic narratives, the selected segments function as “blocks of signification” or “units of reading” (Barthes, 1988, pp. 5–6, 1990, p. 44) with their own meanings and contribute to the analysis.

2. The Conflict in Colombia and Historical Memory: History and Memory

Exploring the conflict and historical memory in Colombia is important for three main reasons. First, it underscores the necessity for Colombia to reconstruct its historical memory. This reconstruction helps reveal events that shaped the nation's violent past and impacted entire peasant communities. Second, it provides a concrete context that clarifies the fundamental dynamics of the conflict. This context explains the origins and nature of the event and situates comics within that historical moment. Third, it demonstrates the importance of comics as cultural artifacts that document, represent, and narrate Colombia's historical memory.

To set the stage for this exploration, the following section provides an overview of the historical background of the Colombian conflict, with emphasis on problems of rural land occupation and tenure. These aspects have deep roots in serious disputes over rural land, including ownership and distribution, and form the backdrop for the persistence of inequality throughout Colombia's history. The legacy of colonialism, with practices like 'latifundia and feudalism'³¹, persists in Colombia today, linking past injustices to present challenges.

2.1. Historical Context: Rural Land Disputes in Colombia

The conflict in Colombia is fundamentally linked to the concentration of land ownership, which remains a persistent source of unrest. Although multiple factors contribute to the conflict, the distribution of rural land is particularly significant. As noted by former Minister of Agriculture Juan Camilo Restrepo, "[...] 4.2 % of the land in Colombia (plots of land composed of 5 hectares) belong to 67.6 % of the owners, while 46.5 % of the land (properties of more than 500 hectares) belong to only 0.4 % of the owners"³² (as cited in Giraldo Moreno, 2015, p. 223, my translation). These figures illustrate the pronounced rural land inequality that continues to fuel the conflict.

Today, a small minority in Colombia keeps accumulating land—possibly more than before. Oxfam³³ has raised concerns about the severe state of Colombian rural areas. Its analysis

³¹ In Colombia, historical practices like latifundia and feudalism, inherited from colonial times, persist. Land ownership remains a key source of inequality and conflict, concentrated in the hands of a powerful few. This system, known as latifundia, sees wealthy landowners exploiting the labor of rural peasants, perpetuating social disparities reminiscent of feudal structures. For more on this issue, see Alarcón Barrera (2020), Martínez (2021), and Restrepo Baena (2020).

³² The original reads, "el exministro de [A]gricultura Juan Camilo Restrepo afirma que [...] el 4.2 % de la tierra (parcelas menores de 5 hectáreas) está en manos del 67.6 % de los propietarios, [mientras] que el 46.5 % de la tierra (propiedades de más de 500 hectáreas) la posee el 0.4 % de los propietarios".

³³ The name "Oxfam" originates from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, established in Great Britain in 1942 amid World War II. Oxfam has been dedicated to combating poverty and injustice worldwide in developing nations. For more, visit Oxfam International (2023).

calls Colombia the Latin American country—and even one of the world’s countries—with the most extreme land ownership concentration. Just 1% of the largest farms, owned by wealthy landlords, control 81% of Colombia’s rural land. The report also highlights that about one million peasant households live on plots too small even for a single grazing cow (cf. Paz Cardona, 2018; Roldán, 2022). This has happened after many historical events forced people to move from rural to urban areas. It is necessary to rethink how peasant communities access land if they are to survive. Díaz Díaz and López Bayona note that unequal land distribution patterns go back further than Colombia’s most recent displacement crisis (cf. 2021, p. 62).

Limiting the understanding of the Colombian conflict to armed confrontations misses the ongoing sociopolitical and cultural harm suffered by rural communities. Many factors play a role in Colombia’s conflict, but the concentration and unfair distribution of land stand out as the main triggers for violence, inequality, and poverty. The CNMH report, *Tierras: Balance de la contribución del CNMH al esclarecimiento histórico*, states that “social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics interconnect agrarian concerns with violence [in Colombia]”³⁴ (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, p. 9). This chapter outlines four distinct periods: colonial times, the 19th century civil wars, the 20th century period called *La Violencia*, and the period from the 1980s to now, known as *Las Violencias*. Each is examined historically with attention to land possession and concentration issues.

2.1.1. Colonial Times

Conflicts over land occupation in Colombia have deep historical roots, dating back to the colonial period. This was clear during the 16th century colonial period’s ‘centralist governance,’ which marginalized communities both culturally distant from Europeans³⁵ and those in remote regions far from the territory’s center (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2022e, pp. 30–31). Colonial policies of centralism and marginalization helped a privileged minority of Spanish descent with a Eurocentric identity rise. The Truth Commission calls this “the colonial legacy” of Colombia’s conflict (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2022d, p. 44). This legacy empowered a mainly white, Eurocentric seigniorial class, who gained power and wealth through land acquisition, marginalization, and structural racism.

³⁴ The original reads, “procesos sociales, económicos, políticos y culturales [...] vinculan la cuestión agraria con la violencia”.

³⁵ During the colonial period and throughout the struggle for independence from Spain, approximately 80% of the population of *La Nueva Granada* – as the Spanish Crown identified the territories that comprised Colombia today – were communities of African, Indigenous, mixed-race (*mulatos*), and mestizo backgrounds. This predominantly marginalized, humiliated, and enslaved population largely remained illiterate (cf. Munera, 2020, pp. 102–103).

The Spanish set up land control systems that Colombia's seigniorial class later used, making land dispossession a persistent issue since colonial times. This became systematized after independence. Two systems from the 16th century highlight this trend: the *resguardos*³⁶ and the *realengas*.³⁷ Alfredo Molano says the *resguardos* began as a way for the Crown to protect indigenous people from slavery. However, Molano points out that the *resguardos* evolved into "classic mechanisms of land dispossession", designed to deprive rural lands of native communities and subject them "to labor under servile conditions"³⁸ (Molano Bravo, 2015, p. 155, my translation).

Another land-control system during the colonial era was the *realengas*. Marco Palacios explains that the Crown used *realengas*—lands titled to the King of Spain—to expand its property holdings. Over time, this evolved into the 'hacienda regime' in rural Colombia, explained further below in 2.1.3. In this system, landowners controlled vast areas. They excluded peasants from ownership, making them cheap laborers or tenant farmers on small plots.³⁹ The growth of haciendas led to the continued expropriation of land from peasants. Large landowners who owned haciendas left peasants little chance to own their own land (cf. Palacios, 2011, p. 75).

Land appropriation and control established by a powerful elite in colonial times intensified over the centuries. According to the Truth Commission, after 1810, the colonial period ended, and a centralized republican state began. However, from 1810 to 1886, *La Nueva Granada* did not undo the oppressive structures facing ethnic communities. Such communities stayed marginalized from key political and territorial affairs. For example, the *resguardos* recognized in the 16th century and ancestral indigenous territories were later called wastelands (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2022d, pp. 44–45).

Patterns of land accumulation inherited in colonial times further established socio-economic disparities, consolidating the dominance of the white Colombian elite while exacerbating the marginalization of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities as well as peasants. By the 17th and 18th centuries, a discernible political-administrative framework began to take shape, mirroring the control and dominion exerted over land akin to the imperial rule observed in the Spanish-held territories of the Indies (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2022e, p. 31).

³⁶ *Resguardos* can be understood as indigenous reserves.

³⁷ *Realengas* were territories taken in *La Nueva Granada* and entitled to the Spanish Crown.

³⁸ The original reads, "los Resguardos [fueron] en realidad [...] un medio para despojarlos [a las comunidades indígenas] de las tierras" y hacerlos "trabajar en condiciones serviles."

³⁹ For a thorough understanding of *haciendas* in Colombia, particularly those that used slave labor, see *El estudio de las haciendas: Un balance historiográfico* by Ahumada Escobar (2010).

After colonial times, wealth was consolidated among a few castes by the accumulation of rural land, first from indigenous people and later from peasants. Antonio García Nossa (1977) calls this a “lordly republic” (*república señorial*), similar to Western Europe’s feudal systems. Power was preserved with clientelism. This meant peasants and townspeople were controlled to keep local elites in charge, above central government authorities. This old, unjust system still exists in places like the Caribbean plains and the inter-Andean valleys.⁴⁰

The legacy of inequitable land ownership and distribution in Colombia stems from feudalistic principles introduced by Spanish conquistadors. Over time, the seigniorial republic system, as García Nossa notes, gave way to the entrenched hacienda regime in rural Colombia. Darío Fajardo argues that significant socioeconomic changes have occurred from independence to the present. The economy initially centered on the exploitation and export of minerals, timber, and bark. It later shifted to monocultures such as tobacco, coffee, bananas, and sugar. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, illicit crops like marijuana and coca became significant products in this evolving economic landscape. However, these historical patterns have hindered the development and progress of legal small- and medium-sized rural properties (cf. Fajardo, 2014, pp. 6–7) since colonial times.

Colombia’s longstanding rural land ownership system, dating back to colonial times, reflects the concentration of power and wealth among a privileged few. It also highlights the systemic marginalization of indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasant communities. These groups have often been displaced from their ancestral lands by a powerful socio-political and economic elite. Colombia’s geography is predominantly agrarian, which makes the issue more severe, with nearly 80% of municipalities in rural areas and 94% of the nation’s territory (cf. Díaz Díaz & López Bayona, 2021, p. 63, as cited in Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo - Colombia Rural). Socioeconomic disparities now persist in both rural and urban areas. Many displaced communities in urban centers struggle to access jobs, resources, and political opportunities. The impact of land theft and forced displacement, which began in colonial times, continued through the 19th century and still shapes contemporary Colombian society. Although new actors and dynamics are involved, the legacy endures.

⁴⁰ For more information, see *Colombia: Esquema de una república señorial* (García Nossa, 1977). The book examines the historical context of the conflict between the seigniorial rule of the Colombian Republic following independence and the efforts of grassroots sectors to implement democratic reforms in rural areas. García Nossa contends that Colombia, historically governed by a few ‘seigniories,’ has consistently resisted significant agrarian and democratic reforms, except for the coffee revolution.

2.1.2. Civil Wars of the 19th Century

The feudal political and economic system of rural land use, initially established by the Spanish colonial rulers and perpetuated by Colombia's seigniorial elite, persisted well into the 19th century. This established system laid the foundation for widespread inequality and social unrest. Eventually, ideological divisions gave rise to the liberal and conservative parties, which vehemently disagreed over governance and land distribution. According to David Bushnell, a bipartisan policy emerged long before Colombia's economy and cultural identity had fully developed. Essentially, both dominant parties shaped the nation in line with their own agendas, disregarding the needs and aspirations of the populace. Concurrently, the political elites were undermining the very republic they purported to forge (cf. Bushnell, 2007, pp. 78–79). Over time, the ideological differences between the two political parties escalated into a full-fledged armed conflict through the 19th-century civil wars, which would shape Colombia's political, economic, and social landscape for decades to come.

As both parties vied for control during the 19th century, Colombia's sociopolitical landscape became increasingly polarized, exacerbating social tensions and fostering a climate of mistrust and division. In fact, Colombia experienced intense strife as the two dominant political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, fought to resolve their ideological differences.⁴¹ The rivalry between these two parties stemmed from diverse pretexts, including the Church-State relationship, the abolition of slavery, and the preferred political organization, whether federal or centralist, for the nation (cf. Sánchez G, 2007, p. 17). Such disputes plunged the nation into internal armed conflicts, creating latent tensions and divisions within Colombian society. These conflicts affected the whole country, especially its civilian population, whose social and economic aspirations were completely overshadowed by the narrow self-interests of the ruling elite.

The internal armed conflicts instigated by the liberal and conservative factions were initially concentrated in specific regions of the country, including *Cundinamarca*, *Santander*, *Cauca*, *Antioquia*, *Tolima*, and *Boyacá* (cf. Pérez Mutis, 2012, p. 171). These confrontations sparked significant internal mobilization among rural peasants, eventually leading to disputes over landownership. Adolfo Pérez Mutis contends that government presence was predominantly centralized in the country's heartland, conspicuously overlooking burgeoning

⁴¹ For more, see Bushnell (2007); Deas (2007); Jaramillo (2007); LeGrand (2007) and Pérez Mutis (2012). It is also crucial to emphasize, as David Bushnell affirms, that longstanding divisions between the two major political factions since the 19th century have rendered the Colombian political landscape particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of violence. Additionally, the Colombian populace has often found itself politically, socially, and economically marginalized, with power concentrated in the hands of a select, influential minority (cf. 2007, p. 73).

tensions in other regions, such as the Atlantic coast and the Eastern Plains (*Los Llanos Orientales*). As these conflicts escalated, political party leaders and economic elites seized the limelight and disregarded the dire implications of war on rural civilian populations. This myopic prioritization marginalized rural communities, perpetuating the dominance of Colombia's entrenched political, economic, and social elite in the center of the country (cf. Pérez Mutis, 2012, p. 171).

One of the most remembered internal hostilities at the end of the 19th century was the Thousand Days' War, between October 17th, 1899, and November 21st, 1902. It signified not only the loss of human lives, but also the loss of a significant region of the country, Panama. Jerónimo Ríos Sierra affirms that at the end of the 19th century, approximately 100,000 people died in a population of no more than three million inhabitants (cf. Ríos Sierra, 2017, p. 23). The devastating loss of civilian lives and the astounding economic burdens inflicted by war left the country staggering. Consequently, calls for peace intensified, underscoring the urgent need for both parties to prioritize negotiations and seek a resolution (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 208).

Amidst the loss of civilian lives, Colombia found itself grappling not only with a dramatic internal strife but also with the intruding influence of the U.S. intervention, which further eroded its territorial sovereignty. David Bushnell argues that ill-advised decisions made during the Thousand Days' War compelled the conservative government to sign the "Wisconsin Treaty" in 1902, which marked the war's conclusion. However, this treaty ceded full control of the Panama Isthmus to the United States for the construction of the Panama Canal. This decision proved devastating, as it led the United States and several other Latin American nations to recognize Panama's separation from Colombia (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 209–212).

The Thousand Days' War represented a catastrophic chapter in Colombia's history, resulting in territorial disintegration marked by the loss of Panama and the neglect of other Colombian regions. Pérez Mutis points out that the conflict left the nation in ruins, characterized by widespread devastation, a staggering death toll, and a discredited government. Most significantly, it sowed the seeds of inherited hatreds and animosities that would fuel the next cycle of violence that plagued Colombia throughout the 20th century (cf. Pérez Mutis, 2012, pp. 170–171). Consequently, after the resolution of the 19th century civil wars between conservatives and liberals, the 20th century would witness a resurgence of tensions, this time centering around contentious issues of land ownership and distribution, which set the stage for a new era of catastrophic social unrest known historically in Colombia as the period of *La Violencia*.

2.1.3. *La Violencia* (1940s – 1970s)

Patterns of land appropriation in Colombia, which originated in colonial times and exacerbated during the conflicts of the 19th century, would intensify in a manner that was increasingly exclusionary and socially marginalizing throughout the 20th century. Particularly in the first years of this century, Colombia witnessed an unregulated land appropriation by a select few, profoundly affecting most of the population. It is worth noting that the rural populace in Colombia, deeply rooted in agrarian traditions, relied heavily on their lands for sustenance and livelihood. Consequently, waves of land expropriation intensified existing socioeconomic disparities that further marginalized vulnerable rural communities and perpetuated cycles of poverty, disenfranchisement, and violence.

Laws passed during this period, under the conservative party's governance, were detrimental to the popular classes in the countryside. These policies primarily served to bolster the wealth and influence of the elite classes at the expense of peasant, marginalized communities. Land redistribution schemes disproportionately favored the already powerful and rich. For instance, the implementation of Law 104 of 1919 authorized the allocation of *resguardos* to privileged classes and large landowners, while simultaneously imposing punitive measures against Indigenous individuals who attempted to impede this land allocation process (cf. Molano Bravo, 2015, p. 155). Similarly, the vast expansion of *haciendas*⁴² onto previously uncultivated lands, the so-called wastelands, coupled with extensive land grants to entrepreneurs and large landowners, pushed peasants to migrate increasingly farther beyond Colombian agricultural frontiers (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2022e, p. 38; Fajardo, 2015, p. 100). This way, the colonial concept of *realengas*, lands designated for the Spanish Crown, evolved over time into the economic system of the *hacienda*.

The figure of the *hacienda* began to take hold at the beginning of the 20th century, before the outbreak of violence in the 1940s, and has since consolidated among Colombia's socio-political and economic elites to the present day. It is important to consider that coffee and cattle, as well as other commodities such as bananas, sugar, and petroleum, became prominent in Colombia's agricultural landscape during the 1920s. Not surprisingly, the *hacienda* served as the hub for controlling the production and distribution of these commodities. Consequently, rural land began to be monopolized by a few, while labor exploitation and poverty propelled peasants towards the colonization of uncultivated territories (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria

⁴² Alfredo Molano points out that, haciendas in rural Colombia before 1936 were true "independent republics" where "the three powers were carried out: the administrative, legislative, and judicial" (2015, p. 157).

Histórica, 2018, p. 19; Comisión de la Verdad, 2022e, pp. 38–39; Molano Bravo, 2015, pp. 153–157).

Peasant communities were gradually leaving the expanding agricultural estates owned by *hacienda* proprietors. According to historian Catherine LeGrand, this migration began with peasants who had worked on large landowners' estates in the cold, highland regions of *Antioquia*, *Boyacá*, and *Cauca*. Seeking better opportunities, they moved from these cooler mountainous areas to warmer, lower-altitude territories (cf. LeGrand, 2007, p. 122). This prompted an increasing number of peasant families to seek independence and self-sufficiency, leading to the establishment of small villages on previously unoccupied lands.

These rural settlements experienced a notable increase in value, attracting large landowners and *hacienda* proprietors. In colonized lands, settlers initially grew crops for self-sufficiency and local markets but later expanded into large-scale production (cf. LeGrand, 2007, p. 123). Over time, as *hacienda* owners faced labor shortages and increasing agricultural competition, they resorted to coercive measures such as binding labor to their haciendas, enclosing rural lands with barbed wire, and unlawfully seizing already cultivated land from peasant settlers (cf. LeGrand, 2007, pp. 124–126). As cultivation expanded in wastelands, peasant communities faced dispossession of their colonized territories, witnessing the consolidation of large estates and the concentration of land ownership. Exclusionary forms of land appropriation and tenure empowered, what Darío Fajardo terms, “land valorization by cycles,” characterized by the sequence: “colonization-conflict-migration-colonization” (Fajardo, 1993, p. 198). This precipitated the emergence of diverse social conflicts across Colombia's rural regions.

In addition to the widespread land grabbing and exploitation of peasant labor on expansive *haciendas*, Colombian workers also faced adversity within foreign corporations. Antonio Caballero (cf. 2016a, pp. 16–17) and Alfredo Molano (cf. 2015, p. 154) shed light on the operations of two U.S. mega-companies that received preferential treatment from the Colombian government and, consequently, subjected their workers to abuse: the Tropical Oil Company and the United Fruit Company.⁴³ Another foreign enterprise, *La Casa Arana*, of Anglo-Peruvian origin, engaged in the exploitation of indigenous *Huitoto* communities in the

⁴³ Firstly, the Tropical Oil Company, a subsidiary of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company, focused on oil extraction. It established an oil enclave in the two of Barrancabermeja. Conversely, headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, the United Fruit Company specialized in large-scale banana cultivation. This company was established in the Caribbean region of Magdalena. Both corporations flourished in the early and mid-20th century and controlled vast territories in Colombia and in other Latin American countries. Due to their poor working conditions, they encountered significant labor-management conflicts. For more, see Brungardt (1995), Comisión de la Verdad (2022e, p. 39), Junguito Bonnet (2022), and Zambrano Guachetá (2023).

Amazon jungles of Putumayo for rubber extraction. This practice inflicted severe exploitation and abuse upon this indigenous population that pushed them to the brink of extinction (cf. Caballero, 2016a, p. 17). In the wake of all these injustices, rural communities responded.

The responses of rural communities, peasant laborers, and settlers to abuse were diverse. It involved a multitude of actors and manifested in various forms of resistance, protests, and organizations. These forms ranged from solidarity and grassroots movements to labor strikes and political alliances with indigenous peoples and other marginalized populations. Tragically, as it will be seen later, some peasant communities were practically obliged to resort to armed insurrections that would mark the onset of the Colombian armed conflict in the 1960s. “Resistance” among peasant settlers primarily arose from “a profound sense of injustice and the firm belief that landowners [of extensive land holdings] had amassed their wealth through illegitimate methods”⁴⁴ (LeGrand, 1988, p. 94, my translation).

The diversity of actions reflects the complexity of the difficulties and challenges experienced by rural communities. The righteous action of peasant settlers was to get informed about their rights. This becomes important when one examines the unfair situation that peasants faced compared to large landowners. LeGrand asserts that three factors basically hindered peasants and settlers from resisting exploitative and abusive practices: marginalization, poverty, and most significantly, illiteracy (cf. 1988, p. 94). Despite these challenges, groups of peasants received assistance in drafting petitions, making demands, and informing the government to safeguard their land from unlawful seizure by large landowners and big multinationals (cf. Fajardo, 2015, p. 102; LeGrand, 1988, pp. 94–95).

Another significant response occurred between 1922 and 1945, characterized by the struggles of the indigenous group led by *El Indio Quintín Lame*.⁴⁵ *Quintín Lame*’s efforts extended beyond mere land rights, encompassing broader engagement with indigenous identity and the educational empowerment of indigenous communities in Colombia (cf. Caballero, 2016a, pp. 18–21; Molano Bravo, 2015, p. 155). The indigenous struggles embodied by figures like Quintín Lame were groundbreaking and progressive, especially considering the historical

⁴⁴ The original reads, “[l]a resistencia [...] provenía “de un profundo sentimiento de injusticia [y] de la convicción de que los propietarios [de grandes extensiones de tierra] habían obtenido su fortuna por medios ilegítimos.”

⁴⁵ Manuel Quintín Lame (Popayán, Cauca, October 26, 1880 – Ortega, Tolima, October 7, 1967) stands out as one of the foremost indigenous leaders of Colombia in the 20th century. A self-educated individual, he mastered Spanish, literacy, legal knowledge, and advocacy skills, becoming an advocate for justice for indigenous peoples in Colombia. Lame is renowned for using the *Mingas Indígenas*, a series of meetings that emphasized the imperative for indigenous people to assert their rights. Under his leadership, indigenous communities advocated for land rights, an end to exploitative labor practices, the protection of indigenous territories, education for indigenous peoples, and the empowerment of women within indigenous societies. For more about Quintín Lame, see Ramos Ruíz (2018).

context where indigenous peoples were often marginalized and treated as inferior. Despite insufficient progress, indigenous communities persevere in their fight to keep their land and cultural identity, prioritizing the safeguarding of their memories and testimonies above all else.⁴⁶

The struggles mentioned above found resonance among workers who had endured exploitation across sectors nationwide. Prior to the 1930s, workers, including artisans, railroad employees from cities like *Girardot* and *Bogotá*, harvesters in *Santander*, and tenant farmers in *Huila* as well as members of various unions, mobilized through organized marches, strikes, and blockades, demonstrating solidarity in their collective call for improved labor conditions and equitable treatment (cf. Molano Bravo, 2015, p. 154). In the struggle for workers' rights in Colombia, the female figure of María Cano (12 August 1887 - 26 April 1967) stands out. A prominent member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Revolucionario* (PSR)), Cano was a pioneering advocate for workers' and human rights, especially for women's rights in Colombia (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 243). María Cano's significant contribution to the 1928 banana zone strike stands as one of her most important achievements.

Among the multitude of strikes and marches in Colombian history, two persist in the country's historical memory: those led by the workers of the Tropical Oil Co. and Banana United Co. (cf. Caballero, 2016a, pp. 16–17; Junguito Bonnet, 2022, pp. 228–229; LeGrand, 2007, p. 131). For example, the strike staged by Banana United Co. workers culminated in a massacre perpetrated by the Colombian military, an event condemned by the liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán before the Congress of the Republic (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 244–245; Caballero, 2016a, p. 17) and that years later would be represented in an episode of *One hundred years of solitude* (García Márquez, 1967/2005).

The factors discussed above led to struggles by peasants, indigenous peoples, and workers, culminating in the formation of political groups. All these aspects would contribute to stopping the hegemony of the conservative party that had dominated the government for the initial two decades of the 20th century.⁴⁷ Prior to 1930, practically all institutions, such as the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the armed forces, were controlled by the conservative party (cf. Caballero, 2016b, p. 1). Besides, this period observed the establishment of the first peasant leagues, the expansion of workers' unions, and a growing affinity of peasants and settlers with

⁴⁶ For more on the contribution of ethnic communities to the historical memory in Colombia, see *El Aporte de los Pueblos Indígenas en la Construcción de Pais: Pueblos Étnicos* by Comisión de la Verdad (2020).

⁴⁷ David Bushnell identifies other factors that contributed to the decline of the conservative party's dominance. These include the massacre of banana plantations, the accumulated fatigue from years in power, and, notably, the catastrophic collapse of Wall Street in 1929, which also inflicted significant damage on the Colombian economy. For more, see Bushnell (1994/2005, pp. 244–245).

leftist parties, signaling a profound shift in political dynamics towards more inclusive and progressive ideologies.⁴⁸ This marked the ascent of the liberal faction to power in the 1930s, following two decades mainly characterized by widespread abuses in rural Colombia that had started years ago.

The rise of the liberal faction was a response to the injustices and hardships faced by rural communities. Accordingly, significant reforms to address social and economic inequalities were implemented. An important legislative measure was Law 200 of 1936, recognized as the country's initial agrarian reform, designed to address land tenure issues and mitigate escalating conflicts between landowners and peasants (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 257; LeGrand, 2007, p. 135). This law aligned with the initiative to acknowledge the “social function of property,” aiming to limit the dominant individualistic view of property ownership, particularly land tenure (cf. Alviar García, 2012, p. 121). Accordingly, Law 200 comprised various components, including legitimizing land occupation for peasants who had seized uncultivated land on haciendas, imposing increased taxes on landowners with unproductive holdings, and facilitating the purchase of private land for redistribution among peasants, deprived of land, enabling them to cultivate it, among other measurements (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 257–259; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, pp. 20–21). This law mitigated the discontent of farm workers and peasant settlers. However, it would unintentionally trigger the period of violence that erupted in the 1940s.

Following the administration of Alfonso López Pumarejo in 1933, Laureano Gómez Castro, a prominent figure within the conservative party, urged his fellow partisans and conservative Colombians to make the “Liberal Republic unlivable” through various means, including abstention from voting and resorting to different forms of violence if deemed necessary.⁴⁹ Law 200 also instigated renewed land-related confrontations. Alfredo Molano and Catherine Legrand highlight the ambiguity surrounding the concept of “social function of property” implicit in this law. While peasants interpreted it as a form of granting them rights to land regardless of formal titles, landowners and hacienda owners perceived it as a menacing threat, prompting them to resort to armed measures to defend their properties and rural lands

⁴⁸ As shown by Catherine LeGrand (2007, p. 134) and Alfredo Molano (2015, p. 154), peasants identified with several left-wing political parties, including *La Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria* (UNIR), *El Partido Comunista de Colombia* (PCC), *El Partido Socialista Revolucionario*, and *El Partido Agrarista Nacional* (PAN).

⁴⁹ Laureano Gómez's purpose of “making the republic unlivable” (*hacer invivable la república*) was stated in a speech on September 15, 1940, and broadcast by the National Radio of Colombia. In this speech, Gomez practically declared civil war on the social programs promoted by President López Pumarejo. For more, see Vélez Cabrera (2021). Furthermore, for an in-depth examination into the consequential role and enduring legacy of Laureano Gómez in shaping Colombia's political and social landscape, including an unprecedented spiral of violence, see Maya and Albarracín (2018).

(cf. LeGrand, 1988, p. 216; Molano Bravo, 2015, p. 159). López's presidency would ultimately lead to profound polarization in the country, culminating in the 1938 electoral victory of the Liberal candidate Eduardo Santos.

The escalating political tensions between conservatives and liberals, including the enactment of the agrarian reform expressed in Law 200, provoked unprecedented violence across rural Colombia. LeGrand notes that by 1944, in response to decreasing agricultural production and a growing labor shortage in rural areas, specific measures were implemented. Consequently, Law 100 of 1944 was introduced, seemingly to safeguard landowners' interests by ensuring their dominion over land and reinstating their authority to exploit peasant labor through sharecropping arrangements in haciendas (cf. LeGrand, 1988, p. 219). Likewise, "this new legislation added complexity to peasants reclaiming land from haciendas," while the 1945 labor law "expanded the scope of 'public service' enterprises, within which strikes were prohibited"⁵⁰ (Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 263–265, my translation). These laws revived old disputes between large landowners and agricultural workers, including peasant settlers.

The widespread discontent among peasants and laborers was intensified with the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. Gaitán had gained prominence among the Colombian popular classes. This was due not only to the role he had played denouncing the United Fruit Co., but also to his strong affinity with peasants and workers, which aroused apprehension among Colombian political and economic elites who traditionally held him in disdain (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 268–269). An example of Gaitán's connection with popular classes was the organization of the renowned "March of Silence" (*la Marcha del Silencio*) on February 7, 1948, held in *Plaza de Bolívar*, where he condemned the massacre of peasants and called for an end to bloodshed in the Colombian countryside (cf. Molano Bravo, 2015, p. 164). Two months later, Gaitán was murdered, initiating the era commonly referred to as *La Violencia*.

The assassination of Gaitán marked the onset of *La Violencia* period, during which peasant communities once again bore the brunt of violence. While April 9 is commonly referred to as the *Bogotazo*, similar violent demonstrations were not limited to urban centers but also spread across the country, particularly in regions with a liberal majority (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 276–277). It is important to clarify that violent acts against the peasant population, as illustrated in this chapter, had already been ongoing for some time. However,

⁵⁰ The original reads, "[u]na revisión de la reforma agraria de 1936, que data de 1944, en realidad hizo más complicado para los *campesinos* el proceso de reclamación de terrenos de haciendas, y una nueva ley laboral de 1945 [...] amplió la definición de empresas de "servicio público", en las cuales las huelgas estaban prohibidas."

following Gaitán's assassination, a new wave of violence, marked by unprecedented brutality, would consume rural Colombia. Various terms have been employed to describe this tumultuous period, including “an undeclared civil war” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018, p. 22) , “a cataclysm” (LeGrand, 1988, p. 219), or even “hell itself” (Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 276).

The era known as *La Violencia* paints a harrowing picture of the atrocities that ravaged Colombia's rural landscapes. This dark chapter in Colombian history is marked by widespread massacres of innocent civilians, forced destitution and exodus of peasant communities to urban centers, and the resurgence of assaults by wealthy landowners against settlers and peasants. It also gave rise to a breed of criminals who instilled terror and executed peasants with impunity, accompanied by death threats, burning of properties, and homesteads. Besides, *La Violencia* marked the relentless displacement of families into even more precarious territories, among other violent actions.⁵¹

At the end of the 1950s, a new political strategy emerged to address the escalating violence and the rise of guerrilla groups: an alliance between the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties. Such an alliance was known as the National Front (*El Frente Nacional*). In this agreement, which lasted 16 years from 1958 to 1974, the two parties take turns selecting the president to rule the country every four years (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, pp. 306–308; Cartagena, 2016, pp. 70–71; Molano Bravo, 2015, pp. 178–182). The bipartite coalition had to address the social problem left by years of state neglect in the Colombian countryside regarding land ownership. Consequently, efforts were made to provide material reparations to peasants affected by violence.

Some important attempts and achievements can be highlighted during the so-called *Frente Nacional*. Law 135 of 1962, known as the Social Agrarian Reform, was enacted. According to Héctor Sebastián Alarcón Barrera, this law sought above all to bring order to the regime of *baldíos* (public uncultivated lands) and improve the relationship between production and ownership. This law established the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (*Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria – INCORA*) to implement a public land policy in Colombia. Notably, the law did not explicitly mention the “social function of property” principle

⁵¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the violence that unfolded during this period, see Bushnell (1994/2005, pp. 275–302); LeGrand (1988, pp. 219–226); Pécaut (2007); and Sánchez G (2007). The most comprehensive study of the period of *La Violencia* in the Colombian countryside is compiled in the two volumes of *La violencia en Colombia: Estudio de un proceso social*, authored by Germán Guzmán, Orlando Fals Borda, and Eduardo Umaña Lunaque (1977a); (1977b).

acknowledged in Law 200 of 1936. Unfortunately, Law 135, like Law 200, proved ineffective due to the political influence of large landowners (cf. Alarcón Barrera, 2020, p. 187).

Another attempt was a research project on violence against peasants. Here, it is germane to recognize the establishment of the ‘Commission of Investigation into the Causes of Violence in Colombia,’⁵² resulting in the renowned study *La Violencia en Colombia: Estudio de un Proceso Social* (Guzman Campos et al., 1977a, 1977b). Likewise, the Colombian Association of Peasant Users (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos – ANUC*) was founded. This association marked a significant milestone, since, until now, it is recognized as the most influential peasant movement in Colombian history (cf. Alarcón Barrera, 2020, p. 188; Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 128–131). In conclusion, *El Frente Nacional* marked the end of violence between the Liberal and Conservative parties. However, new forms of violence emerged in the Colombian countryside (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 309) with the rise of guerrilla groups such as FARC-EP⁵³ and ELN⁵⁴ (cf. Molano Bravo, 2015, pp. 182–191; Ríos Sierra, 2017, p. 20).

As time passed, numerous peasants took up arms to resist the relentless assault of wealthy landowners. Previously, it was underscored that land theft gave rise to diverse forms of peasant resistance. Contrary to the peaceful nature of many of these grassroots movements, actions perpetrated by landowners and corporations favored armed support and were often marked by aggression and violence. Regrettably, a significant number of peasants also found themselves compelled to resort to arms as a means of resistance.

The escalation in armed struggle among the peasantry in Colombia underscores the severity of their difficulties in relation to land grabbing and the constant attacks by the socioeconomic and political elites. All sorts of injustices, coupled with systematic oppression and the relentless land invasion of powerful landowners on their rural land, left many with little choice but to take up arms in defense of their livelihoods and basic rights. Here, it is paramount to underscore that violence is inherently unjustifiable. Nonetheless, when examining the systematic and historical assaults on the peasant population, it becomes evident that they were tragically left with no alternative.

In numerous regions of Colombia, particularly in marginalized areas, guerrilla groups began to establish a presence over time. In specific regions of *Sumapaz*, *Tolima*, *Antioquia*, *los Llanos Orientales* (the Eastern Plains), *Huila*, and *Córdoba*, some peasants organized guerrilla

⁵² In Spanish, *la comisión de investigación de las causas actuales de la Violencia en Colombia*.

⁵³ Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (Armed revolutionary forces of Colombia – Army of the people).

⁵⁴ Ejército de Liberación Nacional (Army of National Liberation).

groups and units to protect themselves against assaults orchestrated by the conservative government (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 280; LeGrand, 1988, p. 220). Over time, these armed peasant groups grew significantly. By the mid-1950s, their numbers swelled to between 40,000 and 50,000 combatants, surpassing the size of the Colombian army, which consisted of no more than 25,000 soldiers at that time (cf. Ramsey, 2000, p. 206). The army purportedly acted on behalf of powerful local landowners, perpetuating the elite's monopolization of land (cf. LeGrand, 1988, p. 220). Alfredo Molano corroborates this account, offering a succinct depiction of the uprisings among peasants who resorted to armed resistance against forced displacements, land invasions, and the oppressive actions of landowners, frequently aided by the Colombian armed forces (cf. Molano Bravo, 2015, pp. 169–175).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of guerrilla groups emerged, significantly shaping Colombia's conflict landscape. Key formations included the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* – ELN) on July 4, 1964, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* – FARC) in May 1965, the Popular Liberation Army (*Ejército Popular de Liberación* – EPL) in 1967, and the guerrilla group M-19 on April 19, 1973.⁵⁵ Among these groups, the FARC stands out as a guerrilla organization with a primarily peasant constituency. It advocated agrarian reform aimed at reshaping the rural social fabric, granting peasants the right to work and reside on agricultural land, while imposing restrictions on large landowners' expansive holdings (cf. Bushnell, 1994/2005, p. 331; Molano Bravo, 2015, pp. 186–187; Pizarro, 2006).

La Violencia deeply impacted rural Colombia, driven by land disputes involving elites, corporations, and peasants. Initially peaceful, peasant struggles gave rise to guerrilla movements by the late 1970s, ending *La Violencia* and ushering in a new phase of conflict. In the 1980s, the rise of paramilitary groups and illicit crop cultivation intensified the violence, marking the beginning of the period known as *Las Violencias*.

2.1.4. *Las Violencias* (the 1980s – Now)

This new phase of the conflict is mainly defined by the emergence of two significant variables. Primarily, illegal armed factions known as paramilitaries came into play, while simultaneously, the illicit drug trade gained significant power in Colombia. These two factors practically served as catalysts for the proliferation of additional actors, elements, and forms of extreme violence across the political, social, and economic dimensions. Accordingly, the multifaceted nature of

⁵⁵ For a review of these groups and their impact in Colombia, see Moncayo Cruz (2015) and Ramsey (2000).

this new cycle of violence has led scholars from various disciplines to advocate labeling this period as *Las Violencias*⁵⁶ (cf. Ortiz Sarmiento, 1995, p. 371).

As of the 1980s, paramilitary groups emerged as new violent actors who added a multifaceted dimension to the conflict and worsened the stability of the country. The rise of paramilitarism in the early 1980s represented a significant escalation of violence, particularly in rural areas. Paramilitary groups spiraled out of control due to indirect support from the Colombian state and its legitimate armed forces, as well as backing from influential cattle breeders and large landowners. Additionally, powerful drug traffickers played a pivotal role in the formation and expansion of paramilitary armies in the country over time.

Originally, the Colombian State regarded these illegal groups as a necessary form of violence, as evidenced by certain counterinsurgency measures implemented throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Human Rights Watch, 1993). These policies coincided with the emergence and consolidation of guerrilla factions in the country during the 1980s. The so-called counterinsurgency strategies were primarily aimed at combating and eliminating guerrilla groups. Carlos Ortiz's (1995) illustrates how the administrations of Belisario Betancourt (1982 – 1986) and Virgilio Barco (1986 – 1990) regarded paramilitary groups as a form of “good violence” (*buena violencia*). This perception arose from the belief that the Colombian army alone was insufficient to confront the diverse array of guerrilla groups operating in the country (cf. Ortiz Sarmiento, 1995, pp. 407–408).

The lack of effective state presence enabled paramilitaries to rapidly expand their control in rural areas, escalating violence and complicating conflict dynamics. The state played a direct role in fostering paramilitary groups to combat guerrillas, with support from economically powerful civilians, such as landowners, seeking self-protection against guerrilla threats. During the 1980s and 1990s, guerrilla groups such as FARC-EP and ELN escalated attacks. In response to criminal acts committed by guerrillas, large landowners, cattle breeders, businessmen, and drug barons joined forces to finance private security groups. However, their motivations extended beyond mere protection; they also sought to safeguard political agendas aimed at consolidating their economic and territorial dominance (cf. Ríos Sierra, 2017, pp. 151–153).

Additionally, the funding supplied by drug cartels, which were commencing the establishment of expansive plantations across various rural areas in the country, greatly

⁵⁶ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín calls this period that of the “[Counter]insurgent War” (*Guerra [Contra]insurgente*). According to Gutiérrez Sanín, this period is defined by two significant milestones: first, the emergence of guerrilla movements, followed by a phase resembling a civil war, in which the central focus is on combating guerrilla groups.

enhanced the resources of paramilitary factions. The injection of illicit funds reinforced these groups' financial resources, allowing them to acquire additional weaponry and enlist mercenaries (cf. Reyes Posada, 2007, p. 357). This marked the genesis of what would be termed “the paramilitary project,” a complex criminal network intertwined with military, political, and socioeconomic as well as criminal power structures. The paramilitary project began its expansion into rural regions of Colombia, particularly targeting areas characterized by a profound absence of state presence and governance (cf. Lara Salive, 2018, pp. 38–39; Reyes Posada, 2007, pp. 356–357).

Paramilitary presence was particularly pronounced in regions where drug traffickers held vast estates and extensive land holdings. Some of the regions affected by the presence of illegal actors were *Puerto Boyacá*, areas in the department of Antioquia, and even more marginalized areas of the country, such as the Pacific zone and the Eastern Plains (*Los Llanos Orientales*), among many others (cf. Reyes Posada, 2007, pp. 356–358; Ríos Sierra, 2017, p. 418). By the end of the 1990s, the paramilitary project had solidified its position as the foremost violent actor operating outside the bounds of law in Colombia. It wielded unparalleled power and instigated widespread violence, becoming a frightening force that exerted control over Colombian territory.

The Colombian state further exacerbated the rise of violence and sociopolitical influence of illegal armed groups while granting paramilitary groups a semblance of legitimacy. This was done through Decree 356 of 1994, which permitted the establishment of Private Security and Surveillance Cooperatives (*Cooperativas de Vigilancia y Seguridad Privada*), commonly referred to as *Las Convivir* (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 158). This decree ultimately proved catastrophic for the nation. As highlighted by the Historical Memory Group, the Colombian state found itself incapable or unwilling to confront these insurgent groups and maintain control in the territory with its legitimate forces. While the army actively engaged in offensive operations against FARC guerrillas, it often turned a blind eye to the criminal activities of paramilitary groups operating in the same areas. In 1997, these paramilitary groups were declared unconstitutional (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 158). However, leaders and founders of *Las Convivir*, including Salvatore Mancuso and Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, also known as Jorge 40, among other criminals, went underground and established huge illegal armed forces that instilled fear in rural communities. Within this backdrop, the Castaño family founded the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia - AUC*) (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 158–160).

The expansion and influence of paramilitary groups brought new waves of violence and suffering for the inhabitants of rural communities located in marginalized regions. Many paramilitary blocs were created throughout the Colombian periphery, which further intensified the destabilization and insecurity experienced by local communities.⁵⁷ The sense of insecurity felt by rural communities was closely connected with the threat of land dispossession, which symbolized a menacing “agrarian counter-reform.” As stated by Díaz Díaz and López Bayona, “[t]he expropriation of peasants from their land by illegal armed groups led in fact to an agrarian counter-reform, an event that greatly increased land concentration”⁵⁸ (Díaz Díaz & López Bayona, 2021, pp. 62–63, my translation). This involved not only the loss of their land but also the lives of community members, friends, and even their own.

The inhabitants of these marginalized regions with paramilitary presence endured a reign of terror characterized by widespread land theft, forced displacement, targeted assassinations, and brutal collective massacres. All these crimes were a persistent practice driven primarily by the desire to exploit rural lands for large-scale projects (cf. Díaz Díaz & López Bayona, 2021, p. 63), including the expansion of vast plantations for illegal drugs, especially coca (cf. Reyes Posada, 2007, p. 358).

The repercussions of paramilitary activity, coupled with actions of other violent factions like guerrilla groups, forced numerous families to abandon their homes in search of safety and stability elsewhere. The mass exodus of rural populations to urban areas during this period of the conflict marked one of the largest displacements in Colombia’s history (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016, pp. 275–276; Reyes Posada, 2007, p. 358). This displacement not only has disrupted the lives and livelihoods of those affected but also has brought broader societal and economic implications for the whole country.

During the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, paramilitary groups, in collaboration with political and economic allies, steered the country toward an extreme right ideology. According to the report *¡Basta Ya!*, this period was defined by a political agenda focused on three priorities: combating terrorism, safeguarding private property, and asserting territorial control in regions dominated by guerrilla factions (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 160). This agenda played a significant role in shaping the outcome of the 2002

⁵⁷ Jerónimo Ríos Sierra provides a concise overview of the diverse paramilitary factions and groups that emerged across various regions of the country, each notorious for perpetrating different acts of violence against the civilian population. These atrocities included massacres, targeted assassinations, and the forced displacement of innocent peasant communities. For more, see Ríos Sierra (2017, pp. 159–174).

⁵⁸ The original reads, “[l]a expropiación a los campesinos de sus tierras por parte de grupos armados ilegales condujo de hecho a una contrarreforma agraria, evento que incrementó en gran medida la concentración de la tierra.”

elections. Politicians associated with paramilitary factions obtained seats in the Congress of the Republic, paramilitaries exerted influence over municipal and gubernatorial offices in various regions,⁵⁹ and their reach extended to the presidential campaign, resulting in the election of Álvaro Uribe Vélez as president (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 160; Molano Bravo, 2015, pp. 199–200).

Álvaro Uribe's presidency (2002–2010) marked a major shift in Colombia's conflict strategy. His administration ended bipartisan political dominance, abandoned peace talks with guerrillas, and implemented the "Democratic Security Policy"—a military-focused approach to weaken FARC and ELN (cf. Ríos Sierra, 2017, pp. 85–86). This strategy combined armed forces with civilian engagement, offering incentives for combat success and imposing penalties for failure, with significant long-term consequences.

For the "Democratic Security Policy" to achieve significant effectiveness in Colombian society, the right-wing adopted the strategy of "denialism."⁶⁰ This approach involved the Uribe government categorically denying the existence of any internal conflict within the country. Uribe's denialism supposed the reframing of the historical truth by stating that violent actions in the country had been perpetrated by "narco-terrorist groups" against the sociopolitical order of the country. Furthermore, victims of the armed conflict were also denied recognition of their experiences and memories, which are crucial for presenting an alternative perspective on historical truth and achieving justice (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 178; Ríos Sierra, 2017, p. 88).

Uribe's government failed to eradicate guerrilla factions, let alone paramilitary forces. Instead of being decimated, these illegal armed groups adapted to evolving circumstances and expanded their areas of operation well beyond Colombia's agricultural borders (cf. Ríos Sierra, 2017, p. 92; Vásquez, 2010, p. 9). In regard to paramilitaries, the 2005 Justice and Peace Law (Law 975), aimed at negotiating with these groups like the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*), was widely criticized for granting near-total impunity to perpetrators and neglecting victims' rights, ultimately leading to its failure (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 179).

⁵⁹ The relationship between influential local and regional politicians and paramilitary factions became widely recognized as *parapolítica*. This phenomenon intensified during Álvaro Uribe's tenure from 2002 to 2010. Cf. Human Rights Watch (2010). The term gained prominence around 2006, when investigations revealed that numerous congressmen, mayors, governors, and other politicians had formed alliances with the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*). These connections facilitated civilian assassinations and enabled the exercise of sociopolitical and economic influence. *La parapolítica* persists in Colombia today. For more, see Valencia (2024).

⁶⁰ The Colombian right wing, led by Álvaro Uribe, has embraced a negationist discourse that denies the existence of the conflict in Colombia. Denialism in Colombia is a discursive tactic that distorts historical truth and manipulates public opinion, while other voices seeking to understand the past are not considered. For more, see López de la Roche, Fabio (2022).

Paramilitaries were rearmed and transformed into other armed criminal entities known as BACRIM (*Bandas Criminales*) or neo-paramilitaries, which concentrated their activities in peripheral areas akin to the FARC and the ELN (cf. Lara Salive, 2018, p. 57; Vásquez, 2010, p. 10).

The civilian population faced substantial consequences under Álvaro Uribe's leadership. Particularly, impoverished young people, both in urban and rural regions, were tragically affected by the "false positives." Driven by the imperative to produce results and lured by rewards, the Colombian military engaged in unethical tactics, leading to innocent civilians being falsely labeled as guerrillas killed in action (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 64; Lara Salive, 2018, p. 93; Palacios, 2012, pp. 18–19). The prevalence of false positives during the Uribe era is deeply alarming. According to recent data provided in 2023 by the Special Justice for Peace (*Justicia Especial para la Paz* – JEP), between 2003 and 2008, an astounding 6,400 murders were attributed to the atrocious practice of false positives, with the likelihood of additional cases yet to be uncovered.⁶¹ Furthermore, from 2002 to 2010, there was an obvious rise in forced displacements, heightened militarization of civilian life, and illicit surveillance (*chuzadas*) targeting activists, unionists, and journalists among different civilians critical of the Uribe administration (cf. Ríos Sierra, 2017, p. 101).

Former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez concluded his two-year term in office with considerable popularity.⁶² Such approval paved the way for his Defense Minister, Juan Manuel Santos, to assume the presidency from 2010 to 2018.⁶³ Under Santos's leadership, a new path to resolving the conflict emerged, incorporating innovative approaches to how Colombian society should confront its centuries-old historical and social violence. Santos' strategy for addressing the armed conflict in Colombia can be briefly outlined in two key pillars: military operations coupled with peace negotiations, which yielded significant results in weakening

⁶¹ Between 2002 and 2008, a preliminary investigation by the Truth Recognition Chamber (*la Sala de Reconocimiento de la Verdad*) uncovered that 6,402 individuals in Colombia were falsely portrayed as guerrillas killed in combat. This figure was determined through an extensive analysis of testimonies, prosecutor files, reports from various official entities, and data from organizations such as the Observatory of Memory and Conflict of the CNMH and the Colombia-Europe-United States Coordination. The Special Justice for Peace (*Justicia Especial para la Paz* – JEP) refers to false positives as case 03. JEP investigates this case with a "bottom-up" approach to finding those most responsible at the national level. For more, see Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz - JEP (2024a) and Uprimny Yepes (2023).

⁶² Despite his significant influence in Colombia, Álvaro Uribe's public image has been severely damaged in recent years. As of April 2025, the ex-president is facing trial on charges of bribery and witness tampering. The case, which began in 2018, stems from allegations that Uribe and his legal team attempted to influence witnesses to retract statements that link him and his brother to the creation of paramilitary groups. Uribe denies the charges, asserting they are politically motivated. For more, see Suarez and Rueda (2025).

⁶³ Former President Uribe also exerted significant influence, helping propel Iván Duque to the presidency from 2018 to 2022. Throughout this timeframe, the peace process initiated by Juan Manuel Santos faced considerable sabotage. The tenure of the ex-president Duque will be further analyzed and discussed in the concluding section of this dissertation.

guerrilla groups, particularly the FARC (cf. Lara Salive, 2018, p. 60). Santos introduced another groundbreaking aspect in the pursuit of peace: the integration and proactive involvement of conflict victims in what was termed the “Legal Framework for Peace,” which will be outlined below.

As documented in the *¡Basta Ya!* report, a significant milestone occurred on July 31, 2012, with the approval of the Legal Framework for Peace (*Marco Jurídico para la Paz*). This framework introduced the concept of “transitional justice,” which diverges from traditional punitive measures and emphasizes truth-seeking. Rather than solely focusing on judicial proceedings, transitional justice prioritizes “the elucidation of truth and victims’ reparations.” To facilitate this process, the “Truth Commission”⁶⁴ was established to acknowledge and investigate violent acts against civilians committed during the armed conflict (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, pp. 255–256).

Another pivotal pillar of transitional justice, launched in 2018 and working in tandem with the Truth Commission, is the “Special Jurisdiction for Peace” (*Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz - JEP*). The JEP operates within “the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition (*Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición – SIVJRNR*),” which is integral to the Final Peace Agreement (cf. Calle Meza & Ibarra Padilla, 2019, p. 4). The primary mandate of the JEP is to “investigate, clarify,” but also, crucially, to “judge and punish” crimes that occurred during the armed conflict.⁶⁵ According to Melba Luz Calle and Adelaida Ibarra, the JEP represents a distinctive Colombian transitional justice framework to address the armed conflict. Central to its mission is empowering victims to assert their rights in the aftermath of historical human rights violations. Moreover, alternative justice models, such as the JEP, have demonstrated notable advantages over traditional punitive approaches (cf. Calle Meza & Ibarra Padilla, 2019, p. 18). This assertion holds weight, as the JEP offers a more effective and beneficial path towards accountability and reconciliation, in contrast to Colombia’s persistently ineffective, largely impunity-prone punitive system.

The Legal Framework for Peace has proven to be a fundamental instrument in the search for truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition. It has illuminated countless historical instances of violence against civilians. The statistics on the JEP’s advancements are compelling. Since 2019, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) has engaged with 3,426 victims nationwide, providing a platform for their voices to be heard. Additionally, it has facilitated the

⁶⁴ To know more about the Truth Commission in Colombia as well as its perceptions, functions, and effectiveness, see Ruiz et al. (2021).

⁶⁵ For more information, see Calle Meza and Ibarra Padilla (2019) and *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz - JEP* (2024c).

regularization of legal status for 14,000 persons appearing (*comparecientes*). Furthermore, the JEP has brought 148 of the primary perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the armed conflict to justice through indictments. Presently, it is overseeing 11 macro-cases concerning crimes against the population, with active involvement from the victims to aid in elucidating the truth.⁶⁶

Acknowledging and validating the memories of victims of the conflict is of paramount importance within the Framework for Peace. As a testament to this commitment, Law 1424 of 2010, enacted by the Congress of the Republic, underscores the pivotal role of Historical Memory in elucidating the truth and providing reparations to victims (cf. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 257). Furthermore, Law 1448 of 2011, known as the Victims and Land Restitution Law, was enacted to aid in the quest for truth and reparation. Such a law led to the creation of the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH). Its main task is to collect, document, preserve, and safeguard various forms of memory and testimony related to victims' experiences during the conflict. Historical Memory, within the Legal Framework for Peace, underscores the crucial role of victims' memories in accordance with the standards set by the Integral System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition.

2.2. Historical Memory: The Past from Grassroots Perspectives

A comprehensive understanding of the past requires historical memory to value human and unofficial sources that are frequently neglected. These sources offer “historical truth not available in documents” (Bornat, 2013, p. 32). This underscores the importance of oral history, which gathers testimonies from a wide range of witnesses, including “the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated” as well as victims of socio-historical conflicts such as wars. These accounts enable oral history to reconstruct the past in a more realistic and equitable manner, challenging established narratives (cf. P. Thompson, 2000, p. 7). Consequently, oral history serves as a foundational resource for reconstructing historical memory and critically examining official accounts of the past.

In Colombia, historical memory needs to prioritize the experiences and knowledge of people who have been silenced and marginalized. The National Center for Historical Memory states that these perspectives are essential to understanding the country's past (cf. 2013, p. 13). This approach leads to a fuller view of the violence suffered by marginalized communities. It

⁶⁶ For further details regarding the progress achieved by the JEP so far, as well as the categorization, research, and elucidation of the macro-cases and other information, see Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz - JEP (2024b).

also aligns with methods used in transitional justice and Truth Commissions. Looking at the past through victims' oral histories upholds truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition. The memories, testimonies, emotions, and perspectives of victims are vital. Here, historical memory uncovers truth and offers symbolic reparations. This constitutes its significance and function.

The conflict in Colombia has affected a wide range of victims across various regions, each contributing distinct accounts that broaden the understanding of past events. While urban areas have experienced significant violence, rural populations have been disproportionately affected. Notably, rural communities have often been regarded as inferior and denied basic rights. The Truth Commission identifies peasants as “the primary victims” of the conflict, subjected to numerous violent acts intended to achieve “symbolic abatement”⁶⁷ (2022c, p. 170). The notion of “symbolic abatement” refers to treating this population as “backward and ignorant,” leading to the systematic violation of their “human dignity” (2022c, p. 172). This is particularly paradoxical since most Colombians are of peasant and/or indigenous descent, underscoring the extensive impact of violence on ancestral communities, as previously discussed.

Analyzing Colombia's conflict from grassroots perspectives illuminates histories that have often been overlooked. Accounts from marginalized groups provide detailed insights into personal struggles within the broader national context. By focusing on victims' experiences, historical memory offers a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the conflict, revealing complexities often omitted or distorted by dominant narratives from those in power. Examining the past from these perspectives facilitates the identification of root causes and consequences of conflict, the recognition of perpetrators, the assessment of violence's impact, and the acknowledgment of victims' resilience.

The principal challenge in reconstructing historical memory is developing an inclusive narrative of Colombia's internal armed conflict. This narrative should document facts, assign accountability, dignify victims, and encourage public discourse on the enduring factors of conflict (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015, p. 14). By incorporating victims' histories, historical memory remains balanced and reflective of Colombia's diverse experiences.

⁶⁷ In Spanish, the Truth Commission refers to this act of main violence as “disminución simbólica.” The use of the English word “abatement” appears to be the most appropriate to express the meaning in Spanish. Abatement implies not just a diminution or reduction, in this case, of the rural population, but also a kind of subjugation.

2.3. Historical Memory Initiatives

The reconstruction of historical memory in Colombia has primarily been led by investigative commissions dedicated to examining violence and conflict. In addition to these commissions, various projects and methodologies have been implemented to preserve historical records. These initiatives seek to provide a comprehensive and accurate account of Colombia's violent past, ensuring that the experiences, recollections, and testimonies of victims are acknowledged and preserved for future generations.

Efforts to reconstruct historical memory in Colombia began in the late 1950s. During this period, the primary focus was not on establishing a formal record of memory, and concepts such as Collective Memory, Cultural Memory, and Historical Memory had not yet been articulated in the national discourse. The principal aim was to investigate the widespread violence that erupted following the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. However, violence in Colombia did not begin with this event; it had already been present in the form of structural and systematic violence, as discussed in Section 2.1.

To examine ongoing violence in Colombia, particularly in rural regions, a range of commissions have been established. These commissions function as institutional mechanisms for constructing historical memory of events since the mid-1940s.⁶⁸ Jefferson Jaramillo Marín observes that these commissions are “unprecedented cases” globally and have “proliferated” in Colombia since 1959. They combine features of “traditional truth commissions,” which focus on uncovering human rights abuses and promoting justice, with those considered “extrajudicial,” necessitated by institutional limitations that impede comprehensive investigations (cf. Jaramillo Marín, 2011, pp. 234–235, 2016, pp. 249–250). Emerging in “contexts of violence and conflict,” these commissions aim to “[contribute] to the clarification” of the truth in Colombia (cf. Kalach Torres, 2016, p. 107). Although often categorized as truth commissions, they did not originally bear this title. The designation “Truth Commission” was officially adopted only with the most recent commission, formed as part of the final peace agreement in November 2016 (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2018, 10 paragraph).

Truth Commissions and Historical Memory Projects in Colombia fulfill distinct yet complementary functions in examining the past. Jaramillo Marín (2011, 2014, 2016) notes that Truth Commissions are official, state-sanctioned entities that systematically collect testimonies, document human rights violations, and issue recommendations for justice and reconciliation. Their mandate typically includes legal authority to summon witnesses and access classified

⁶⁸ For more, see Jaramillo Marín (2014).

information.⁶⁹ In contrast, Historical Memory Projects concentrate on researching, preserving, and disseminating the collective memories of communities affected by violence, utilizing reports, documentaries, and exhibitions. These projects promote societal understanding and recognition of past atrocities, often emphasizing cultural and communal aspects of memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, 2023), in contrast to the legal orientation of Truth Commissions. This section reviews the Truth Commission and related initiatives that document Colombia's violent history, focusing on victims' experiences.

2.3.1. The Truth Commission

Due to the persistent and endemic violence in Colombia, the country has led the way in establishing numerous commissions to investigate violent incidents, often specific to certain regions and occurring in rapid succession.⁷⁰ Three commissions have drawn attention for their research into historical violence in the country. The first one was the investigative commission labeled as *la Comisión Investigadora de las Causas de la Violencia*. It was established on May 27, 1958. Its main objective aimed to “identify the causes of [the bipartisan] violence” in the period of *La Violencia* in order to “deactivate” them (cf. Kalach Torres, 2016, pp. 110–111; Valencia Gutiérrez & Zapata, 2018, 1st paragraph). The second one was the Commission of Studies on Violence in 1987, which comprised a group of scholars specialized in the study of violence in Colombia, bringing extensive knowledge and research experience to the commission (cf. Jaramillo Marín, 2011, p. 236). While the 1958 investigation commission focused primarily on understanding violence in the past during the period of *La Violencia*, the commission of studies on violence in the 1980s concentrated on the period of *Las Violencias* (cf. Jaramillo Marín, 2011, p. 236). The third example of truth commissions in Colombia is the one currently underway, simply called *La Comisión de la Verdad* (the Truth Commission).

On April 5, 2017, Colombia established the Truth Commission as a pivotal component of its peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). This initiative was deemed essential to uncover the profound truths behind the armed conflict, which has left deep scars on Colombian society. The Truth Commission originated within the framework of the peace agreement, known in its legal instances as the Final Agreement for the

⁶⁹ For more, see Jaramillo Marín (2011, 2014, 2016).

⁷⁰ For a comprehensive survey of all the commissions established in Colombia, see Kalach Torres (2016) and Jaramillo Marín (2010). Kalach categorizes these commissions into four groups: those addressing violence and the armed conflict, those analyzing and resolving specific cases, those serving in advisory capacities, and those focused on peace objectives. Jaramillo Marín, on the other hand, focuses on commissions from 1958 to 2006, within what he describes as “a war without transition.”

Termination of the Conflict and the Building of a Stable and Lasting Peace (*Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera*). Together with the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Search Unit for Persons Reported Missing (*Unidad de búsqueda para personas desaparecidas*), it makes part of the Integral System for Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2018, 9th paragraph; Kalach Torres, 2016, p. 118; Ruiz et al., 2021, p. 127).

Like its predecessors, the Truth Commission had clear and significant objectives. Foremost among these were three key goals: to clarify the truth about Colombia's long-standing conflict, to promote the recognition and dignity of victims, and to foster coexistence in affected territories, thereby facilitating social reconciliation (cf. Comisión de la Verdad, 2022a, paragraph 13). Consequently, this commission served as a platform for victims' voices, allowing them to share their experiences and recollections during the conflict. By documenting their testimonies, the Truth Commission aimed to recognize the suffering endured by countless individuals and communities.

As mentioned in the introduction, victims' testimonies played a key role in shaping the *Informe final: Hay futuro si hay verdad*. Beyond serving as a collective memory project for the country, this massive report is part of the broader effort to reconstruct historical memory. This project is centered on the memories, experiences, and testimonies of the conflict's victims. Accordingly, as Saúl Franco points out, the Final Report incorporates the voices of more than thirty thousand people. Among them are many peasants and victims of violence, whose testimonies, though often heartbreaking, also convey hope and resilience from nearly every rural region of the country (cf. Franco, 2023, pp. 3–4).

The final report of the Truth Commission categorically confirms that the most prominent violence in Colombia is closely related to the theft of land from peasants and to the possession and poor distribution of rural land. This report details various types of violence suffered by the civilian population, which includes massacres, forced disappearances, kidnappings, and the recruitment of children, adolescents, and young people, among many others (cf. Franco, 2023, pp. 10–13). In total, the commission identifies “17 modalities of violations and infractions” of human rights (cf. 2023, p. 14). While the victims are numerous, the peasant population has been the most affected (cf. 2023, pp. 14–15), with “forced displacement” being the “most frequent type and form of violence” (2023, p. 12). Therefore, reconstructing Colombia's historical memory requires centering rural communities' experiences to ensure an inclusive, accurate account that supports reconciliation—an effort that depends on society as a whole (cf. 2023, p. 4).

2.3.2. Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology in Colombia and Latin America is closely associated with the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. PAR experiences “have been carried out in several countries of the Third World but also in Austria, Belgium, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States” (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 10–11). Fals Borda’s key contributions include the ethnographic study of Colombian peasant economies during the 1950s, providing advisory and consulting services for comprehensive agrarian reform in the 1960s, and aiding in the establishment of the National Association of Peasant Users (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos* – ANUC) (cf. Rappaport, 2020, pp. xi–xii) at the end of the 1960s. Orlando Fals Borda, along with Camilo Torres Restrepo, founded the Faculty of Sociology at the National University of Colombia in 1960. This paramount move led to the institutionalization and professionalization of sociology in the country, fostering advanced research and strengthening ties with various state institutions and social communities in Colombia (cf. Celis & Gómez de Mantilla, Luz Teresa, n.d.; Rappaport, 2017, p. 239, 2020, p. xi).

Orlando Fals Borda has been pivotal in studying Colombia’s historical memory through the experiences, recollections, and perspectives of peasants. His contributions extend beyond research, as he has actively provided platforms for interaction and collaboration with peasants. Two striking examples of such “research communities” for investigation and exchange are the Circle of Research and Social Action (*La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social*; henceforth, *La Rosca*) (Rappaport, 2020, p. xi; pp. 15-17) and The Caribbean Foundation (*La Fundación del Caribe*) (2020, pp. xii–xv; p. 16; pp. 35-37). Both research platforms and the cooperation with Colombian peasantry used the PAR methodology.

This methodology was regarded as distinctive within the research field and was differentiated from others. As Orlando Fals Borda notes, “We have chosen this name to distinguish it from other types of action research whose objective is not social change but the maintenance and defense of the *status quo*” (Fals Borda, 1988, p. 85, emphasis by the author). The persistence of conservative and outdated power structures in the Colombian countryside is widely recognized as a fundamental cause of widespread poverty and violence in the country.

The persistence of existing conditions and the regressive system of land ownership and distribution in rural Colombia has perpetuated systemic marginalization, poverty, and abuse among peasants, indigenous communities, and Afro-Colombians. This power dynamic has sustained economic disadvantages and abuse, while systematically silencing these groups and

restricting their ability to advocate for social change. PAR emerged to address issues including “poverty, exploitation, and oppression” (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 1–2).

Following Orlando Fals Borda’s directions, this methodology is primarily “experiential” and grounded in “knowledge” from grassroots populations and researchers, making it an investigative process at both “personal” and “collective” levels. Its main aim is “constructing power or countervailing power for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes, and for their authentic organizations” so that they can “advance towards shared goals of social change within a participatory political system” (1988, pp. 85–86). In Joanne Rappaport’s words, PAR “provided a model for fashioning [...] social science in the service of popular movements; Cauca and Córdoba, which were hotbeds of peasant ferment in the early 1970s, constituted the laboratories in which *La Rosca* undertook this task” (2017, p. 239, italics by myself).

La rosca is a colloquial expression in Colombia that refers to an exclusive group or circle of friends who help each other. This expression is generally used in work contexts when a person has a friend or acquaintance with influence to help them find a job or get a promotion. Within the research context proposed by Fals Borda and its founding members, *La Rosca* represented a research group of human science scholars seeking to change their research approaches in line with social and cultural commitments (cf. Negrete Barrera, 2008, p. 86). The members of this group of researchers were exclusively “dedicated to promoting [...] participatory action research” (Robles Lomeli & Rappaport, 2018, p. 597).

La Rosca served multiple purposes within the Colombian countryside. According to Joanne Rappaport, it was both a research and social action group. Additionally, it functioned as a publishing house for the studies it conducted. An interdisciplinary team of sociologists, economists, journalists, and ethnographers, along with peasant associations and the peasants themselves, comprised *La Rosca* (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 15). Ultimately, this research group fostered a deeper understanding and directly empowered rural populations through experiential, practical, and participatory approaches (Bonilla, Castillo, Fals Borda, & Libreros, 1972; Bonilla, Duplat, Castillo, Fals Borda, & Libreros, 1971; Rappaport, 2017). Between 1972 and 1974, the group worked with rural communities across varied regions, including Tolima, the Pacific Coast, and the Cauca Valley (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 15).

Fals Borda, in collaboration with the ANUC, focused on the Caribbean Coast, supporting peasant activists and gathering documentary evidence of their land struggles (cf. 2020, p. 16). *La Fundación del Caribe* was founded on the Caribbean Coast, with its main locations in *Barranquilla*, *Montería*, and *Sincelejo*. Alongside Fals Borda, key members

included Professor Víctor Negrete, writer David Sánchez Juliao, and comics and caricature artist Uliánov Chalarka, among others (cf. Rappaport, 2020, pp. xii–xiii).

PAR emphasized two key aspects that highlight the collaboration with these populations: the “critical recovery of history” (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 58–66; Rappaport, 2020, pp. 94–129) and the “systematic devolution of information” collected to the communities involved (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 53–58; Rappaport, 2020, pp. 130–168). According to Fals Borda, the critical recovery of history served the practical needs of rural communities. This process entailed selecting and presenting representative historical events that resonated with the community, drawing from cultural artifacts and both individual and collective memories. Such “popular versions” of history “proved to be critical” because they revealed aspects of the past that had been “blatantly omitted” or “silenced” by “official versions” or even by “previous historians” in Colombia (cf. Fals Borda, 1988, p. 58).

The “systematic devolution of information” was intended to reach “the communities themselves” and “local people” who are unaware of complex “monographs” and who “would not have been able to understand them” (Fals Borda, 1988, p. 5). In Joanne Rappaport’s words, “[s]ystematic devolution” of information to communities who aided in their creation “ensured that the products of research would have a life beyond the bookshelves, in activist practice” (Rappaport, 2020, p. 17). Accordingly, research findings and collaborative efforts between researchers and rural communities should not be restricted to complex academic publications.

PAR’s methodical and comprehensible devolution ensured that communities not only followed the research but also used the results to their benefit. This involved translating research into clear and concise language for rural communities. As Orlando Fals Borda explains, “it was possible to produce serious analytical work based on practical knowledge of the reality of both the ordinary population and of the activists” with a common purpose, and that would benefit “not only the general fund of science but also the people’s own knowledge and wisdom” (Fals Borda, 1988, p. 5). The idea was not simply to produce scientific work but also to tailor “intellectual tools” for communities as well as to create outcomes and practical applications for their cultural, social, and economic benefit. Among these outcomes, we can mention examples such as “cooperatives, trade unions, handicraft and cultural centers, education and health brigades” (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 5–6), among others, that could improve the living conditions and standards of these marginalized communities.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology’s critical recovery of history and systematic dissemination of information represented a significant innovation in Colombia. One notable example was the use of comics to communicate the research findings of *Fundación*

del Caribe to peasant communities on the Atlantic coast in the early 1970s. The foundation enhanced accessibility by employing graphic narratives in the comic series *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*, which drew upon peasants' experiences, testimonies, and the region's cultural artifacts. Subsequent chapters will provide a detailed examination of comics as a medium for representing historical memory. Prior to this analysis, two significant initiatives for reconstructing historical memory in Colombia, associated with the comics *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*, will be addressed.

2.3.3. Historical Memory Group

The Historical Memory Group (*Grupo de Memoria Histórica* – and from now on GMH) was established as a research team with the primary objective of producing a comprehensive report on the origins and causes of the conflict in Colombia through an extensive historical memory exercise centered on victims. The GMH emerged in 2007 as a sub-commission of the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation (*Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación* – CNRR).⁷¹ According to Pilar Riaño Alcalá and María Victoria Uribe, this sub-commission was paradoxical for two main reasons. Firstly, the GMH was established under the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), who has consistently denied the existence of an armed conflict in Colombia. Secondly, although the country entered the Transitional Justice process through the Justice and Peace Law (Law 975 of 2005), which aimed to foster nationwide reconciliation, this law faced significant criticism. It was perceived to favor the narratives of paramilitaries over the testimonies of victims (cf. Riaño Alcalá & Uribe, 2016, pp. 1–2).

Law 975, which governed the GMH, included several articles in Chapter 10, titled “Conservation of Archives,” that emphasized the importance of documenting and preserving the country's historical memory with the explicit participation of victims of the conflict. Article 56 of this law establishes the Colombian State's duty to historical memory. Articles 57 and 58 highlight the collective dimension of truth and the necessity of creating archives to preserve such memory. Additionally, Article 58 underscores the state's responsibility to ensure victims' participation in memory and truth-telling processes and to facilitate access to information contained in archives or documents that preserve victims' memories.⁷² These articles provided

⁷¹ The CNRR was created as part of the Justice and Peace process during the administration of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, thanks to political agreements with the leadership of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*). For more, see Jaramillo Marín (2014).

⁷² For more information on these articles, see Función Pública (2005, p. 13)

the legal support for the Group of Historical Memory (GMH) to investigate historical memory in Colombia and emphasized the essential role of conflict victims in its reconstruction.

The GMH was innovative in creating spaces for victims' voices to be heard, offering alternative narratives about the violence in Colombia beyond the official ones. This initiative promoted freedom of expression and thought, allowing victims to oppose, correct, or complement previous "historical records" of the "internal armed conflict" (Riaño Alcalá & Uribe, 2016, p. 3). To achieve its goals, the GMH designed a series of "memory workshops" suited to rural communities to study "the often-brutal effects of violence without dehumanizing the subjects themselves" (Riaño Alcalá, 2008, p. 269). These approaches include oral history, popular education, and verbal-visual arts, among others, that were used in the research tradition of PAR (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 15; Riaño Alcalá, 2008, pp. 272–274). The research toolkit used during the memory workshops allowed participants to activate their memories and share their personal histories and experiences, creating a space for both expressing and documenting collective recollections and testimonies.

Memory workshops about the conflict in Colombia have been crucial for approaching violence and fostering understanding of the country's violent past from victims' memories. By incorporating varied approaches and tools, the workshops cater to diverse communities and address local experiences, recollections, and perspectives. Such workshops have been held in different regions of Colombia affected by violence.⁷³ As they have been tailored to facilitate historical memory reconstruction, the results have been collective, inclusive, and diverse narratives to make visible those voices previously overlooked and marginalized (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 15; p. 63; Riaño Alcalá & Uribe, 2016, p. 4).

2.3.4. The CNMH (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*)

The research initiatives of 'critical recovery of history' and 'systematic devolution of information' implemented by PAR were designed to return historical insights to the communities that contributed to their generation, thereby enabling these communities to benefit from this knowledge. Although this approach is valuable, reconstructing Colombia's historical memory necessitates the involvement of society. This process requires the dissemination of large-scale studies, research, and memory projects to a wide range of audiences. The National Center of Historical Memory (*Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica*; CNMH) is central to documenting and representing the past within this broader societal context.

⁷³ For some examples, see Riaño Alcalá and Baines (2012); Riaño Alcalá (2004).

The documentation and representation of Colombia's past, particularly the experiences of conflict victims, have been significantly enhanced by diverse media, cultural formats, and the digital revolution. Aleida Assman observes that translating and preserving memories into "externalized and mediated forms" enables more efficient and enduring portrayals of historical narratives. The digital revolution has been instrumental in the storage, circulation, and accessibility of these memories (cf. A. Assmann, 2006, pp. 210–211). In the Colombian context, many recollections and testimonies are actively recovered and portrayed to ensure they remain accessible and retrievable.

Reconstructing historical memory requires not only the investigation and representation of memories but also their subsequent engagement by diverse members of society. This can be fostered through education, outreach initiatives, inclusive storytelling, and narratives that resonate widely. Equitable access to these representations is also vital, achievable with archives, digital platforms for storage and distribution, and the documentation of marginalized memories. These efforts are made possible by the CNMH's commitment to documenting, preserving, and disseminating historical memory.

Historical memory in Colombia gained prominence as a "state memory policy" well before the 2016 peace agreements (cf. García Alonso, 2022, p. 377). The Colombian State's "duty of historical memory," alongside the rights of victims and society to uncover the truth about the conflict, is rooted in a "jurisprudential framework" (Riascos Guerrero, 2022, p. 182). Within this context, Law 1448 of 2011, the Victims and Land Restitution Law, was enacted to implement a range of judicial, social, and economic measures in favor of conflict victims. This legislation establishes both the right to truth and the duty of historical memory. Articles 146, 147, and 148 mandate the creation of the CNMH, whose primary objective is to collect, recover, and preserve "all documentary material, oral testimonies, and other forms of evidence in different media" related to the Colombian conflict (cf. Ministerio del Interior - República de Colombia, 2012, pp. 68–69).

Victims' diverse accounts of the violent past, conveyed through oral history, "[allow] the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated" (P. Thompson, 2000, p. 6) and are represented across various media to facilitate broader understanding and interpretation. Narratives from victims' perspectives have prompted many Colombians to acknowledge the significance of historical memory. Documenting and representing memories and testimonies of conflict violence, particularly by "privileging the voices of the victims," not only clarifies the truth but also deepens "the understanding of the victims' experiences," including the "damages

and impacts they have faced individually and collectively” (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 25) and their resilience.

In accordance with the legal mandate to collect, store, and make publicly available all materials related to victims’ memories of the Colombian conflict, the CNMH has recognized the value of diverse media in representing historical memory. Consequently, its website functions as a comprehensive digital archive, housing a wide array of documentary, testimonial, and academic materials related to the memories of marginalized communities and victims of violence. This archive includes publications in written, graphic, and audiovisual formats, as well as multimodal forms such as visual art, memory sites, documentary series, books, stories, and comics. Cynthia E. Milton characterizes these multimodal forms of historical representation, centered on victims’ memory, as “unofficial modes of truth telling,” which serve as alternatives and complements to “formal spaces of truth seeking and truth telling, such as truth commissions and trials” (Milton, 2007, p. 4).

The portrayal and communication of memories through media, art, literature, and public discourse play a significant role in shaping societal approaches to historical memory and identity. They can foster empathy, awareness, and healing. Effective representation across these platforms integrates traumatic recollections and the agency and resilience of communities affected by the conflict into Colombia’s broader historical and cultural narrative. This process ensures that such memories are acknowledged, remembered, and addressed by both those who experienced the past and by current and future generations. Within this context, comics have emerged as cultural and material artifacts that depict and document historical events.

Comics as a medium for documenting peasant memories in Colombia gained wider recognition after the 2016 peace agreement, highlighting their role in representing marginalized perspectives and reconstructing historical memory. *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa Atlántica* (Chalarka, 1985), created in the early 1970s, became particularly visible in this context. The work documents the contributions of Orlando Fals Borda, the *Rosca de Investigación*, and the *Fundación del Caribe*, all of whom employed Participatory Action Research (PAR). Originally designed to support social and peasant movements (Gutiérrez, 2016; Pereira Fernández & Rappaport, 2022), PAR is here shown to facilitate the research and documentation of historical memory through comics. Fals Borda notes that comics were used to record the participation-insertion method (*método de la participación-inserción*) and proved effective for communicating with illiterate peasants (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A).

Additionally, the CNMH published the comics *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b) and *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* (CNMH,

2018a). These works also display different processes for researching and documenting memory work, as well as for narrating individual and collective memories. These three comics also highlight the memories of peasant communities from Colombia's rural areas, sharing their perspectives and testimonies about the violence reflected in land dispossession and the unequal distribution of rural land.

Comics are classified as “unofficial modes of truth telling” (Milton, 2007, 2017) and serve as a multimodal form for representing historical memory in Colombia. This medium is distinctive in its ability to capture not only the memories of individuals and communities but also the memory work undertaken by researchers and institutions that elicit, narrate, and document the experiences, recollections, and testimonies of rural communities affected by historical conflict. This context prompts critical questions: Why are comics used to convey memories from the perspectives of peasant communities? What forms and functions within comics correspond to individual and collective memories, making them a valid medium for representing historical memory? The following section explores these questions.

3. Comics as a Medium of Memory

This chapter contends that comics visualize individual and collective memory, providing distinct mechanisms for representing their complexities. Unlike film or photography, comics use still images that mirror how memory operates. Rather than replicating past events, comics actively illuminate memory processes at personal, communal, and historical dimensions.

Memory can be studied from several perspectives. These include physical, collective, historical, and political aspects. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, introduces distinctions in memory analysis from a phenomenological perspective. Ricoeur (2006) identifies private memory in the individual's mind (individual memory), shared memory in a community or group (collective memory), and collective consciousness from historical events (historical memory). In political analysis, Aleida Assmann underscores the need to examine memory across individual and collective dimensions. She proposes four layers: individual memory, social memory, political memory, and cultural memory (A. Assmann, 2006). These multilayered perspectives offer holistic approaches to understanding the link between personal memories and the broader sociopolitical and cultural world.

This chapter adopts a framework of individual, collective, and historical memory to explore how comics address each of these levels. While these categories are examined separately for clarity, in practice, they continuously influence one another. As Aleida Assmann notes, “different dimensions of memory, differing in scope and range, overlap and intersect within the individual[s] who [incorporate them] in various ways” (A. Assmann, 2006, p. 211). One such way is through comics.

3.1. Comics as a Medium of Individual Memory

This section demonstrates how comics are especially well-equipped to portray individual memory. Before analyzing these qualities, it is necessary to briefly understand how the brain forms long-term memories, which helps connect the internal processes of individual memory with their depiction in comics. This approach aims to reveal parallels between how memory functions and the visual features of the comics medium.

Graphic features in comics—drawing style, panels, frames, gutters, and panel sequences—help depict memory at the individual level. These elements serve as visual “traces” of recollections in our minds, as Paul Ricoeur compares to an “imprint of a seal upon wax” (2006, p. 13), meaning that reality leaves lasting marks in our minds. These marks come from life experiences, persist in memory, and shape personal recollections as the brain processes or

discards them. Ricoeur also calls such marks in individual memory “corporeal, cerebral, or cortical” (2006, p. 15).

Cerebral traces within the brain are intricately linked to the dynamic interplay of internal mental processes involving “reception, encoding, organization, storage, and retrieval of information”⁷⁴ to create recollections coming from the environment in which an individual is embedded. This interplay of cognitive mechanisms underscores the sophisticated orchestration within the brain that produces visual imagery of the past from an individual’s lived experiences. At this point, it would be worthwhile to raise the question posed by Paul Ricoeur: “[I]s a memory a sort of image, and if so, what sort?” (2006, p. 44). Similarly, if memory can be conceptualized as a mental form of imagery, how does the individual memory align with the visual elements present in comics?

To answer the above questions, we must start with the idea that images of the past, formed in the brain, are primarily visual and can therefore be represented in comics. While the brain significantly contributes to internal memory reconstruction, external factors also enable an individual to remember. The reconstructive nature of individual memory extends beyond cerebral organs, brain regions, or processes.⁷⁵ It also encompasses the environment, emotions, the individual’s body and senses, and the impact of events, other individuals, and objects. As Steven Rose notes, “[f]ar from passively recording the past, we in our memories actively reconstruct it” (2010, p. 207). Hence, the act of remembering itself is reconstructive.

The human brain is not just an organ for recording and storing the past. It goes well beyond the idea that memories “are stored as in computer files, and remembering would seem to be no more than pulling these files out of deep storage and reopening them” (Rose, 2010, p. 207). Many models try to explain how the brain creates memories.⁷⁶ A model that has received much scholarly attention is the framework by Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin (cf. Baddeley, 2010, pp. 81–82; Bower, 2010, p. 21; Sutton et al., 2010, p. 212).

The Atkinson-Shiffrin model⁷⁷ looks beyond conventional ideas about short- and long-term memory. It explores how people and their environment interact and how senses help form

⁷⁴ This definition derives from the meanings of individual memory provided by Endel Tulving ((2010, p. 36)) and Daniel Schacter and D. Wagner (2013, p. 1441) which emphasize the processes of encoding, storing, and retrieving. For an overview of the interplay among multiple mental processes, see Kandel, Dudai, and Mayford (2016); Kandel (2007); R. F. Thompson (2013); Schacter (1998), among others.

⁷⁵ For an overview of experiments exploring organs and brain processes related to individual memory, as well as various systems and classifications derived from studies in the cognitive and neuroscience fields, see Caygill (2010), Markowitsch (2010), Rose (2010), or Sutton, Harris, and Barnier (2010).

⁷⁶ For a detailed examination of some of these models, see McClelland (2010), Moscovitch (2010), Ratcliff and McKoon (2010).

⁷⁷ For an in-depth explanation of this model, see Atkinson and Shiffrin (2016).

memories. This approach explains memory as a process shaped by both external events and the brain's inner workings. Visual perception is key, as it helps us take in and recall information.

The model highlights how people are involved with their environments. Three main types of memory take part in this process: sensory, short-term, and long-term.⁷⁸ These are distinguished by how experiences last in our minds. Rodrigo Quian Quiroga explains that sensory memory holds sensory input for fractions of a second, enabling coherent perception. With attention, some sensory input is moved to short-term memory, where it is held for seconds or minutes. After repetition, some information is stored in long-term memory, which can last hours, days, or years (cf. 2021, p. 84).

Sensory memory is shaped by input from the five senses. Sight lets people take in and process visual information for encoding into memory.⁷⁹ Edmund Husserl, from a phenomenological view, says, “[p]erception [of reality] is built on sensations” (Husserl, 1964/2019, p. 60). From a neuroscientific perspective, Rodolfo Llinás asserts that the brain operates like a radar: it processes a visual stimulus and generates an image in about 12.5 milliseconds (cf. Semana, 1995, 12th paragraph). Sensory memory thus aligns with what Paul Ricoeur calls “immediate memory,” which relates to “the perception of [a] moment” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 35).

When we see an object, the mind represents it—a process Husserl calls “presentification.”⁸⁰ The mind momentarily recreates the object, producing what he describes as a “temporal object” (1964/2019, p. 37), which endures over time. Paul Ricoeur similarly views “temporal objects” as things that last “in the pure reflexivity of the consciousness of internal time” (2006, p. 31). Husserl uses the example of hearing a melody. A sound can last in

⁷⁸ In his seminal work *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Edmund Husserl draws a fundamental distinction between primary memory and secondary memory. In his framework, primary memory is linked to retention, whereas secondary memory is aligned with the realm of phantasy, which is an internal reproduction in our minds. Phantasy, as perceived by Husserl, is a distinctive “mode of consciousness” characterized primarily by “representation” or “reproduction”. Husserl aptly terms this phenomenon “presentification”. For an in-depth explanation of primary memory and secondary memory, see Husserl (1964/2019, pp. 58–60). In this dissertation, sensory memory is tied to primary memory, while short-term and long-term memories are aligned with secondary memory.

⁷⁹ Certainly, the human brain operates as a complex system where human senses do not function in isolation to capture reality. Instead, a highly interactive relationship exists among the senses to perceive reality, which the human brain encodes, stores, and later retrieves as recollections in the mind of an individual. Memory is incredibly complex and inherently imperfect. Isolating the senses in studying memory would strip us of our capacity for emotional, aesthetic, and sensual appreciation, reducing us to unfeeling machines. While this section takes the sense of sight independently, it does so as a methodological approach and to underscore the visual and pictorial connection between memory and comics.

⁸⁰ The concept of “presentification”, which is akin to mental representation or reproduction, was introduced by Edmund Husserl to denote “the act which does not place an object itself before us, but just presentifies – places before us in images, as it were (if not precisely in the manner of true figurative consciousness)” (Husserl, 1964/2019, p. 54).

the mind briefly after it ends. Perception governs hearing, but memory keeps the melody present inside our minds. This aligns with “primary memory” (Husserl, 1964/2019, p. 38), “retention” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 35), or what neuroscience calls sensory memory.

With vision, “presentification” also happens, but as an image. Visual memory gives our minds a static, momentary, and often blurry image of what we just saw. In other words, our minds quickly create a fleeting image of the past moment. For example, if we close our eyes after seeing something, the inner visual “presentification” is a mental image of what just occurred.

Such internal mental snapshots, or “mental traces,” persist briefly in our consciousness, even though they are invisible to the eye. These traces appear in our minds less distinctly than when we see them. While our eyes perceive images with clarity, our brains process them with lower resolution and fidelity than a photograph or video. In other words, mental traces are blurred and therefore imperfect in our minds, reflecting the limitations of human memory in accurately capturing and retaining details. This blurriness underscores the ephemeral and subjective nature of individual memory, which contrasts sharply with the clarity and fidelity often attributed to external visual media such as photography and films.

Recollections in the mind of an individual are inherently visual. Paul Ricoeur describes memory as the “presence of the absent,” where past events, though no longer visible, linger in the mind as visual traces (cf. 2006, p. 44). For this, Ricoeur introduces the term “memory-image”⁸¹ to highlight the visual and immaterial nature of memory, grounded in the interplay between the environment, the body, and the brain to generate recollections (cf. 2006, p. 50). The memory-image concept captures the interplay between the physical and cognitive aspects involved in the generation and retrieval of memories, at least in the individual and sensorial domains. Ricoeur adds that, “what is celebrated is [...] the visualizing function of imagination, its manner of giving something [that occurred in the past] to be seen” (2006, p. 52). Thus, individual memory relies on the imagination’s ability to *visualize* the past, creating internal images that make absent moments present again.

Given that internal images from the past in the individual memory can be represented externally in visual media, as in the case of “portraits, paintings, [...] photographs” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 46), including drawings in comics. The emphasis on the image to represent a moment of the past in our minds falls on “the belief of being attached to memory,” but the external

⁸¹ Ricoeur uses the term “memory-image,” which is based on Henri Bergson’s passage from ““pure memory” to memory-image” in *Matter and Memory* (2015). Cf. Ricoeur (2006, pp. 50–51). Accordingly, “the memory-image” is “an imagination that shows, gives to be seen, makes visible” (2006, p. 54).

representation of “[t]he “remembered” [...] draws upon the “depicted”” (2006, p. 47). This brings us to the question: how do mental traces of the past in an individual’s mind connect with external visual representations, such as images in comics?

Comics are a visual medium for representing individual memories. By combining images and words, comics can show personal recollections in several ways. Visual elements express the sensory and perceptual sides of memory. Words and graphic conventions give context and clarity, and help show non-visual aspects like thoughts and sounds. These features make comics a strong tool for exploring and expressing the complexities of memory. This topic will be discussed further.

3.1.1. Pictorial Track

The issue of making cerebral traces, or memory-images, visible in visual media needs examination. At this stage, “traces” that are “written and eventually archived” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 13) appear. Specifically, memory-images are materialized and textualized by the individual for outward projection. Ricoeur calls these imprints “external traces,” referencing “written discourse” and noting “graphic components” like images (2006, p. 13). Thus, this process transforms internal memory images into visual, tangible forms accessible to both the individual and others.

The relationship between comics and individual memory is best examined through autobiographical memory and autobiographical comics. Autobiographical memory includes personal experiences and events, reflecting the individual’s view of the past. Two needs arise: to record experience-near ongoing goal activity, and to keep a stable, coherent record of the self’s past interactions with the world (cf. Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004, p. 492). In this setting, “the self is always the same, never another.” The self creates images of itself and its environment, and remains “the same actor [performing] actions in the past that persist in [their individual] memory” (Guynn, 2006, p. 169). Thus, autobiographical memory involves recalling both past actions and the environments in which they occurred. Ricoeur describes this as “autobiographical certification of a narrative,” (2006, p. 163) linking mental traces with memory-images, imagination, and narration.

To visualize the internal brain traces from autobiographical memory, one can explore the characteristics of autobiographical comics. These comics are a form of visual storytelling in which creators narrate their personal experiences and recollections through a combination of

verbal-pictorial elements. Let us consider three well-known comics. First, *Barefoot Gen*⁸² (Nakazawa, 1975/1987) is a manga based on the author's experiences as a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Second, *Maus: A Survivor's Story* (Spiegelman, 1986/2003), comics used by the artist to portray not only his own memories and experiences living with his father as a victim of the Holocaust but also his Polish father's memories as a survivor of the Shoah. Finally, *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000/2008), in which Satrapi narrates her recollections as a child, teenager, and young adult during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In their works, Keiji Nakazawa, Art Spiegelman, and Marjane Satrapi embody their autobiographical memories, framed by catastrophic historical events.

Different labels are used to refer to this type of comics, including autobiographical comics (Chaney, 2016; Chute, 2016; El Refaie, 2012; Johnson, 2017); graphic memoirs (Pedri, 2015; Schröer, 2016); or autographics (Gardner, 2008; Whitlock, 2020). Independent of the labels used, these comics feature graphic and verbal portrayals of the author's self-representation, environment, and memories and past experiences, all drawn by the same artist.

In autobiographical comics, the author assumes a multifaceted role, controlling every aspect of their production. Drawing directly from personal experiences, memories, and emotions, as well as testimonies, the author not only crafts the script but also designs entire scenarios, including characters, settings, and other elements to represent recollections and experiences through graphic narratives. As these narratives are based on reality, autobiographical comics could be categorized as non-fiction. However, given that this medium represents memory and past experiences that exist only in the author's mind, it must incorporate elements of fiction through the author's imagination.

The result is a graphic narrative in which the author assumes the roles of both narrator and protagonist, constructing a personal account within the narrative framework. Autobiographical comics serve as representations of individual memory, capturing the subjectivity of recollection through distinct visual elements. This section examines the visual dimension of memory images. The subsequent section will elaborate on these components.

3.1.1.1. Drawing: External Traces of Memory-Images

In the individual memory, more specifically in autobiographical memory, the individual serves as the vessel for cerebral traces that form memory-images and sees them in their own mind. In

⁸² *Hadashi no Gen* in Japanese.

this regard, Rodolfo Llinás⁸³ explains that our eyes gather information from the outside world, which our mind processes as if it were drawing or painting internally. This occurs through visual perception, where our eyes scan the incoming data, and the mind creates internal or mental traces based on the surrounding environment (cf. Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, 2014, 17:30-18:40). It is as if our mind is continuously drawing internally to perceive, analyze, and understand information coming from external input and received through our eyes. When mental traces are externalized, they materialize and visualize in media like comics, which serve as conduits for the artist's internal memory or memory-images.

Memory-images lack the precision and clarity of photographs and films, resembling instead traces, like the depictions found in comics, where drawing is its most prominent feature. Hillary Chute points out that, “[c]omics, [different from photographs and films that duplicate or imitate almost exactly the object in reality,] is not a duplicative form; its drawings may refer to reality, but they constitute their own separate functioning model. Comics call attention to images as material objects and not just as representations” (2016, p. 21). Although drawing may seem less precise than other visual media in representing reality, it most closely reflects how the mind generates and processes individual memory.

Through drawing, we represent both the present reality and the individual perceptions of the past in our minds. Angela C. Brew distinguishes between “observational drawing,” which involves direct observation and constant adjustment by the hand and eye (cf. 2015, p. 15), and “drawing from imagination,” which relies on mental images in which imagination and memory combine without direct guidance. Here, drawing is a sort of wayfaring without a map (cf. 2015, p. 253). The type of drawing I refer to originates from individual memory rather than imagination. Here, the draftsman uses freehand drawing to represent memory-images.

Drawing based on memory is related to depiction because what we see externally is a characterization, or, from a phenomenological point of view, a “presentification” of something that is in the past and no longer exists, yet persists in our minds. Depiction is a characteristic type of “visual experience” characterized by the “phenomenology of seeing” in which drawing “involves both an idea of the visual appearance of an absent object and awareness of a particularly [organized] set of marks on a surface” (Grennan, 2017, p. 48) to represent past experiences. Jacques Derrida notes that Charles Baudelaire attributed the origin of drawing to memory rather than to perception. Derrida suggests this is because drawing refers to “the

⁸³ Rodolfo Llinás, also from Colombia, is the director and professor of the Physiology and Neuroscience Department of the Medicine Faculty of New York in the United States.

absence or invisibility of the model” (1993, p. 49). Put simply, drawing replaces direct, physical vision.

Memory-images related to individual memory correspond more closely to the external traces we create when drawing, due to the intrinsic connection between our minds and the act of freehand drawing. The art of drawing, especially in comics, aligns with Martin A. Conway’s assertion about artistic activity in memory representation. According to him, “artistic activity” in depicting the past requires the ability “to move flexibly between the rich sensory and perceptual world of immediate experience and the more distant knowledge of remembered reality and past working selves” (2004, p. 520). When drawing, artists create visible traces of a remembered reality, representing memory-images in their minds, particularly evident in autobiographical comics.

As drawing connects to the artist’s personal experiences, the resulting traces serve as external representations of their internal past, whether recent or distant. As Angela C. Brew states, “[d]rawing creates vision, whether from an internal idea or mental image or from an external object or scene, rather than reveals something that is already there” (2015, p. 22). In the same line of thought, Julio Cesar Goyes Narváz points out that, “[c]ontrary to the belief that our personal experiences provide, perceptions are not direct and precise copies of our surroundings, as the sensations [generated in our mind] are abstractions rather than exact replicas of the external world”⁸⁴ (2003, pp. 14–15, my translation). The idea that drawing makes it possible to visualize the past by combining inner perceptions or imagery with images from the outside world underscores the notion that the vision of the past created through drawing in comics is inherently subjective and curtailed, as opposed to the precision and accuracy of those portrayed in films, videos, or photographs.

Drawing is the defining feature of comics, emphasizing their hand-crafted nature and the visible presence of the artist.⁸⁵ As Jared Gardner argues, comics “cannot erase the sign of the human hand” (2011, p. 65, emphasis by the author). This reliance on freehand drawing shapes distinctive artistic styles (see Figure 3-1) and enables the visualization of memory-images, with drawn lines closely linked to the mental traces through which memory is formed.

⁸⁴ The original reads, “[c]ontrariamente a la opinión que puede arrojar nuestra experiencia personal, las percepciones no son copias directas y precisas de lo que nos rodea, porque la sensación es una abstracción y no es una réplica del mundo que nos rodea.”

⁸⁵ Comics artists not only draw their works on paper surfaces, but also, thanks to the latest technology, they use screens such as those of tablets or high-performance computers on which, by means of a digital pencil, they produce their comics. As stated by Simon Grennan, “[d]rawing [is] formalized [when] inscribing visual marks onto a surface, by whatever technological [or analog] means, so that these marks can be reali[z]ed and integrated into some context by a viewer” (2017, p. 29). Still, it is the artist’s free hand that manipulates all the digital and analog elements involved in creating graphic narratives.

IN *DICK TRACY*, FOR EXAMPLE, CHESTER GOULD USED **BOLD LINES, OBTUSE ANGLES AND HEAVY BLACKS** TO SUGGEST THE MOOD OF A **GRIM, DEADLY** WORLD OF ADULTS--



-- WHILE THE **GENTLE CURVES AND OPEN LINES** OF **CARL BARKS' UNCLE SCROOGE** CONVEY A FEELING OF **WHIMSY, YOUTH AND INNOCENCE.**



IN *R. CRUMB'S* WORLD, THE **CURVES OF INNOCENCE ARE BETRAYED** BY THE **NEUROTIC QUILL-LINES** OF **MODERN ADULTHOOD,** AND LEFT PAINFULLY OUT OF PLACE--



-- WHILE IN *KRYSTINE KRYTTRE'S* ART, THE **CURVES OF CHILDHOOD AND THE MAD LINES** OF A **MUNCH** CREATE A **CRAZY TODDLER** LOOK.



IN THE **MID-1960s** WHEN THE **AVERAGE MARVEL READER WAS PRE-ADOLESCENT,** POPULAR INKERS USED **DYNAMIC BUT FRIENDLY LINES** A LA **KIRBY/SINNOTT.**



BUT WHEN MARVEL'S READER BASE **GREW INTO THE ANXIETIES OF ADOLESCENCE,** THE **HOSTILE, JAGGED LINES** OF A **ROB LIEFELD** STRUCK A MORE **RESPONSIVE CHORD.**



FOR **DECADES** OF **COLOR COMIC BOOKS,** THE **SIGNATURE STYLES** OF **INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS** LIKE **NICK CARDY** HAVE **INFUSED PERSONAL EXPRESSION** INTO **EVERY STORY--**



-- WHILE **JULES FEIFFER'S UNEVEN LINES** DID **BATTLE** WITH THEMSELVES IN A **PANTOMIME** OF THE **INNER STRUGGLES** OF **MODERN LIFE.**



IN *JOSÉ MUNOZ'S* WORK, **DENSE PUDDLES OF INK AND FRAYING LINEWORK** COMBINE TO **EVOKE A WORLD OF DEPRAVITY AND MORBID DECAY--**



-- WHILE **JOOST SWARTE'S CRISP ELEGANT LINES AND JAZZY DESIGNS** SPEAK OF **COOL SOPHISTICATION AND IRONY.**



IN *SPIEGELMAN'S "PRISONER ON THE HELL PLANET,"* **DELIBERATELY EXPRESSIONISTIC LINES** DEPICT A **TRUE-LIFE HORROR STORY.**



AND IN *EISNER'S* **MODERN WORK** A **FULL RANGE** OF **LINE STYLES** CAPTURE A **FULL RANGE** OF **MOODS AND EMOTIONS.**



SEE PAGE 216 FOR COPYRIGHT INFORMATION.

Figure 3-1: Types of Drawing Lines according to Artists (McCloud, 1994, p. 126).

These external traces not only represent the past but also define the artist's unique style. So far, the discussion has highlighted that the art of drawing in comics is the best way to represent past images from our minds, mediated by visual memory. The next section will address another common element in comics: the panel.

3.1.1.2. The Panel: A Moment Frozen in Time

The previous section established drawing—particularly in comics—as a privileged medium for expressing and representing memory-images. In this context, John Berger observes that drawing “forces us to stop and enter its time. A photograph is static because it has stopped time. A drawing [...] is static because it encompasses time” (1976/1985, p. 43). This distinction is crucial for understanding the representational capacity of comics: rather than merely freezing a moment, drawn images condense temporal experience within a single panel. Accordingly, the comic panel serves as a drawn snapshot that both captures and preserves a past instance while simultaneously embedding it within a broader temporal process.

A panel is considered the “basic narrative unit” of this medium, used to represent an object, an idea, a concept, a moment, or a sequence of moments.⁸⁶ Definitions of the comics panel typically emphasize its primary characteristic of occupying a distinct visual space within the pages of comics to narrate a story graphically. Hillary Chute notes that Art Spiegelman links the process of “creating comics panels with being taught to pack an emergency suitcase by his Auschwitz-survivor father: comics can be about packing the space of the panel as tightly as possible” (2016, p. 16). In turn, Thierry Groensteen considers the comics panel drawn on the page “as a portion of space isolated by blank spaces and enclosed by a frame that insures its integrity”⁸⁷ (2007, p. 25). Similarly, Harriet Earle underscores the spatial dimension of the panel as a “building block” or “fragment” that constitutes a “larger narrative structure” and that “cannot exist on its own” (2021, p. 24). While acknowledging that a comics panel typically interacts with others on a page, I argue that when used to imaginatively evoke a past moment from an individual's mind, a single panel can stand alone as a self-contained visual expression.

The notion that a panel in comics cannot exist independently holds true only when considering its narrative aspect, which will be discussed later. This section aims to show that a panel, even as an isolated element, can exist independently.

⁸⁶ For more detailed definitions of the concept of panel in comics, see Earle (2021, p. 24); Horstkotte (2015, p. 27); or Kuhlman (2020, p. 173), among others.

⁸⁷ As a preliminary explanation, the blank spaces that surround a panel are conceptualized as gutters, while the frame is the line that encloses the panel. Both concepts will be discussed later in this section.

My interest in the panel lies not only in its spatial parameter. Groensteen uses the concept of the “spatio-topical system”⁸⁸, but I am also interested in the panel’s temporal quality. The main objective here is to highlight the panel as a visual and physical element. I use autobiographical memory to identify parallels between the comics panel and individual memory. My approach aligns with Golnar Nabizadeh’s ideas. Nabizadeh argues that “comics panels can [...] be regarded as sites of remembrance placed within the gutters,” providing “an invaluable scaffold through which to explore the theme of memory” (2019, p. 4). This is especially true at the individual level, particularly for autobiographical memory.

Art Spiegelman is one of the most renowned representatives of autobiographical comics. According to James Campbell, Spiegelman depicts his memories and experiences in his works that he describes as “many lines on a piece of paper,” portraying “very condensed thought structures” (2008, p. 61). If a panel is a concise section of thought, it becomes a temporal-visual unit when applied to episodic memory. It portrays a recollection of a previous moment when the individual was present. Essentially, a panel captures a moment in time from the creator’s mind. That is the reason why, Sebastian Domsch describes a panel in comics as a “mentally framed visual space” (2018, p. 15).

The comics panel functioning as a visual space, whether it has an enclosing frame or not, contains all the visual imagery drawn from the memories of the comics artist, who is the individual engaged in the process of remembering and portraying their experiences and recollections. This imagery includes several elements. Groensteen notes that a panel is essentially composed of “the image, the story[,] and the frame,” but there are many additional properties within the image itself, such as “reference, composition, lighting, color, qualities of the line, and [even] the writing does the same” (2007, p. 30). This means that the panel not only displays the content or the imagery of a past moment. It also reveals the artist’s unique style of depicting and staging that specific moment.

Since the panel contains not only all the visual content but also provides insights into the composition, arrangement, and the artist’s unique style, it is appropriate to relate it to the concept of *mise en scène*, which is widely used in visual media such as theater and film.⁸⁹ Geraint D’Arcy explains that *mise en scène* in theater and film involves the process of “staging [all] the elements” of scenes so that “[t]he range of decisions and artistic choices” is manifested “for a [viewing] audience” (2020, p. 19). Connecting this to the discussion about memory, just

⁸⁸ While Thierry Groensteen employs the concept of “spatio-topical system” to describe the physical essence of all elements on the page of comics (cf. Groensteen, 2007, p. 28), this dissertation, particularly in this section, focuses solely on a single panel, whether or not it has a frame.

⁸⁹ For an exploration of the concept of *mise en scène* in both theater and film, see D’Arcy (2020, pp. 18–24).

as each panel in comics reveals the artist's subjective depiction of a moment from their past, *mise en scène* within a panel involves the intentional arrangement and presentation of visual elements to convey or evoke a particular past moment in the artist's mind.

The *mise en scène* within a comics panel not only directs the viewer's attention to what is meant to be seen but also reflects the artist's own perceptions and lived experiences. In autobiographical comics—and, by extension, in autobiographical memory—artists do more than represent external reality as they perceive it; they also inscribe themselves into the panel, interacting both with others and with the medium itself. Such works therefore offer self-representations that reveal how artists interpret, reconstruct, and position themselves in relation to their past. In this sense, the *mise en scène* of the comics panel constitutes the visual field of a specific moment. It may depict what the artist saw, what the audience is invited to see, or how the artist envisions themselves within that remembered moment.

The panel in comics depicts and stages a past moment or object in a static, drawn form. This particular “past ‘thing’” represents “*what* was formerly seen, heard, experienced, learned,” which positions “memory as a cognitive issue” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 55, emphasis by the author), but also “brings it closer to perception” (2006, p. 48). The comics panel can be understood as a visual and temporal unit that portrays a single, memorable moment previously perceived. Consequently, its spatial and temporal dimensions are significant in representing such a moment.

While the temporal dimension expressed in comics panels is central to portraying memory, some authors place less importance on it. As indicated above, certain comics scholars focus more on its spatial parameter. Groensteen, for example, states that the “temporal parameter” of the panel is not as significant for him as “the spatial” one. He argues that “the comics panel is not the [...] equivalent of the *shot* in cinematographic language” (2007, pp. 25–26, emphasis by the author). However, the panel does relate to the concept of the shot in film, at least when considered as a temporal unit in comics to portray individual memory.

In the previous section, it was mentioned that Colombian neuroscientist Rodolfo Llinás believes the brain continuously scans the individual's environment to process and interpret what is perceived, particularly what is seen. According to Llinás, the mind is as if internally drawing the viewer's external reality. Each time we observe our surroundings, we perform a kind of “visual sweep.” In this regard, Rodolfo Llinás states that, “each time the brain performs a sweep it creates a new image, a new temporal organization, a measure or a quantum of

consciousness”⁹⁰ (Semana, 1995, 12th paragraph, my translation). The panel, therefore, represents that image, or “quantum of consciousness,” generated in our minds by the environment. Thus, in comics, it serves as a single spatio-temporal unit to depict a moment from the past.

It is essential to remember that everything we see becomes part of the past as time progresses. Therefore, our mind continuously receives numerous images or “temporal snapshots” of reality through our eyes. Returning to the perspective given by cinema, and as Llinás states, “it is as if the mind creates many still photographs per second, and, as in the cinema, the speed and continuity with which these still images are projected gives the sensation of movement”⁹¹ (Semana, 1995, 13th paragraph, my translation). Llinás’s claim aligns with ideas expressed by Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman. According to Bergman, “[t]he brain holds an image for a short period of time after it has disappeared”. Thus, our brains generate “still images that [...] lie in what [...] Bergman calls a certain “defect” in human sight: “persistence of vision”” (2000, p. 91, emphasis by the author). Surprisingly, Bergman considers the “persistence of vision” as a “defect” when, in fact, it is quite the opposite.

The concept of “persistence of vision” is closely connected to the “presentifications” or “memory-images” discussed previously. In my view, this visual mental phenomenon should not be regarded as a flaw but rather as a fundamental property of the mind. This capacity allows us to perceive, recognize, analyze, and interpret information from our environment. The mind does not perceive and interpret the environment exactly as it appears. Instead, the sensation of motion is processed as an indefinite sequence of “static images.”

In Bergman’s terms, and in relation to comics, “still images” are closely related to cinematic shots and comics panels. The visual phenomenon of static images, as described by both Llinás and Bergman, vindicates the effect of continuous movement seen in the earliest film projectors. When a series of still images is rapidly juxtaposed and projected, viewers perceive a sensation of motion (cf. Monaco, 2000, p. 91). While technological and digital advances have significantly changed the effect of motion in film, projectors and still images provide insight into how our mind processes movement through static images.

In the case of comics, panels represent the *mise en scène* that constitutes significant memory-images of our individual memory. They are primarily static and drawn. Significant still images produced by our minds—whether they depict an object, place, person, an important

⁹⁰ The original reads, “cada vez que el cerebro realiza una barrida crea una nueva imagen, una nueva organización temporal, una medida o un quantum de conciencia.”

⁹¹ The original reads, “es como si la mente creara muchas fotografías fijas por segundo, y, como en el cine, la rapidez y continuidad con que se proyectan esas imágenes fijas dan la sensación de movimiento.”

or traumatic event, or just sections of a moment—constitute our episodic memory and remain imprinted in our minds. These static but significant mental moments from the past are best represented by the comics panel, capturing and preserving them in a way that aligns with how our minds store these memories.

3.1.1.3. Frame: A Focalized Space in a Past Moment

The panel in comics is enclosed by margins known as frames. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith affirm that the concept of a panel stands “irrespective of whether or not there are actual panel borders” (2013, p. 131). Although there may be panels without borders, frames are a convention in comics that enclose a panel’s visual content. As they surround it, all the visual elements are contained within defined boundaries, creating a sense of structure. Such a structure gives the impression of being a material container. Frames in comics simulate those used in paintings or photographs displayed on walls, tables, or as room decorations.

A frame surrounding visual renderings within a panel is not just decoration. Its primary function is to enclose and delineate the visual content of a panel. Furthermore, the frame provides specific panel shapes. According to Groensteen, “the frame” not only “closes the panel,” but it also “confer[s] upon it a particular form” (2007, p. 40). The frame contributes to shaping to the panel, which can take various forms. However, the default and conventionalized shape is that of a rectangle or a square. This standardization allows panels to be placed side by side or stacked. In this way, the organization of elements resembles a grid, conferring order on the elements arranged on the page. At the same time, rectangular or square frames allow readers to easily visualize and relate all the panels on a page. Furthermore, the frame gives a sense of stability and continuity in the reading of visual elements.

The frame within a comics panel not only defines its boundaries but also serves as a temporal reference for the image or images it contains. Accordingly, the frame surrounding the images signifies that the moment shown within the panel occurred at a specific time in the artist’s past. In other words, the frame serves as a visual symbol that not only encloses the panel but also places the depicted scene within a particular moment. Groensteen highlights that “the mental image that inspires the drawing hand is always already framed, *grosso modo*” (2007, p. 40, emphasis by the author). In this sense, the frame encapsulates a static moment from the past as perceived by the artist’s mind. Without clear frames, readers would be confused about which elements belong to which panels on the page. As readers move from one panel to the

next, they actively connect these moments, linking the depicted memories to piece together the author's vision of the past.

Although the observer views the image in the present, the framed image represents a past moment coming from the author's memory. The reader must make inferences and connections across panels, as well as link visual elements, to understand both the sequence of events and the passage of time. In this regard, Scott McCloud draws our attention to the way time is adapted to space in comics. He notes that “[w]herever” [readers’] eyes are focused [,] that’s **now**. But at the same time [their] eyes take in the *surrounding landscape* of *past and future*” (1994, p. 104, panel 7, emphasis by the author). As readers move through the panels, they must interpret each as a static representation of the past, present, or future, depending on how the artist visually constructs and arranges the story of the past in their mind.

The frame in comics serves not only as a symbol capturing a past moment but also as a graphic narrative strategy that defines the visual field within each panel. The “observer” in this context can refer to two roles: the comics artist, who recreates scenes from their past experiences, and the reader, who engages with and interprets the artist's depiction. A panel represents a specific moment from the past, delimited not only by a temporal frame but also by the panel's visual boundaries. To fully grasp this concept, it is important to understand the difference between “central vision,” which focuses on what is directly observed, and “peripheral vision,” which concerns the broader, less defined areas of sight.

Human beings do not merely see; they observe. While seeing is a passive act, observing requires focused attention and mental effort directed toward a specific object. As Li Zhaoping explains, vision encompasses both processes: seeing involves the initial recognition of visual stimuli, while observing is selective, requiring deliberate shifts in gaze that allow only limited information to be processed by the brain (cf. Zhaoping, 2024, p. 18).

A similar logic operates in comics. As R. Duncan and Smith note, comics “[do] not present each moment of action in the [graphic] narrative; the writer and/or artist must decide which images [...] to show in order to tell the story” (2013, p. 131). The frame thus guides the observer's gaze, isolating and emphasizing particular moments within a broader visual continuum. In doing so, it mirrors the selective nature of observation—and, by extension, of memory—by foregrounding certain details while excluding others. This raises the question of how the framing of comic panels relates to the ways in which individuals encode and recall their own memories.

Just as a person cannot recall every moment of their life, they also cannot remember every visual detail of a moment. Only the elements that were consciously observed and

significant at that time are remembered. This means that, like episodic memory, our visual memory is selective, focusing on what is most relevant or meaningful to us.

As mentioned above, the visual content of a comics panel is mainly composed of the *mise en scène*—the arrangement of visual elements within the frame—reflecting what the artist observed and remembered from a specific moment in the past. However, the panel representing a particular recollection captures only a portion of a much larger visual field. Thus, the panel’s frame represents the artist’s central focus at that moment, which is preserved in memory and depicted visually. As Martin Schüwer notes, the *mise en scène* within a comics panel constitutes a focalized space (cf. 2008, p. 408). This space is not only limited by the panel’s frame but also connects to the idea of magnifying a moment from the past or a part of it.

In comics, the frame acts as a crucial visual element that symbolizes the artist’s central vision. It allows the artist to highlight specific aspects of a memory or scene by framing and enlarging them, thereby focusing viewers’ attention as if they were observing that moment in the past. This framing can either zoom in on specific details, such as a face or an object, or depict a broader scene, capturing a wider range of visual elements. Essentially, the frame shapes how memories and visual fields are represented and perceived in the comics medium.

The frame in comics not only highlights key elements drawn from the artist’s memory but also guides readers’ interpretation of them. It functions as a mechanism for focusing attention and can shape how readers understand a panel. Groensteen observes that, “[the frame] can go so far as to instruct the reader on what must be read, or even as far as to supply a reading protocol, or even an interpretation of the panel” (2007, pp. 49–50). Therefore, the frame can determine the reading of a panel based on how the comics artist represents their central vision and specific moments from the past.

3.1.1.4. Gutter and Closure: Constructing a Cohesive Historical Narrative

Each panel is bordered by a frame and separated by spaces gutters. Although these gaps may appear empty, they are essential for constructing the graphic narrative (cf. Earle, 2021, p. 24) and for generating meaning (cf. Berlatsky, 2009, p. 163). McCloud observes that the gutter is where “*human imagination* takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (1994, p. 66, panel 4, emphasis by the author). While frames visibly define the content within panels, gutters are invisible spaces that require readers to establish connections, fill narrative gaps, and generate meaning. Gutters are described as “invisible” because they lack explicit imagery and instead depend on the reader’s active participation to connect panels and create

meaning (cf. 1994, p. 63). This raises the following question: what is the relationship between the “gutter”—the spaces between frames in comics—and the process of forgetting in individual memory?

Similar to the empty spaces in comics, human memory contains numerous gaps because it is impossible to remember every detail. Erll observes that “memories are [like] small islands in a sea of forgetting” (2011/2016, p. 9). This metaphor extends to the visual structure of comics: enduring memories are represented by panels enclosed by frames arranged on the page as if floating within the empty spaces of the gutter. Just as a comic’s graphic narrative is constructed from individual frames separated by gaps, personal history is assembled from remembered fragments, with extensive areas lost to forgetting. This analogy underscores that memory operates not as a continuous flow but as a sequence of key moments or “islands,” as Erll describes.

Accordingly, the concept of the “gutter” in comics parallels the function of forgetting in memory processes, which is essential to how individuals remember. Elena Esposito states that it is necessary to forget “the countless singular and irrelevant aspects of objects and events, but also the excess of accumulated memories, in order to free mnemonic capacity, and to permit the construction of new memories” (2010, p. 181). New memories are formed by connecting significant fragments of the past.

Although panels arranged within the spaces of comics, known as gutters, may appear independent, the moments they depict from the past are interconnected within the broader graphic narrative. This connection is established by the reader through a process identified as “closure.” As McCloud explains, “this phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It’s called **closure**” (1994, p. 63, panel 1, emphasis by the author). This concept originates in the research of the Gestalt school of psychology and perception, particularly in the work of Max Wertheimer, who observed that, “[c]losure or *completion* [...] refers to the perceptual tendency to unite incomplete or partially interrupted figures” (Sarris, 2012, p. 185, italics by the author) in order to process entire patterns and structures.

Within comics, closure enables readers to bridge the gaps between panels and connect the visual and narrative elements separated by the gutter. This phenomenon should be understood as a cognitive process that allows readers to assemble fragmented images and scenes into a story. Umberto Eco notes that “comics break down [series of still panels] into a few essential elements” that readers “join together in their imagination and see them as a

continuum”⁹² (Eco, 1968/1988, p. 172, my translation). Thus, closure transforms a sequence of isolated images into a unified graphic narrative, analogous to the way the mind connects scattered memories to form coherent recollections in personal history.

Readers generate meaning and advance graphic narratives by mentally connecting still panels separated by empty spaces, which create the impression of a fragmented story. Nevertheless, the mind completes such fragmented imagery based on prior experience. As McCloud explains, “in our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is *incomplete* based on *past experience*” (1994, p. 63, panel 2, emphasis by the author). When the past is depicted in comics, “closure allows us to **connect** [...] moments and **mentally construct a continuous, unified reality**” (1994, p. 67, panel 2, emphasis by the author). The gutter, therefore, can be understood as a representation of gaps in memory that symbolize forgetting. In addition to the gutter, panel juxtaposition and sequence are two significant concepts in representing the past in comics. These concepts are discussed in the following section.

3.1.1.5. Panel Juxtaposition and Sequence: Graphic Life Narratives

This section deepens the connection between comics and individual memory by focusing on juxtaposition and sequence, framing memory as an archive. Jens Brockmeier describes memory as “an archive of the past” (Brockmeier, 2018, p. 42), highlighting how the brain systematically organizes, stores, retrieves, and even discards experiences. Like an archive, memory arranges recollections in categorized sequences, allowing them to be juxtaposed and accessed in meaningful ways—much like the structure of comics.

When considering individual memory as a neurocognitive capacity of recalling something from reality through the interplay of mental processes, the initial impression is to regard memory as a sort of “storehouse in which knowledge or information is encoded, deposited, and retrieved” (Brockmeier, 2018, p. 45). Nevertheless, human memory transcends the notion of a “storehouse” that holds past moments as memory-images. On the contrary, our memory aligns more closely with the metaphor of “an archive of the past,” which functions as

⁹² The original reads, “[e]l cómic desmenuza el continuum [de una serie de encuadres inmóviles] en unos pocos elementos esenciales. Que luego el lector une estos elementos en su imaginación y los ve como continuum, es cosa evidente.” I would like to make a clarification regarding the translation I made. Eco refers in his original Spanish text to “comics” using the term in singular. In English the term is generally used in plural. Regarding the word “encuadres,” the ideal translation in English would be “frames.” However, this dissertation understands panels as all visual information that is enclosed by a frame. Therefore, in the translation I provide, I decided to use the term “panels” instead of “frames.”

a dynamic repository where memories are not only stored, organized, and poised for retrieval, but also selectively deleted. This function is vital for consolidating long-term memories.

To understand how our brain organizes long-term memories, it is essential to recognize the role of the hippocampus. This organ, located deep within the brain at the level of our ears, plays a crucial role in organizing and consolidating memories rather than storing them directly. Acting like a “clerk,” it selects and processes experiences before sending them to the “cerebral cortex,” where they are stored as long-term memories (cf. Quian Quiroga, 2021, pp. 64–65; p. 74; Zola & Squire, 2010, pp. 496–497). Essentially, the hippocampus organizes and filters information.

In the same line of thought discussed above, Brockmeier argues that “the hippocampus” is important “for what is called the consolidation of information assumed to take place in the transition from short-term memory to long-term memory, as in the formation of episodic and autobiographical memories” (2018, p. 43). The hippocampus shapes our life narratives, ensuring that the most meaningful experiences become lasting memories. Accordingly, understanding how episodic memory is formed in our minds is crucial for approaching how graphic narratives in comics mirror the way we remember and tell our own stories.

Episodic memory enables individuals to recall and explicitly reference autobiographical events by connecting various memory-images stored in long-term memory. From a phenomenological perspective, Ricoeur asserts that “long-term memory constitutes recollection or reproduction” and involves “re-presentation” rather than mere presentation (2006, p. 35). Consequently, episodic memory, as a component of autobiographical memory, is essential for consolidating long-term memory by representing sequences of distinct memory-images in juxtaposition.

Comics rely on juxtaposition and sequence to convey meaning. The arrangement of panels enables the representation of related yet distinct moments in time, allowing readers to infer connections between them. In depicting individual memory, comics differ from films, which present actions and moments as a continuous, seamless sequence.

To depict a significant episode from the past, the artist must carefully select which images to juxtapose in sequence, thereby guiding readers through the graphic narrative. Duncan and Smith state, “[t]he process of **encapsulation** involves selecting certain moments of prime action from the imagined [or remembered] story and encapsulating, or enclosing, renderings of those moments in [...] panel[s]” (2013, p. 131, emphasis by the author). The process of encapsulation, combined with juxtaposition and sequence, enables the artist to construct a narrative that is both meaningful and closely tied to memory.

Reader participation also is essential for constructing meaning in comics. Duncan and Smith note that as readers move from one panel to the next, “juxtaposition comes into play,” enabling them to connect each panel with those surrounding it and create a cohesive graphic narrative. Although the meaning of each panel is shaped by its context, every panel “has the potential to provide new information,” allowing the narrative to evolve in the reader’s mind (cf. 2013, p. 141).

Comics depict not only visible elements but also typically unseen phenomena, including smells, sounds, tastes, and emotions. McCloud observes that “pictures can [...] represent **invisible** concerns such as *emotions* and the *other senses*” (1994, p. 127, emphasis by the author). By employing images, icons, and words, comics utilize the versatility of the drawn line to create a sensory experience that captures the full range of human perception.

3.1.2. Verbal Track

The ‘verbal track’ refers to the written component that propels the narrative. The organization of text and images determines how comics communicate experiences and memories. Narratives are “provided not just by [...] images but also by [...] text (balloons or captions or otherwise integrated textual material)” that interact to “display either a convergence or a divergence between the verbal and the visual” (Baetens & Frey, 2015, p. 143). Baetens and Frey further argue that “it is not the meaning of the image that must be domesticated or completed by the use of words, but the meaning of the text that must be anchored or relayed” (2015, p. 147) within the visual elements of comics. This integration allows readers to construct stories in their minds.

This section analyzes the interplay between the verbal track and visual elements in representing auditory content. These components influence how individual memory is portrayed in comics. Duncan and Smith note that “[v]oice, sound effects, and music represented in [graphic narratives] lack the realism found in an auditory medium, but they can be a great deal more expressive than they are in non-illustrated prose” (2013, p. 144). Comics use both visual and verbal strategies to convey sounds and auditory memories. This discussion addresses key elements: narratorial captions, speech balloons, thought bubbles, and alphabetic signs for human speech. It also examines symbols and onomatopoeias for both human and non-human

sounds. These features typically appear as written text, usually enclosed within a conventional frame to indicate sounds and thoughts.⁹³

3.1.2.1. Narratorial Captions: Retrospective Self-reflection

Narratorial captions in comics function as a reflective voice, offering retrospective commentary on past events. In autobiographical comics, this voice is typically attributed to the creator, who serves as both narrator and protagonist. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term “narrator” refers to the entity recounting the story, distinct from the author as a real-world individual or the character within the narrative.

In autobiographical works, the creator functions not only as a storyteller but also as a character within the narrative. This dual role introduces a distinct layer of introspection, enabling direct engagement with and interpretation of past experiences for both the creator and the audience. Richard Aczel describes the narrator as an “umbrella term” encompassing various narrative functions, such as the “selection, organization, and presentation of narrative elements,” as well as “self-personification as teller, comment, and direct reader/narratee address” (1998, p. 492). In comics, these functions manifest through narratorial captions and graphic elements that complement panel visuals (cf. Hescher, 2016, p. 148). Thon further asserts that narrators can be understood as “constructs [...] in the form of characters” and “narrating characters” (2015, p. 70), who may or may not participate in the events they describe.

These ideas show how narratorial captions in autobiographical comics reflect the artist’s internal voice. It aligns with Thon’s term “*authorial narration*” in autobiographical comics, which is ascribed to the same author who also serves as narrator (cf. 2015, p. 70). In such cases, the author develops the narrative and acts as narrator, guiding the reader through the graphic narrative and linking personal reflection to narrative structure.

In relation to individual memory, narratorial captions in comics function like a “voice-over,” representing the internal voice associated with recollection and reflection. As auditory experiences are visually depicted in comics, readers are encouraged to interpret narratorial captions as the artist’s voice. These captions narrate, explain, or reflect on past moments. The interplay of visual and verbal elements allows comics to capture the essence of memory from both pictorial and verbal perspectives. In this way, captions serve as a form of self-narration.

⁹³ Thoughts are a rather particular case. In this section, they are inner voices heard only by the author, who recreates his memories and who serves as the “narratorial-character” of his thoughts in autobiographical comics. Other figures in the comics’ stories are aware of their thoughts, which are likewise internal voices that cannot be heard by other characters but are read by comics viewers.

Self-narration in narratorial captions is conveyed through the medium's graphic elements. Visually, it appears in square or rectangular frames with a distinct typeface, often at the top or bottom of a panel. Verbal content may also be unframed, integrated within the image, or sequenced with other images (cf. Hescher, 2016, p. 148). These captions show personal bias, selective memory, and the influence of time on the narrative. They also guide readers' interpretation and offer insights beyond pictorial details.

Narratorial captions as self-narration can be seen as panels, primarily verbal but linked to visuals. Their text serves as "discrete linguistic units" (Miodrag, 2014, p. 21) that build the narrative. This text appears "in neat, clearly printed lettering. Such lettering is easy to read, but it does little to convey the **paralanguage** (volume, emphasis, rate, vocal quality, etc.) of human speech" (R. Duncan & Smith, 2013, p. 145, emphasis by the author). Comics show these features in speech balloons.

3.1.2.2. **Speech Balloons: Remembering Human Conversational Sounds**

Conversational sounds in comics are most evident in "speech balloons," which are key visual elements that represent character dialogue. Like panels and frames, these balloons define the graphic narratives of comics. McCloud notes, "[b]y far the most widely-used, **versatile** of comics' many synaesthetic icons is the *ever-present, ever-popular word balloon!*" (McCloud, 1994, p. 134, panel 1, emphasis by the author). By calling this element a "synaesthetic icon," McCloud links spoken and written language, showing how the balloon's design frames the text as character speech.

In comics, the speech balloon is a convention for visually framing and representing character speech. Its hybrid nature combines a visual frame and written text, with a "pointer" or "tail" to indicate who is speaking (cf. Cohn, 2013, 38; Magnussen, 2000, p. 203). This clearly signals which character speaks. The words serve as direct speech in a visual narrative, like lines in a play (cf. Hescher, 2016, p. 150). Speech balloons blend visuals and text in dialogue, helping readers understand the narrative.

Readers play a crucial role in animating speech balloons and other verbal and pictorial elements within comics. They must engage with features to reconstruct conversations as they would in reality. Readers should distinguish between elements belonging to the characters' world—the storyworld—and those forms that structure the graphic narrative but are unperceived by the characters. As Hescher notes, the words are part of the "story's diegesis," existing in the characters' world. However, the frame of speech balloons is "non-diegetic,"

since characters do not see “balloons floating around them” (Hescher, 2016, p. 149). This difference shows how comics integrate visual and verbal elements to represent spoken language.

The verbal component of speech in comics is made of arbitrary linguistic signs. Words that represent speech are based on cultural conventions specific to the speaker’s language. Readers must know the comic’s language to understand words in speech balloons. The same is true for narratorial scripts and other written texts. By contrast, images in comics have a direct relationship to what they represent in the real world. Most readers can recognize and understand these images without prior knowledge.

This also connects to individual memory, especially auditory memory, as shown in comics. When we remember conversations, it is nearly impossible to recall every word, even those in “idea units” (Neisser & Libby, 2010, p. 320). Human memory cannot retain conversations word-for-word, even for short dialogues.

Verbal content in comics, whether in speech balloons or narrative scripts, is usually limited compared to images in panels. Yet, readers can reconstruct voices, dialogues, and monologues from the visual cues in speech balloons. The cognitive process of closure helps interpret visuals and reconstruct auditory elements.

When authors—comics artists—represent their memoirs in this medium, they create dialogues, conversations, or monologues to support the graphic narrative. However, this does not mean authors recall every word exactly as depicted in the speech balloons. Instead, they use their memories and imagination to craft these conversations and may also draw on other sources, such as testimonies or interviews. A remarkable example is Joe Sacco’s comics, such as *Gaza* (2015), *Safe Area Goražde* (2011), and *Palestine* (1996/2009), which fall in the genre of graphic journalism, where written words are often used to convey testimonies, experiences, and memories shared by victims of violent socio-political conflicts. Similarly, Art Spiegelman conducted numerous interviews with his father, Vladek, to capture his experiences and memories as a Holocaust eyewitness and survivor in *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. (Spiegelman, 1986/2003). These examples illustrate how autobiographical comics blend personal memory, imagination, and external verbal sources as well as others’ recollections.

Violent events create enduring impressions for those who experience them directly, with certain memories remaining vivid over time. Auditory elements also influence memory and are incorporated into graphic representations. While dialogue in comics does not constitute a verbatim record of past conversations, the verbal component provides a close approximation of

memories and experiences, offering readers insight into significant conversations at pivotal moments in individuals' lives.

Another key aspect of the verbal component in comics that helps visually mimic characters' speech is "lettering." Lettering allows the representation of paralinguistic features, such as tone, timbre, and speech intensity. As Duncan and Smith note, "[a]spects of paralanguage can be suggested visually by varying the size, thickness, and shape of both the words and the balloons or boxes that contain them" (R. Duncan & Smith, 2013, p. 145). These visual variations within words and speech balloons help convey the emotional and vocal nuances of monologues and dialogues, enhancing readers' understanding of how something is said, not just what is said.

The way something is expressed, beyond its literal content, can leave a lasting impression in long-term memory. Through lettering, comics can capture and communicate the significance of paralinguistic elements in memory. In comics, "words are not only meant to be read, [but] they must also be looked at, both in themselves and in relation to the place they occupy in the work" (Baetens & Frey, 2015, p. 152). As a hybrid medium combining words and static images, comics are particularly effective at representing both visual and auditory memories. Groensteen observes that "there is undoubtedly a dis-sociation between the *told* (with words) and the *shown* (by drawings), but the *shown* is itself a *told*" (2013, p. 83, emphasis by the author). Beyond representing spoken words and sounds through speech balloons, comics also depict characters' thoughts through thought bubbles, further illustrating the medium's capacity to visually convey experiences.

3.1.2.3. Thought Bubbles: Private Carriers of Inner Thoughts

A visual tool for representing thoughts of both the narrator and supporting characters in comics is through "thought bubbles." The thought bubble serves as a "private carrier" of a character's inner thoughts, typically represented through written text. However, it can also include symbols like question and exclamation marks or even icons, images, and pictograms that reflect what's on a character's mind (cf. Cohn, 2013, p. 41; Earle, 2021, pp. 31–32; Forceville, Veale, & Feytaerts, 2010, p. 63). As a result, the content within a thought bubble is inherently subjective, representing not only thoughts and memories but also a character's imagination.

Like speech balloons, bubbles serve as frames that enclose the text representing characters' thoughts. However, thought bubbles differ from speech balloons in a few ways. While a speech balloon's pointer is positioned near a character's mouth to indicate the source

of speech, a thought bubble typically originates from the character's head, indicating that the thoughts are coming from within. Additionally, the frame of a thought bubble is distinct, often resembling a cloud with small puffs trailing from the character's head. These visual cues, like speech balloons, are non-diegetic, meaning the characters in the story do not perceive them.

Another significant distinction between speech balloons and thought bubbles is that the content within thought bubbles—the written text—is known solely to the character whose thoughts are being depicted in a panel. While readers understand that speech balloons represent characters' voices, which other characters in the story can hear, thoughts are different. They cannot be heard or read by other characters within the storyworld. The only entity aware of their thoughts, which are represented by written text and the cloud-like frame surrounding the text, is the character who is the source of their own thoughts (cf. Cohn, 2013, p. 40). However, readers can see and interpret the text within these thought bubbles as the character's inner thoughts.

Although speech and thoughts can be represented in different ways, speech balloons, thought bubbles, and narratorial captions are established visual elements conventionally used to convey verbal content in comics. The appearance of these elements can vary, and comics authors often introduce new styles, particularly for frames.⁹⁴ While the content within these elements is primarily verbal, it also incorporates various “symbols” to represent non-verbal communication, as well as different “lettering styles” to capture traces of sound and thought and their essence (cf. McCloud, 1994, p. 134, panels 4 and 5). In depicting thought, a blend of words and images is often used “to *completely describe the invisible realm of sense and emotions*” (1994, p. 135, panel 1). Comics readers can observe, identify, and infer meaning from both the visual and verbal cues provided by the author to gain insight into characters' speech, thoughts, memories, and even imagination.

In summary, the thought bubble in comics functions as a verbal-pictorial device for representing a character's thoughts within the narrative. When depicting individual memory, the thought bubble primarily serves as a narrative tool, enabling the author to elaborate on or enhance the account of the past. Individual memory cannot access the thoughts and recollections of others unless these are shared through research, interviews, or testimonies. In comics, such insights may be conveyed graphically or verbally to supplement the artist's depiction of personal memories.

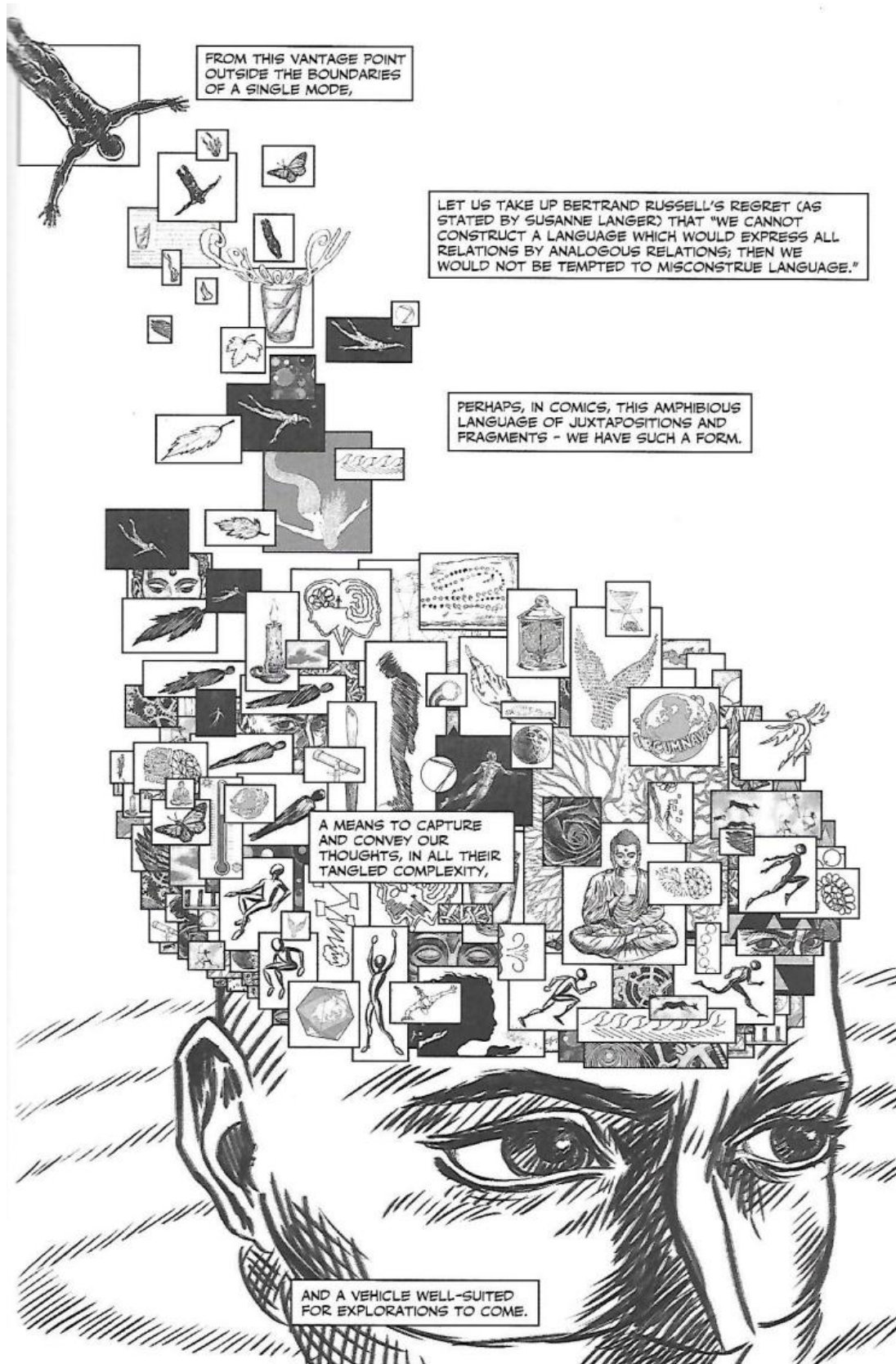
⁹⁴ Charles Forceville, Tony Veale, and Kurt Feyaerts list a series of nine forms of comic balloons to represent speech and thought, along with their frequency of appearance in comics such as *Tintin* and *The Avengers*. For more, see Forceville et al. (2010, pp. 58–61).

3.1.2.4. Balloons and Onomatopoeias: Visualizing Non-Human Sounds

Comics represent non-human sounds through a combination of visual and verbal techniques, adapting speech balloons so their tails point to objects as sound sources, reinforced by additional pictorial and verbal elements. Hescher points out that sounds coming from objects or nature “can be represented by words, non-mimetic [...], symbolic [...] or onomatopoeic. These sound effects can appear enclosed by “balloons or [be] free-floating in a panel or across panels or pages” (2016, p. 150). Furthermore, sounds originating from nature or objects are typically represented through onomatopoeias in comics, which “are probably one of [their] best-known features” (R. Duncan & Smith, 2013, p. 145). They usually appear outside the familiar speech and thought balloons or bubbles (cf. Guynes, 2014, p. 60). The integration of verbal and pictorial techniques enables comics to depict non-human sounds, thereby representing environmental or natural phenomena.

Elements within the pictorial and verbal tracks of comics play a crucial role in representing the interplay between visual and auditory aspects of individual memory. By combining images, text, and sound effects together with panels, their juxtaposition and fragmentation, comics create distinctive graphic narratives that capture traces of memory. This is illustrated in Figure 3-2, where Nick Sousanis shows that the medium of comics and its verbal-pictorial elements allow readers to engage with storyworlds on multiple sensory levels. Understanding and appreciating these components enhances our ability to interpret and connect with others’ memories depicted in comics, making them a powerful medium for conveying collective memory, as discussed further below.

Following Jens Brockmeier’s line of thought, the notion that the human brain is the exclusive locus for processing, storing, and retrieving memories has been challenged. An understanding of memory-making needs to include crucial elements beyond neural or mental processes. Social and communal practices, cultural artifacts, such as comics, and historical processes have emerged as significant contributors to understanding the workings of memory (cf. Brockmeier, 2018, p. 48). This broader perspective, known as the “expanded view” of memory (S. D. Brown & Reavey, 2014, 2015, 2018), offers a comprehensive framework that goes beyond individual memory, emphasizing its connection to collective experiences, cultural practices, and the material world. This approach highlights how memory is shaped not only internally but also through its interaction with broader social and physical contexts.



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Figure 3-2: Comics as “[M]eans to capture and convey [T]houghts [and Memories]” (Sousanis, 2015, p. 67).

3.2. Comics as a Medium of Collective Memories

People in a community often share memories and experiences that form their collective memory. It is important to understand that these memories are shaped not just by individuals but also by the social environment and specific tools or structures within that group. In simpler terms, collective memory is built and exists within “social groups” and “social frameworks” (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). Comics, as a medium, represent not only personal memories of individuals in a group but also the different social frameworks that help evoke, depict, record, and share the group’s collective memory.

This section will explore how comics themselves act as a social framework that supports the documentation of collective memory processes. First, the connection between comics and social groups, as well as their role within social frameworks, will be analyzed. Following this, the discussion will focus on how comics function as both social and material frameworks, examining their structure, including elements such as the cover, paratexts, and graphic narratives.

3.2.1. Comics and Social Groups

Primarily, the social milieu plays a crucial role in shaping our experiences, helping us form memories, and sharing them with others. When we share our past with others, our personal memories become part of a larger collective memory. In this shared space, “social groups”—such as family, friends, and community members—help individuals “acquire, [...] recall, recognize, and situate their memories” (Halbwachs, 1952/1992, p. 38). Accordingly, social groups provide essential support for remembering processes. They not only influence how we remember but also serve as a vital framework for the formation and sustenance of both individual and collective memories.

At the collective level, comics facilitate the exploration, representation, and dissemination of memories among social groups, including families and communities. Autobiographical comics are produced within collective contexts and are influenced by the dynamics of these groups. In this context, creators share personal experiences while simultaneously contributing to the formation of collective memories within their immediate social circles. For instance, authors such as Art Spiegelman, Keiji Nakazawa, Marjane Satrapi, and Joe Sacco integrate their individual histories with the broader collective memory of their respective communities.

Comics frequently depict both individual and collective experiences of social groups. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Spiegelman, 1986/2003) is a prominent example. In this work, Art Spiegelman illustrates the challenges of living with his father, Vladek, a Holocaust survivor. He also integrates his own memories, his father's oral accounts, and personal documents, such as photographs and letters, into his account of historical events. This narrative approach conveys the trauma experienced by both the Spiegelman family and the wider Jewish community during the Holocaust. Spiegelman's method in *Maus* bridges personal and collective memory-images, capturing survival and traumatic "memories and post-memories" (Hirsch, 1991-1993; Morris & Fraser, 2012) of the Spiegelman family and the Jewish community affected by the Holocaust.

Keiji Nakazawa's manga⁹⁵ *Barefoot Gen* (Nakazawa, 1975/1987) offers another example. Here, Nakazawa draws from his personal experience as a Hiroshima bombing survivor. He also reflects the collective memory of social groups in post-war Japan. Nakazawa was six years old when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, at 8:15 am. Through the character Gen, Nakazawa uses both verbal and pictorial forms to show private and collective recollections. He also explores the long-term effects of the bomb on survivors known as *hibakusha*. This term means "explosion-affected people [...] a phenomenon that [...] persists to this day and also can be recognized in extant attitudes toward those affected by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant disaster" (Chute, 2016, p. 115). Nakazawa's work recounts his traumatic memories and uses verbal-pictorial forms to show both physical destruction and the emotional and psychological damage suffered by those who lived a social tragedy collectively.

In *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000/2008), Marjane Satrapi represents the memories and experiences of the Iranian community. She narrates from her personal perspective, from childhood in Tehran to her adult years in Europe, especially France. Like Spiegelman, Satrapi blends personal and collective narratives to capture the shared memory of Iran before, during, and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. *Persepolis* is divided into two parts. The first recounts Satrapi's childhood in Tehran during the Revolution and the rise of the Islamic Republic. The second focuses on her experiences as a teenager and adult living in exile in Europe.

In representing collective memory, *Persepolis* shows how personal recollections can help us understand broader social and historical realities. Satrapi's narrative focuses on her own memories but also highlights the experiences of many Iranians. These individuals were caught

⁹⁵ Manga is an umbrella term for comics originally created and published in Japan. The main characteristic of this type of comics is that all of them are created in black and white.

between their desire for freedom and the repressive regime that followed the Revolution. *Persepolis* allows readers from different cultures to see personal and social experiences and to learn about the Iranian sociopolitical and cultural context. Marta Simidchieva states that *Persepolis* offers non-Iranian readers insight into the Iranian Revolution while also encouraging reflection on their own societies and social contexts (cf. 2017, p. 120).

Joe Sacco also uses comics to depict his travel experiences and document the memories of oppressed communities. In *Palestine* (Sacco, 1996/2009) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (Sacco, 2010), he shows the struggles of Palestinians and the complex history of the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. In *Safe Area Goražde* (Sacco, 2011) and *The Fixer* (Sacco, 2004), Sacco explores the collective memories of individuals in Sarajevo and Goražde, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He shows how sharing individual stories forms collective memories. Although Sacco is not part of these communities, he relies on intermediaries to examine key social, political, and historical issues related to their collective memory.

Visual features in comics, such as panels, frames, gutters, and other tools, translate internal thoughts and memories into visible form. These representations can reflect both personal experiences and the shared perspectives of the social groups to which individuals belong. Autobiographical memory is personal and belongs only to the artist, but it also reflects the collective memory of the artist's social group. In this way, autobiography (the artist's story) and biography (the social group's story) blend. This merging creates what is called "metabiography" (A. Nünning, 2005; Saunders, 2015).

In his analysis of the comics *Las Meninas* (García & Olivares, 2014), Agustín Corti argues that metabiography is also present in graphic narratives, in which the comics author, acting as both main character and narrator, visually recounts events from their own life and those of others. This narrative strategy combines autodiegetic narration, characteristic of autobiography, with heterodiegetic narration, typical of biography. Additionally, the metabiographical genre integrates real historical events with fictional elements, utilizing the comics medium's verbal-pictorial forms to construct narratives that merge fact and fiction (cf. Corti, 2017, pp. 384–385). By integrating individual and collective memory graphic narratives, comics portray the metabiography of specific social groups, illustrating how individual memories are researched, reconstructed, shaped, and disseminated within the community and in broader social contexts. Thus, comics serve as a documentary medium that visualizes the formation and evolution of collective memory, incorporating interactions, research tools, documents, data, and personal recollections.

3.2.2. Comics and Social Frameworks

While social groups are central to the creation and comprehension of collective memory, other social frameworks help to shape and structure it. Halbwachs' theory acknowledges a "shared remembering" wherein these "social frameworks" consist of "instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past" (Halbwachs, 1952/1992, p. 40). These instruments, specific to particular social groups, distinguish their collective memory from that of other groups. In other words, they function as material and social frameworks that both reflect and reinforce the group's collective memory and identity. Elizabeth Jelin builds on this idea, suggesting that certain parameters or conditions act as "features of group identification with some and differentiation with "others" to define the boundaries of [collective] identity [which] become social frameworks that encompass memories"⁹⁶ (Jelin, 2002, p. 25, my translation, emphasis by the author).

The comics discussed earlier serve as tools for representing and dramatizing alternative social frameworks that help recover memories. Authors like Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco, for example, not only depict their own memories and life experiences but also explore the biographies of the social groups they belong to. Furthermore, their graphic narratives emphasize processes of memory, particularly in recovering victims' experiences, with testimony and oral history playing crucial roles as social frameworks for reconstructing the past.

In Spiegelman's case, he feels compelled to interview his father, take notes, and then organize this information both graphically and verbally in comic panels. He does this not only to process his own post-traumatic memories inherited from his father but also to uncover the memories in Vladek's mind. Sacco, on the other hand, employs a more formal and elaborate reporting approach, using interviews and journalism to document the memories and experiences of oppressed social groups. His work requires a more structured process due to the complexity of interviewing and portraying the life histories of individuals within a community.

Interviews enable "cartoonists to visualize witnesses' testimonies," that is, to arrange with other factual and fictional information into collective memories to externalize "*oral history*" (Schmid, 2021, p. 52, emphasis by the author). Autobiographical authors like Spiegelman and Sacco materialize alternative social frameworks, such as oral history. According to Pollak, oral history, or life history, involves interviewing witnesses who experienced historical events either directly or indirectly through their social group. Even if not

⁹⁶ The original reads, "estos parámetros [...] implican al mismo tiempo [...] rasgos de identificación grupal con algunos y de diferenciación con "otros" para definir los límites de la identidad, se convierten en marcos sociales para encuadrar las memorias".

all group members participated, these events become deeply embedded in the collective imagination and are felt as if personally lived. Life histories capture key details—such as dates, people, places, and cultural artifacts—that are essential for reconstructing a group’s collective memory (cf. Pollak, 2006, pp. 33–36).

Through a combination of verbal and visual elements, comics depict this shared information about the past, creating images of collective memory that, like individual memory, reflect the “presence of the absent” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 44). These verbal-pictorial forms also serve as “secondary witnessing” (Mickwitz, 2016, p. 63), helping to reconstruct and document the collective memory of a social group and its social frameworks.

Comics not only depict marginalized memories but also structure and recover them, transforming traumatic pasts into accessible visual narratives that document collective memory. Hillary Chute points out that, “while the comics form [...] rejects the verisimilitude of mechanical objectivity” found in devices like cameras or cell phones, opting instead for drawing, they still reveal “processes of making” inside panels and pages. In other words, comics are committed not just to narrativize the past but also to “detailed documentation—of place, of duration, of perspective, of material specificity, of embodiment [of the past]” (Chute, 2016, p. 18). By combining visual and textual narratives, comics become both a medium and a framework for representing, shaping, and preserving collective memory, influencing how it is organized, interpreted, and shared.

3.2.3. Documentary Comics: Social and Material Frameworks

Documentary comics (Adams, 2008; Grünewald, 2013; Mickwitz, 2016) use research, historical documents, and private and collective information from social groups. Although they “rely on historical documents,” their center of information revolves around the “testimony of [...] historical participants or witnesses [of] historical events” (Guynn, 2006, p. 144) that occurred within a community. This collective information is “a distinct [...] visual documentation” (Orbán, 2015, p. 122) that highlights collaboration between researchers and the people studied. Carolyn Ellis and Jerry Rawicki refer to this process, which involves conducting multiple interviews to uncover a shared but often traumatic history through oral narratives, as “collaborative witnessing” (2013, p. 376, 2015, p. 172). This approach, seen in Spiegelman and Sacco’s comics, allows for a deeper, more social connection to the past.

Documentary comics are distinguished by their capacity to bridge geographical and temporal distance through the integration of verbal and visual elements. By combining text and

image, they render distant historical events—often marked by violence and trauma—more immediate and accessible. As Katalin Orbán notes, “graphic non-fiction has brought a distinct [...] visual documentation” that allows the coverage of “violent conflicts in distant locations” (2015, p. 122) both in time and place. This multimodal form enables readers to engage with collective memories that might otherwise feel remote, transforming abstract or unfamiliar histories into situated, human experiences. Alison Landsberg points out, “people at other historical moments [and geographical locations]—albeit through different means and mechanisms—have been able to “remember,” and thereby be [interpellated] by, events of the distant past” (2004, p. 3, emphasis by the author). In this sense, documentary comics function as a medium of visual documentation that brings events from different times and places into closer relational proximity with audiences.

A central feature of documentary comics is their ability to foster empathy and understanding through a reflective mode of engagement. Rather than relying on sensationalism, these works encourage slow, interpretive reading practices in which meaning emerges from the interplay between images and text. This process allows readers to connect with the emotional and historical experiences of individuals and communities. As Ellis and Rawicki suggest, the goal of any narrative, including graphic narratives, is to help broader audiences connect with and empathize with the experiences and memories of communities that have endured trauma, pain, and loss (cf. Ellis & Rawicki, 2013, p. 377, 2015, p. 173). The graphic narrative form, therefore, supports an affective encounter that is both personal and socially grounded.

Another defining characteristic is their dual function as narrative and archival forms. These comics not only tell stories but also document and preserve memories. Through the arrangement of panels, sequencing of frames, and use of distinct artistic styles, they reconstruct historical, communal, and personal experiences. These formal and material elements operate as mechanisms of memory storage, enabling comics to act as sites where collective memories are organized and maintained. Through their graphic narrative structures and varied artistic styles, documentary comics archive collective memories within different social contexts (Ahmed & Crucifix, 2018; Grunow, 2018; Horton, 2022; Merino, 2010). In this way, documentary comics combine processes of selection, organization, and preservation with narrative expression.

Unlike traditional archives, which primarily emphasize the collection and categorization of materials, documentary comics integrate an archival function with storytelling (cf. Chute, 2016, pp. 191–196; Gardner, 2006, p. 801; Jenkins, 2015, pp. 305–310). They present testimonies, life histories, and witness accounts through immersive graphic narratives, enabling readers to engage with the past in dynamic, interpretive ways. This integration of archival

methods and narrative structure distinguishes documentary comics as a medium that both preserves and communicates memory.

Materiality and format also play a crucial role in shaping documentary comics. These works rely on the physical organization of pages to structure meaning (cf. Chute, 2016, p. 27). Furthermore, the book format provides a tangible space in which history is given visual and spatial form, reinforcing the sense of permanence and authority associated with documented memory (cf. Mickwitz, 2016, p. 14). The interaction among layout, sequencing, and design shapes how readers perceive and interpret the past, highlighting the importance of comics as material objects.

Finally, documentary comics are characterized by the interplay of their constituent components, including covers, paratexts, and the graphic narrative itself. These elements function as interrelated semiotic resources that guide the reader's engagement and understanding of complex verbal-pictorial forms (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 225). The cover often serves as the initial point of entry, framing expectations and signaling themes, while paratextual features provide contextual information that shapes interpretation. The graphic narrative then develops and conveys the core memories and histories. Together, these components create a cohesive system in which meaning is produced through the interaction of visual form, textual content, and reader participation.

In sum, documentary comics are defined by their multimodal structure, their capacity to evoke empathy through reflective engagement, their dual narrative-archival function, their reliance on material form, and the interconnectedness of their visual and textual components. These features collectively enable them to represent, preserve, and communicate complex histories and memories in ways that are both accessible and affectively powerful.

3.2.3.1. Covers

The physical format of comics—especially in book form—is shaped by paratextual elements that give the work a tangible and material presence. As indicated by Gérard Genette, “a text without a paratext does not exist and never has existed” (Genette, 1997b, p. 3). Basically, there are two types of paratexts: *peritexts* and *epitexts*. Paratexts surround the main content—in the case of comics, the graphic narrative—and can include elements such as the title page, introduction, table of contents, and acknowledgments. Genette refers to these paratexts as *peritexts*, the physical or visual parts of the book itself (cf. 1997b, p. 5). There are also external paratexts, which Genette calls *epitexts*. These include paratextual elements outside the text,

such as interviews, reviews, advertisements, and public statements, and they influence how the text is received (cf. Genette, 1997b, p. 5). Both *peritexts* and *epitexts* define “spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, and functional characteristics” (Genette, 1997b, p. 4) in any text. In comics scholarship, one paratext that is often overlooked is the cover.

Comic book covers serve both visual and material functions, fulfilling peritextual and epitextual roles (Witte, Latham, & Gross, 2019). As peritext, the cover physically encloses the comic book, shaping its form and providing a distinct visual identity that conveys meaning. The materiality of the cover enables it to occupy physical space. As with other books, comic covers may be made of hardcover, cardboard, or paper. The cover contains both verbal and pictorial information, which makes it easily identifiable. In digital formats, the arrangement and distribution of verbal and pictorial elements establish spatial and substantial characteristics. Beyond its material presence, the cover contains significant verbal and visual information that serves practical functions.

Covers enable readers to quickly understand the primary themes and content of comic book narratives. They integrate verbal and visual elements that directly reflect the stories within (Rishu & Kukreja, 2025, paragraph 5). This approach contrasts with traditional written texts, where covers typically display only essential information such as the title, author, and publisher. In these formats, visual design is generally limited to color selection, and images are infrequent or optional. The verbal component is usually dominant (Acquarelli, Cogo, & Tancini, 2010). Conversely, comic book covers prioritize imagery as the central feature, with text serving a supplementary function.

The cover contains information in both written and graphic forms, both being equally important. It provides written information that consists of “the name of the author, the title of the work, and the emblem of the publisher” (Genette, 1997b, p. 24). In addition to these basics, covers may include other details like the genre, publication date, and price.⁹⁷ Genette also highlights the importance of a “specific illustration” on the cover (1997b, p. 24), which should be directly relevant to the book’s content. In comics, this visual aspect is especially important, as the cover’s imagery not only reflects the content but also introduces key elements such as characters, settings, and themes central to the story. The combination of text and visuals on the cover helps readers make initial predictions about the comic’s content, which in turn supports their later understanding of the graphic narratives.

⁹⁷ According to Genette, they can be categorized into *front cover*, *inside front and back covers*, and *back cover*. For more information, see Genette (1997b, pp. 24–26). This dissertation focuses on the so-called front covers.

The cover of comics can also function independently as an external paratextual element. It can serve as an *epitext* in the form of a standalone poster that advertises the text. Through its combination of written text and visuals, the cover not only provides information about the content but also entices potential readers. The cover's design offers a preview of key narrative elements—characters, settings, and central themes—while its artistic choices, including color, imagery, and typography, make it visually striking to stand alone as a poster or painting. In this sense, the cover acts as an *epitext*: though it is closely tied to the content of comics, it also functions externally, playing a significant role in their promotion and reception.

3.2.3.2. Paratexts

Comics are made up of both verbal and visual elements that give them meaning, but these elements are not limited to the graphic narrative itself. They also exist as paratextual components, which include both visual and textual features that accompany the main content. According to Gérard Genette, “paratexts” are “accompanying” elements that enable a text “to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1997b, p. 1). In comics, these paratextual elements extend beyond the graphic narrative's pages, providing additional depth and context to the story. Genette further asserts that paratexts “ensure the text's presence in the world” and influence its “reception and consumption” (1997b, p. 1). Therefore, paratextual elements in comics are essential for contextualizing graphic narratives and shaping how readers engage with and interpret the story, both within and beyond the main text.

The aim of analyzing paratexts in the comics that compose the case studies is to demonstrate that they primarily serve as authorial, explanatory, and historical tools that frame the main text. According to Christina Meyer, paratexts in comics offer clues that function as informative, explanatory, or contextual elements, helping readers better understand the main content (cf. Meyer, 2015, p. 272). Similarly, Johannes C.P. Schmid argues that paratexts in documentary comics act as essential components that “evoke frames concerning the represented events, instructing [...] reader[s] in how to make sense of [the graphic narratives displayed] and showing them why they should care” (Schmid, 2021, p. 65) about the narratives contained within comics.

Before delving into the core text, which depicts memory work and peasant memories, readers must navigate specific preliminary verbal peritexts. These paratextual components are within the materiality of comics and are situated in the domain where editors and publishers

play a pivotal role, although authors may also contribute to arranging important information to frame the texts. This “zone,” known as “the editor’s peritext,” is characterized above all by its “spatial and material” nature (cf. Genette, 1997b, p. 16). It is composed basically by “the outermost peritext[s]” such as “the cover, the title page, and appendages” as well as other aspects connected to comics’ “material construction,” namely “selection of format, of paper, of typeface, and so forth” (1997b, p. 16).

The “zone,” which is mainly verbal in comics, may include table of contents, prefaces, introductions, as well as dedication pages and acknowledgments, among others, as indicated above, but this is not a rule. Not all comics are required to contain all these verbal paratexts—peritexts. This zone is also known as the front matter. The main text of a book is where the central content is located. This part is called the “body matter.” Within the medium of comics, it is important to consider the presence of visual elements that function as other types of paratexts, internal to the core text where the graphic narratives are located. These internal paratextual elements within the graphic narratives will be examined in the next section.

Paratexts in comics combine both verbal and pictorial elements. One example is the cover. However, some comics use multimodal paratextual components that guide readers by blending written and visual elements. These types of paratexts include frontispieces and inner sub-covers. According to Gitta Bertram, Nils Büttner, and Claus Zittel, frontispieces, featuring elaborate artistic images, were common in classical books and typically placed just behind the cover (cf. Bertram, Büttner, & Zittel, 2021b, p. 4). In comics, these introductory images often appear as full pages between the cover and the written paratexts, providing information through both text and images that contributes to the narrative’s overall meaning, particularly in documentary comics.

Some comics use full-page sub-covers to mark chapter transitions, visually and thematically preparing readers for changes in the story. These sub-covers play a key paratextual role by shaping interpretation, setting tone, and adding symbolic or thematic depth to the narrative. Exploring paratexts in comics composed of both verbal and pictorial elements is vital as they guide readers in interpreting stories, particularly those involving personal and collective memories. Paratexts provide context, shape expectations, and offer insights that enhance understanding of comics’ main themes. In the comics in question, the idea is to explore how they bridge personal experiences with historical events, enriching the graphic narratives and deepening reader engagement with representations of individual and collective memory.

3.2.3.3. Graphic Narratives

Graphic narratives, which form the main text within comics, serve as a medium for visualizing and documenting the work of memory, both individual and collective, of communities affected by a violent past. Such narratives function as a physical space where historical trauma, personal experiences, testimonies, and recollections are depicted. By combining imagery with written text, graphic narratives not only serve as a medium for representing and documenting the past but also entice readers to engage with histories of victims in a deeper, more empathetic manner. Accordingly, graphic narratives of comics make individual and collective memories of affected social groups more accessible and understandable to a wider audience. This is ultimately one of the important aspects to consider in the representation of historical memory in comics.

Comics are considered part of popular culture, whose graphic narratives aim to represent complex social experiences that have spiraled out of social control and therefore warrant scholarly attention, as John Fiske suggests (cf. Fiske, 1990, p. 103). These graphic narratives are crafted not only to recount personal or communal experiences but also to do memory work. The interplay between individual and collective memory, history, and storytelling underscores the role of graphic narratives in representing complex social realities that have endured over time.

Graphic narratives use a combination of visual and verbal elements to represent memory in a verbal-pictorial narrative form. This form becomes “the *way in which the subject constructs a sense of the past*, a memory that is expressed in a communicable story, with a minimum of coherence”⁹⁸ (Jelin, 2002, p. 27, emphasis by the author, my translation). As previously discussed, authors of autobiographical comics use the multimodal language of comics—combining both visual and verbal elements—to represent their personal memories. In this process, the author portrays themselves as both narrator and character in their own memories, which are visually and textually expressed through the comic’s graphic narratives.

The graphic narratives under question, however, are not necessarily autobiographical but metabiographical, portraying not just a single life but the lives of others who shared similar experiences within real locations and circumstances embedded in historical events. This is done through the combination of factual and fictional elements characteristic of comics’ graphic narratives that portray metabiographies (cf. Corti, 2017, pp. 384–385). Nevertheless, the content depicted in graphic narratives comes from individuals’ memories, experiences, and

⁹⁸ The original reads, “[e]l acontecimiento recordado o “memorable” será expresado en una forma narrativa, convirtiéndose en la *manera en que el sujeto construye un sentido del pasado*, una memoria que se expresa en un relato comunicable, con un mínimo de coherencia”.

documents, not from imagination. As Hayden White affirms, “[t]he content of historical stories” is not “invented by [...] narrator[s]. This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to [...] prospective narrator[s] is found rather than constructed” (White, 1990, p. 27). Personal memories are closely connected to broader collective experiences shaped by specific socio-political and historical contexts.

Graphic narratives give voice to and visualize individuals who contribute to the formation of collective memories. These cultural artifacts “serve as constant reminders of what [...] individuals have been through, and it is through memories” that stories and experiences are conveyed from “the perspective[s] of [...] main character[s]” (Kelley, 2018, p. 93). The transformation of memories into graphic narratives occurs through a collaborative process involving social groups or communities affected by violence, memory researchers, and comics artists. Through this process, graphic narratives introduce diverse protagonists, examine new dimensions of human experience, and incorporate novel thematic elements (cf. Prorokova & Tal, 2018, p. 12) that facilitate the depiction of memory and memory work. These elements not only represent individual memories but also investigate how such memories are produced, examined, elicited, and narrated.

This narrative form extends beyond individual memory to reflect a collective historical memory reconstructed through the experiences of those who endured past violent events, which continue to influence the present. Multiple social institutions contribute to this process. Researchers such as Orlando Fals Borda, research groups including *Fundación del Sinú* and *Rosca de Investigación*, and institutions like the National Center of Historical Memory of Colombia (CNMH) each offer distinct approaches to reconstructing historical memory. These initiatives particularly emphasize the recovery of rural memories profoundly affected by Colombia’s history of conflict, as illustrated by the graphic narratives under study.

Memories and memory work are presented through graphic narratives that often adopt a prototypical narrative structure comprising a beginning, middle, and end. These structural elements present past events derived from memory and history. According to White, events from the past, as represented and narrated in stories, constitute a “historical discourse.” They are considered real because “first, they were remembered and, second, they are capable of finding a place in a *chronologically* ordered sequence” (White, 1990, p. 20, my emphasis). Nevertheless, graphic narratives do not always depict chronological sequences exactly as they occurred in reality.

History and memory are integral to graphic narratives, serving to convey meaning. As White (1990, p. 40) observes, they function as a “message” about a “referent” (the past,

historical events, individuals and communities, etc.), with content that provides both “information” and “explanation” (“the narrative” account); (emphasis and parenthesis by the author). Beyond communication, graphic narratives also serve as “political instruments” (Prorokova & Tal, 2018, p. 6), representing diverse perspectives on conflicts through the memories of survivors and witnesses, as well as through researchers’ efforts to challenge dominant narratives. Consequently, history, memory, and politics are closely interconnected within the communicative function of graphic narratives.

The graphic narratives examined emphasize storytelling traditions rooted in the oral histories of rural social groups and communities in Colombia. These narratives embody distinctive cultural practices, illustrating how verbal and visual elements provide innovative means to depict individual and collective life stories, testimonies, documents, and memories. As Hillary Chute observes, “Driven by the urgencies of re-seeing [violence and disaster] in acts of witness, [graphic narratives] propose an ethics of looking and reading [and are] intent on defamiliarizing standard or received images of history while yet aiming to communicate and circulate them” (2016, p. 31). This approach to storytelling will be analyzed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

3.3. Comics as a Medium for Historical Memory in Colombia

Beyond individual memory, collective traces persist within social groups and constitute collective memory. As Paul Ricoeur observes, “collective memory is held to be a collection of traces left by the events that have affected the course of history of the groups concerned” (2006, p. 119). Unlike individual memory, these traces are embodied not only within panels and pages but throughout the entire book, including its cover, paratexts, and graphic narratives, particularly in documentary comics. Building on these theoretical concepts, the following discussion adopts a practical approach by examining comics as case studies that illustrate the representation of historical memory in Colombia.

When collective traces of the past are associated with violent or traumatic events, the affected social group is compelled to process and communicate these experiences. Through this process, such traces are transformed into historical memory. The past leaves traces as “an affection resulting from the shock of an event that can be said to be striking, [or] marking” (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 14). These traumatic traces impact both individuals and social groups, manifesting at multiple levels. As a result, they are connected not only to personal experiences but also to the broader trauma experienced collectively by the group.

In Colombia, the traces left by violent events can be examined through multiple frameworks. Documentary comics represent one such framework (Conde Aldana, 2019; Guerra, 2018), as they facilitate the framing and portrayal of marginalized memories. The inclusion of these memories has become essential for clarifying historical narratives. Examining them acknowledges diverse perspectives and addresses historical injustices. As Ory Bartal observes, “in the postmodern age [...], personal memories [have begun] to permeate historical narrative[s]” (Bartal, 2016, p. 103). Including marginalized memories in broader narratives is essential for creating a more accurate, inclusive history that fosters understanding and reconciliation.

This section explores three case studies: *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* to show how comics represent historical memory in Colombia. Key questions include: How do comics organize, represent, and narrate the memories of victims of Colombia’s armed conflict? Why do comics serve as a medium for creating historical memory in Colombia? To address these questions, the analysis focuses on book-format comics, specifically their covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives. The study investigates how these works research, elicit, document, and convey marginalized memories.

4. Comic Covers: Evoking Memory through Color and Composition

This chapter addresses the research question: How do visual components on the covers of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* serve as introductory tools for presenting key topics regarding historical memory and enticing readers to explore their corresponding graphic narratives about individual and collective memories of marginalized communities in Colombia? The analysis focuses on the visual affordances of color and cover composition.

By integrating verbal and visual elements, the covers provide an initial insight into the memories portrayed within the comics' narratives. The use of color and composition directs readers' perceptions and expectations, foregrounding significant topics, settings, characters, and objects for further exploration. These covers underscore the contributions of comics to present "a critical picture of the problems and enormous social disparities" (Fernández l'Hoeste & Poblete, 2009, p. 7) in Colombia, which contributes to the reconstruction of historical memory. The discussion demonstrates how color and composition convey meaning, establishing covers as essential to the material and interpretive experience of comics in the context of historical memory.

4.1. Colors as Perceptual Indicators of Memory

On these covers, color functions as a perceptual cue to the collective memories of peasant communities and their histories of violence. It directs viewers' attention to prioritized information, contextualizes the comics' narratives, and provides insights into their content, narrative structure, creators, and contributors.

Color provides viewers with an initial impression of an object's physical properties, such as shape, contour, and texture. Beyond these attributes, color serves a semiotic function by communicating information (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, pp. 225–232; McCloud, 1994, pp. 185–192). On comic covers, color attracts viewers' attention, prompting engagement with both verbal and pictorial elements. As a perceptual element, color directs focus to key information and encourages further exploration of the narrative. Color possesses significant artistic, expressive, and semantic properties, acting as a pictorial vehicle that evokes sensations and emotions in viewers. These emotional responses depend on individual experiences with the distinctive features of color. Kress and van Leeuwen identify these features as value, saturation, purity, modulation, differentiation, and hue, each contributing to a color's potential meaning (cf. 2010, pp. 233–235). The interaction between cover colors and these properties shapes perception, while cultural context ultimately determines the meanings attributed to color.

Despite its significance, the role of color has received limited attention in the fields of history, memory, and comics studies, especially in Colombian comics, where their production has been “sporadic and scarce when compared to that of Argentina, Mexico, or Brazil” (Gómez, 2017, p. 49). Michel Pastoureau, a French historian and scholar of symbolism, has conducted the most extensive historical research on color, emphasizing that societies assign varying meanings to colors over time. His work adopts a socio-cultural and historical perspective.⁹⁹ While studies on the relationship between memory and color exist in neurological and physical sciences, there is a notable absence of such research within memory or cultural studies (Persaud, Hemmer, Kidd, & Piantadosi, 2017).

At the material level, color is a prominent feature in comics, immediately noticeable to readers. Many comics, particularly superhero classics, employ color extensively, granting it strong “iconic power” as colors “symbolize characters in the mind of [readers]”¹⁰⁰ (McCloud, 1994, p. 188). Another notable example is the *Adventures of Tintin* series by Hergé, where color is used to create a “democracy of form,” ensuring that no shape is less significant than another and establishing “a completely objective world” (McCloud, 1994, p. 190).

In contrast to color comics that depict fantastical worlds, such as superhero narratives, or objective realities, as in *Tintin*, comics set in the past often utilize black and white. However, color remains prevalent on most mainstream comic covers, serving as the primary visual element that captures attention. This analysis begins by examining color as a key pictorial component, considering the rationale behind specific color choices and their relationship to historical memory.

4.1.1. Red, White, and Black as Colors for a Distant Past in *Historia gráfica*

This section examines the colors red, white,¹⁰¹ and black on the cover of *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*. The depiction of white can be controversial, as it appears on the cover in sepia tone with a vintage character reminiscent of old photographs (see Figure 4-1). Verbal and pictorial elements within the small panels stand out against a black background that contrasts with a white, nearly sepia-colored background. This is reminiscent

⁹⁹ For more information on this subject, see Michel Pastoureau’s acclaimed collection of books on each color. This section uses Pastoureau’s books on red (2017), black (2009), and white (2023).

¹⁰⁰ For readers of comics and followers of heroes, it is rather straightforward to make a connection between green and Hulk. Likewise, the colors of superheroes’ suits facilitate their identification: blue and red for Superman, red for Spider-Man, or black for the modern version of Batman’s costume.

¹⁰¹ This analysis prioritizes white over sepia, as white constitutes the dominant tonal presence on the inside covers and content of the four comics comprising *Historia gráfica*. It is also important to recognize the variability of chromatic perception: while some viewers may interpret this hue as cream or sepia, others perceive it as white.

of vintage photo tonalities and evokes a feeling of the past. Through monochromatic color design, the four panels depicting information in black, embedded in sepia¹⁰² backdrops, reference past events. This visual strategy across the four cover panels fosters nostalgia and immerses readers in a historical context.

However, it can be difficult to clearly distinguish white from a sepia tone on this cover. Printing processes, paper aging, and surrounding design elements can subtly shift perception. A slightly warm white may appear sepia at first glance, especially if the overall design includes vintage or earthy tones.

For analytical purposes, this color would still be classified as white. Sepia implies a clearly identifiable brownish tint with intentional warmth. By contrast, white—even when printed with minor tonal variation—remains fundamentally neutral. In fact, white is the color used in the internal sub-covers to represent the four small panels that appear on the main cover.¹⁰³ Unless the warm tint is strong and deliberate enough to define the cover’s visual identity, it does not meet the threshold for being considered sepia. Therefore, even if the cover is sepia-toned (in the main title and the four panels), the analysis treats it as white.

The tricolor red, white, and black on the cover of *Historia gráfica* serves as a central symbolic element that connects to memories of rural communities from a bygone past. The three eye-catching colors guide viewers to focus on the cover’s important components. They help readers connect with collective memories of peasants rooted in the heritage of *pueblos originarios* (Indigenous Peoples) on the Colombian Atlantic coast. The interplay of red, white, and black gives the cover a nostalgic yet documentary essence. This evokes a poignant reflection on a distant yet significant past for *campesinos*.

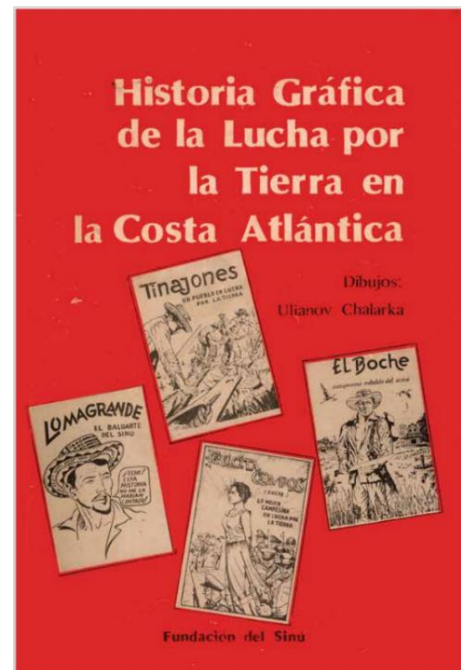


Figure 4-1: Cover emphasizing the use of the red-black-white tricolor (Chalarka, 1985).

¹⁰² Kim Timby asserts that while sepia is “widely used today to [...] qualify the coloration of [...] photographs of the 1850s-1870s” (2021, p. 212), “Black and White” only started to become part of the photographic color spectrum [...] during the era of industrially produced papers that started in the 1880s (Timby, 2021, p. 214, emphasis by the author). It follows that the sepia color precedes the combination of black and white in the photographs of yesteryear.

¹⁰³ See section: 5.1.1.1.4 Internal Sub-Covers to see the prevalence of white, not sepia, in the four images appearing on the main cover.

At first glance, this cover features three colors: red, white, and black (see Figure 4-1). Red is a primary color, along with blue and yellow. White and black “are not always recognized as true chromatic adjectives; essentially, they describe darkness and light” (Pastoureau, 2017, p. 14). Red, white, and black are a simple combination that any observer of the cover can easily identify. Their pictorial characteristics make them conspicuous: red is intense, black looks sharp, and white seems pristine. The white-black-red tricolor stands out at first glance. It makes the cover easily recognizable and therefore aesthetically compelling.

The visual allure of the *Historia gráfica* cover stems particularly from the sharp contrast generated by these colors. One might assume that using as few as three colors is insufficient to achieve a distinct contrast. Notwithstanding this presumption, “[c]olor contrasts don’t have to be huge” since our eyes are “sensitive to small differences” (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2017, p. 145). These slight but striking distinctions lie in the distribution of color on the cover of *Historia gráfica*. Figure 4-1 shows that red comes to the forefront and serves as a background for both white and black. Likewise, white serves as a backdrop for the scenery portrayed in black. They clearly guide viewers to focus on specific elements on the cover.

The red-white-black tricolor on the cover serves as an initial symbolic and contextualizing device that signals information about the production and potential themes, such as the opposition between history and memory addressed in *Historia gráfica*. The symbolic use of colors like white, black, and red dates back to ancient cultures, where they were used in cave paintings to depict important aspects of daily life, such as hunting, rituals, and representations of humans and animals (cf. Pastoureau, 2009, p. 25, 2017, p. 16; Petru, 2006). In cave paintings, red is the prevailing color, although black and white are not absent (cf. Pastoureau, 2023, pp. 16–18). In contrast, the cover of *Historia gráfica* features red as the dominant background, with black and white conveying verbal and pictorial elements. The use of red, white, and black suggests the comics depict an ancient past and reflect communal efforts, akin to early civilizations’ storytelling through art.

The red-white-black tricolor also underlines the narrative and documentary character of the stories in this comic. The narrative quality of *Historia gráfica* emerges if one relates these three colors to traditional stories in popular culture. Red, white, and black are the most commonly used colors in folktales across different world cultures (cf. Bolton & Crisp, 1979; Pastoureau, 2017, p. 135). Such colors naturally carry different connotations depending on the folktale. However, one can make a few generalizations about this triad in *Historia gráfica*. As John B. Hutchings highlights, “[i]n traditional stories and activities, white and black may be used to portray good and evil, and red the frightening color of blood” (2016, p. 340).

In *Historia gráfica*, these three colors seem to be associated with “oral tradition” that comprises “songs, proverbs, religious legends, superstitions, and folktales” (Russo, 2019, p. 265). As mentioned above, the stories in *Historia gráfica* primarily come from the oral histories of communities along the Atlantic coast. Thus, with the use of red, white, and black, readers receive a clue indicating that orality manifests primarily as graphic narratives. Readers can infer this from the images in the four panels on the cover. Color again operates as an introductory marker.

The documentary aspect of *Historia gráfica* also comes to the fore with the use of these three colors. Red bears a highly political connotation, primarily associated with revolution and resistance (cf. Pastoureau, 2017, pp. 167–175). Red as background on the cover is not only an aesthetic or narrative consideration, but also a political one. One of the fundamental purposes of *Historia gráfica* is to contribute to the organized and political action of rural communities whose territorial and human rights have been violated. In this case, red on the cover can have a connection with the “red flag”, which has historically symbolized the struggle of the oppressed since the French Revolution.¹⁰⁴

Red on the cover of *Historia gráfica* evokes peasant resistance and movements against political and economic elites who have been primarily responsible for the impoverishment of Colombia’s peasantry. Black and white symbolize the process of documenting the history of peasant struggles. These two colors have been the colors *par excellence* of documentation, research, and publication. Whether the study and examination of ancient “objects, artworks, and monuments by means of black-and-white reproductions” (Pastoureau, 2017, p. 8) or the close reading of different types of data ranging “from documents, from books and collections of images,” (2017, p. 9) black and white always predominate. The combination of red, white, and black designates the work as a documentary form that combines oral history from rural communities with the history of past events critical to understanding the struggles of Colombian *campesinos*.

The colors red, white, and black on the cover of *Historia gráfica* serve several symbolic purposes. They evoke a connection to the distant past, referencing their use by ancient communities and cave paintings to reflect group life and daily activities. These colors also suggest the integration of oral traditions with graphic narratives, highlighting the stories’ verbal origins. Additionally, red symbolizes struggle and resistance, emphasizing peasant efforts

¹⁰⁴ According to Michel Pastoureau, the connotation of struggle and resistance associated with red dates to the 18th century, during the French Revolution. This is due above all to two objects that have acquired a symbolic value: the red caps and the red flag. The first relates to the caps worn by the working class that were against the king and the privileged classes. The second connotes the flag colored with the blood of martyrs (cf. 2017, pp. 163–166).

against oppression, while black and white underscore the documentary nature of the stories, linking them to written and visual records of cultural and historical significance.

4.1.2. Multicolor as Background for a Contemporary Past in *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*

In contrast to the tricolor cover of *Historia gráfica*, the multicolored covers of CNMH's *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* utilize vibrant, digitally produced hues to represent dynamic, evolving memories of a more recent past. These brighter, digitally rendered colors indicate both modernity and the comics' relationship to contemporary digital archiving practices. Whereas *Historia gráfica* presents a vintage aesthetic through its color palette, the striking multicolored designs of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*, as illustrated in Figure 4-2, highlight their production using modern digital techniques and reinforce their engagement with current memory work.

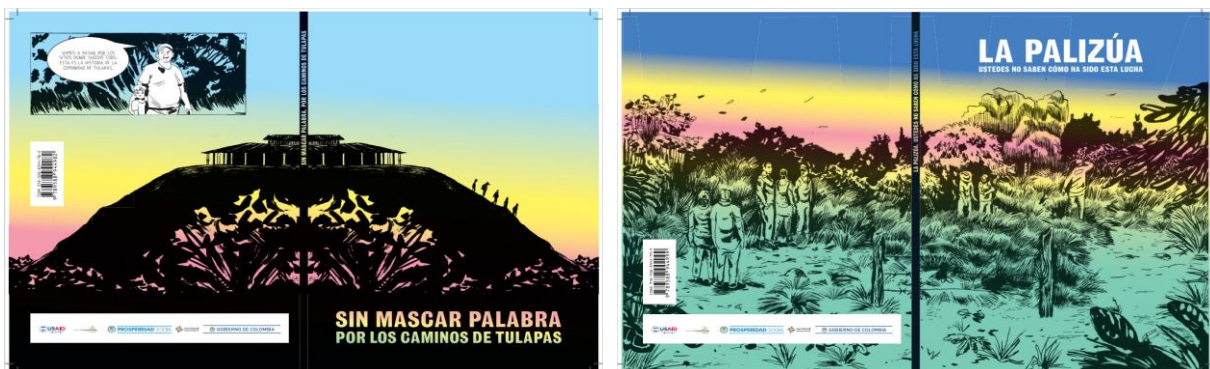


Figure 4-2: Covers displaying multicolor backgrounds and settings in *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b) and *La Palizúa* (CNMH, 2018a).

The multicolored and modern qualities of these covers are further evident in their use of red, white, and black. White is used sparingly, as demonstrated in the images. *La Palizúa* employs white as the primary color for its title and subtitle. Additionally, both covers use white as the background for small boxes that display the comics' identifying numbers and the logos of the social institutions responsible for sponsoring and commissioning their production.

The ISBN and barcodes are positioned on the left side of both covers. The ISBN serves to establish a book's identity, facilitate categorization, and ensure international availability. Although primarily used for commercial purposes, the ISBN is recommended for all publicly available books (cf. International ISBN Agency, 2022, p. 2), including free materials such as *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*. Consequently, these comics are accessible for research at both local and international levels, and the blank boxes on their covers draw attention to the

ISBN, underscoring their contemporary and scholarly significance. In contrast, the absence of an ISBN on the digital version of *Historia gráfica* suggests that it was initially intended for a limited audience, specifically peasants on Colombia's Atlantic coast in the 1970s.¹⁰⁵ Over time, however, *Historia gráfica* has become a valuable resource for the study of Colombia's history.

The white boxes on the back covers of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* display information about the sponsors involved in their production, including USAID¹⁰⁶ and the Colombian government. The slogan "Colombia is reborn post-conflict,"¹⁰⁷ used during the peace process with FARC-EP under President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), emphasizes efforts towards post-war peace. Featured in blue appears *Prosperidad Social*,¹⁰⁸ a Colombian government organization supporting conflict victims' reintegration. These details highlight the comics as modern cultural artifacts, created through collaboration among various institutions.

Another institution included in the white boxes is the CNMH. This center was in charge of commissioning the production of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* at the request of the inhabitants of *Tulapas* and *La Palizúa*, the geographical regions where the graphic narratives of both comics take place, respectively (cf. Guerra, 2018). Operating as a center ascribed to *Prosperidad Social*, whose main function is to recover, compile, analyze, and preserve any documentary material that contributes towards learning victims' recollections associated with the conflict in Colombia, both comics present themselves as documentary tools to narrate the past from the point of view of victims (cf. Andino, 2020; Guerra, 2018). By mentioning the CNMH within the white boxes, the cover acknowledges that the reconstruction of memory involves not only victims and witnesses but also the support of social institutions.

The white boxes on the covers of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* highlight key information, such as the ISBN, which identifies these comics as indexed, serious material accessible in libraries or archives. They also reflect collaboration between national and international institutions supporting Colombia's efforts to recover memory and truth. The white boxes and use of color indicate a high-budget production, in contrast to the limited tricolor

¹⁰⁵ *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica* was previously available in the CNMH archive, but it is no longer accessible there. When this dissertation's material was collected (2018–2019), it did not have an ISBN. Recently, it was found that the book now has this identification number, registered in 2019 with the Colombian ISBN agency. For more details, see <https://isbn.cloud/en/9789584863683/ulianov-chalarca/>.

¹⁰⁶ USAID stands for the U.S. Agency for International Development. Its role between 2014 and 2018 was to support efforts to guarantee sustainable and inclusive peace in Colombia during its post-conflict period. There are four major objectives that summarize USAID's efforts in Colombia. Firstly, to reinforce the participation of national institutions in rural areas. Secondly, to encourage the reconciliation of vulnerable populations. Thirdly, to enhance conditions for economic growth in the countryside. Finally, to strengthen sustainable environmental resiliency in Colombia. For more information, see USAID (2021).

¹⁰⁷ In Spanish, the text reads, "Colombia renace posconflicto".

¹⁰⁸ *Prosperidad Social* means social prosperity in Spanish. For more information about this organism, readers can visit the website <https://prosperidadsocial.gov.co/la-entidad/>.

cover of *Historia gráfica*, likely due to cost constraints. Actually, the use of color in comics often depends on available financial resources (cf. Baetens, 2011, pp. 111–112).

Following the exploration of white, readers can notice its use in a small panel in the upper left corner of the cover of *Sin mascar palabra*. It contains two characters that appear to be father and son. In a speech balloon, the man claims, “We are going to go through the places where it all happened. This is the history of the Tulapas community”¹⁰⁹ (CNMH, 2018b). Both characters and verbal information are in white (see Figure 4-3). The panel depicts a father and son, symbolizing transgenerationality, in which memories and experiences are passed from older to younger generations. White represents both infancy and old age, reflecting the cyclical nature of life and memory, as noted by Pastoureau (cf. Pastoureau, 2023, p. 124). It highlights the transfer of memories to preserve the past.



Figure 4-3: Panel depicting father-and-son figures on the cover of *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b, cover).

Ghosts appear as themes or narrators in several cultural artefacts. In different texts, images, and paintings, “[ghosts and spirits] are dressed in [...] the white of the pall, linen, or winding sheet that covered [dead people] before they were buried” (Pastoureau, 2023, p. 133). The whiteness of the figures superimposed on the blue, black, and green background gives the impression that the two characters are phantoms who wish to confide in their private stories. It is not only, however, the external features of the two characters in Figure 4-3 that give the impression they are ghosts, but also the nature of comics itself that heightens such an idea. Considering that, “pictures [in comics] produce an artificial presence [...], one could argue that [such images] show ghosts” (Herr, 2013, p. 153, my translation).¹¹⁰ That is to say, the drawings of characters

¹⁰⁹ The original reads, “vamos a pasar por los sitios donde sucedió todo. Esta es la historia de la comunidad de Tulapas”.

¹¹⁰ The original and complete citation reads, “[d]a die Bildgegenstände nur in und durch die Bilder sichtbar sind und somit überhaupt vorhanden sind, kann man sagen, dass die Bilder eine künstliche Präsenz erzeugen. Man kann auch sagen, dass sie Gespenster zeigen.”

in comics create the appearance of an ‘artificial presence’ of beings that exist only thanks to the cartoonist’s ability to portray them on the page and the cooperation of readers.

Sin mascar palabra and *La Palizúa* stand out for their colorful visuals. In *Sin mascar palabra*, the multicolored background resembles a sunset, symbolizing both the end of a day and the decline of something broader. In *La Palizúa*, this vibrant effect extends beyond the background to the entire scene and characters. Unlike the red-dominated cover of *Historia gráfica*, which signaled peasant struggles, red is absent in these two covers, suggesting that such struggles are no longer a central theme in these works.

While a vibrant cover might initially suggest a positive tone, in the instances of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*, the opposite holds true. The multicolored backgrounds on both covers evoke a sunset, heightening feelings of loss. Losses may extend beyond the struggles and movements of peasants to encompass the forfeiture of their property, including lands and homes, or even the devastating loss of loved ones. These heavy losses, together with other catastrophic events, certainly generate traumas that are difficult to forget. In this regard, it is important to consider that color functions as a narrative strategy to portray traumatic and post-traumatic events (cf. Baetens, 2011, p. 113; Kelley, 2018, pp. 94–97).

In conclusion, the covers of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* use digitally altered colors to convey a contemporary feel and suggest rural trauma or post-trauma. In contrast, *Historia gráfica* uses red, black, and white to evoke historical resistance and nostalgia through visual references to old photographs. Additionally, the selective use of white in the first two comics emphasizes institutional efforts to recover memory and highlights their international accessibility through standardized ISBN labeling.

4.1.3. Black Color as Preliminary Traces of Subjectivity in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*

In comics, black represents the line drawn by the artist’s hand with different types of pencils, whether wooden or mechanical. Comic artists use them for planning, sketching, or drafting. After generating ideas, artists use a variety of tools and surfaces to draw. Whether analog or digital, such drawing tools will always be handled by artists’ hands.¹¹¹ They use dip pens, refillable brush pens, or fountain pens, generally used with India ink for bordering or outlining,

¹¹¹ This statement, however, may come into question with the current boom of artificial intelligence. Indeed, this technology is used to generate images and text for comic creation (Bülow, 2023; Friedrichs, 2022). Here, we would no longer speak of the creative, subjective hand of the comic artist, but of a machine that creates comics.

filling in, and inking.¹¹² In any case, black color conveys the material used by the artist, which can be the graphite or charcoal of a pencil or the blackish liquid of India ink. In the narrator's perspective in chapter five, dedicated to narrativity in comics, the effect left by the pencil or ink material is also used for narrative effects in which the narrator's memory is not entirely clear or is dim. In addition, these effects can indicate a difference between the past and the present, where the past is not sufficiently sharp, and the present is well defined.

Yet, it is not simply the black color of the silhouettes, figures, or fillers appearing in comics. Black strokes left on the pages give away the subjectivity of comic artists. In other words, "the hand" of cartoonists imprint their "personal style" recognized through "subjective marks" on the pages (cf. Chute, 2010, pp. 9–11; Gardner, 2011) and covers of comics.

The use of black on the covers of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* reveals insights into their cartoonists. *Historia gráfica* prominently credits its artist, Uliánov Chalarka, whose name appears in black at the center-right of the cover, highlighting his importance as seen in Figure 4-1 above. Although these comics were a collaborative effort involving researchers, campesino leaders, and rural communities, the cover emphasizes Chalarka's role as the main creator. Acting as a mediator, Chalarka translated the peasants' memories and researchers' data into graphic narratives (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 8). This aligns with the term I call 'documentary drawing.'

I define the term 'documentary drawing' in the framework of this research as that style in which comic artists use their direct observation of models, render visually oral accounts coming from people, and ground their work in investigative material to make graphic narratives. In Chalarka's case, the people, i.e., the peasants, with whom he had contact, determine his style. However, his art also relied on interpreting visually, through drawing, both testimonies and memories of rural communities. In addition, Chalarka must also have had access to documentary and ethnographic material, such as field diaries, photographs, and interviews, among others, that contributed to refining his style, as shown on the cover and in the main text. Commenting on the pioneers of documentary and historical comics in Latin America, Mario Cárdenas asserts that Chalarka's style in *Historia gráfica*,

adopted several of the characteristics of Fals Borda's research approach, such as the active participation of peasants in the adjustments to the versions represented in the drawings of memories they recounted. This added an additional social stamp to his comics and

¹¹² For a detailed explanation of pencils, pens, and ink, as well as other supplies and tools used in the drawing of comics, see Cole (2020).

conferred a plebeian articulation to language and outcome. All this served to broaden peasants' conversations and memories (Cárdenas, 2022, my translation).¹¹³

Upon examining the cover of *Historia gráfica*, readers may discern meticulous and intricate details that leave no room for ambiguity. The thoughtful black strokes forming the illustrations on the cover are a clear initial indication of Chalarka's deliberate, unhurried craftsmanship in depicting *campesinos'* memories and historical memory work, where researchers' contributions are paramount to the development of these comics.

In *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*, the use of black assumes a significant yet distinct function on each cover. In *Sin mascar palabra*, black provides contrast against the colorful background, accentuating key elements such as the *bohío*-shaped house—a traditional rural dwelling in Colombia, typically made of natural materials like wood, mud, and palm thatch, and commonly associated with coastal and Indigenous communities—and silhouetted figures. The centrally positioned *bohío* conveys a sense of isolation and intrigue, while the shadowed figures, though lacking detail, attract attention and evoke curiosity through their minimalist design. On this cover, black emphasizes depth and emotion, inviting readers to engage with the graphic narrative.

In contrast, in *La Palizúa*, black functions primarily as an outlining and shading tool, assuming a more subtle role compared to its prominence in *Sin mascar palabra*. The characters, outlined in black, merge with the natural setting and appear as extensions of the rural landscape that dominates the cover. This visual integration encourages deeper engagement with the narrative, prompting exploration of the interplay between characters, nature, and rural environments.

Building on these visual strategies, comic artists leave their “stylistic markers” (Etter, 2017). They imprint a unique style that shapes the physical appearance and subjectivity or identity of all characters. As Thomas A. Bredehoft notes, “the visual style of the artist or artists [...] contributes a stylistic heteroglossia to the resulting works” (2011, p. 99). In this context, heteroglossia denotes the diversity of both visual and verbal styles used to construct character identities, representations, and possible scenarios. Consequently, covers offer initial cues for identifying patterns in character identities and setting elements, primarily through black, which may serve as a symbol of ‘documentary drawing.’

¹¹³ The original reads, “El trabajo de Chalarka adoptó varias de las características del modelo de investigación de Fals Borda, como la participación [...] de los campesinos en los ajustes a las versiones representadas en los dibujos de la memoria que ellos relataban. Esto le imprimió un sello social adicional a sus historietas y le dio una articulación plebeya al lenguaje y al resultado. Todo esto sirvió para ampliar la conversación y la memoria del campesinado”.

4.2. Cover Composition: Introducing Narrative Elements for Collective Memory

Cover composition in comics integrates graphic and verbal elements to convey meaning and preview key aspects of the narrative. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, composition organizes these elements into a meaningful whole (cf. 2010, p. 176). The hypothesis here is that covers primarily provide information related to individual and collective memory, especially imagery connected to past events. Images, text, and their arrangement, along with visual properties, together convey different messages to readers.

This section analyzes comic book covers as composite visuals using three key principles—information value, salience, and framing—which determine how verbal and visual elements are arranged, emphasized, and separated to guide the viewer’s attention (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 177). The covers of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* demonstrate how these principles work together through recurring compositional patterns—top-and-bottom, concentric, and left-to-right—shaping how memories and testimonies are visually introduced and interpreted.

4.2.1. Top and Bottom: Opposition of History and Memory in *Historia gráfica*

The cover of *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica* introduces its verbal and pictorial elements following the organization from top to bottom. Whatever is placed at the top is what is considered ideal or general, while those verbal-pictorial elements located at the bottom are what is real (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, pp. 186–193). As will be seen in this section, the composition of elements on the cover, with the top and bottom organization, creates a contrast between verbal and pictorial components. This sends visual messages to viewers that they can relate to the conflict of space within the cover. Likewise, such top and bottom composition suggests the struggle for rural space in Colombia.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is helpful to provide a general overview of the verbal-pictorial elements on this cover. Firstly, the title – *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica* – contains three expressions that help contextualize the text. *Historia gráfica* (graphic narrative¹¹⁴) that refers to the code of the text; *lucha por la tierra* (struggle for

¹¹⁴ In Spanish, *Historia gráfica* presents a difficulty in translation. *Historia* means both history and story. In fact, the stories in the text are framed in historical events documented by researchers who worked with the graphic novelist and the farmers interviewed in the making of this comic book. Therefore, I decided to translate this part as a graphic narrative because it implies both *story* and *history*.

land) related to the main topic of the narratives; and *la Costa Atlántica* (the Atlantic coast), which is the specific location where the stories take place. Secondly, Uliyanov Chalarka, the cartoonist, is a mediator between reality and fiction. Thirdly, images of characters appear as internal sub-covers of the four illustrated booklets that *Historia gráfica* contains. These titles are *Lomagrande: El valuarte del Sinu*; *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*; *El Boche: campesino rebelde del Sinu*; and *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en lucha por la tierra*. The images of these sub-covers depict a diverse assortment of characters that are the center of this analysis. Different elements on the cover, namely the title and other verbal-pictorial elements, bring important information into focus (cf. Meyer, 2015, p. 280).

Figure 4-4 shows the cover of *Historia gráfica* as a visual composite. A dashed vertical axis draws the viewer’s eye from top to bottom. A dotted line splits the cover into upper and lower sections. The title appears at the top; images, the cartoonist’s name, and the publisher are at the bottom. This layout fits the “top and bottom” information value (Arnheim, 1954/2009, pp. 30–33; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 186). Kress & van Leeuwen state that top elements carry ‘ideal’ information, representing a generalized knowledge and attracting attention. Bottom elements are ‘real’, providing practical or specific information, evidence, or action steps (cf. 2010, p. 186) .

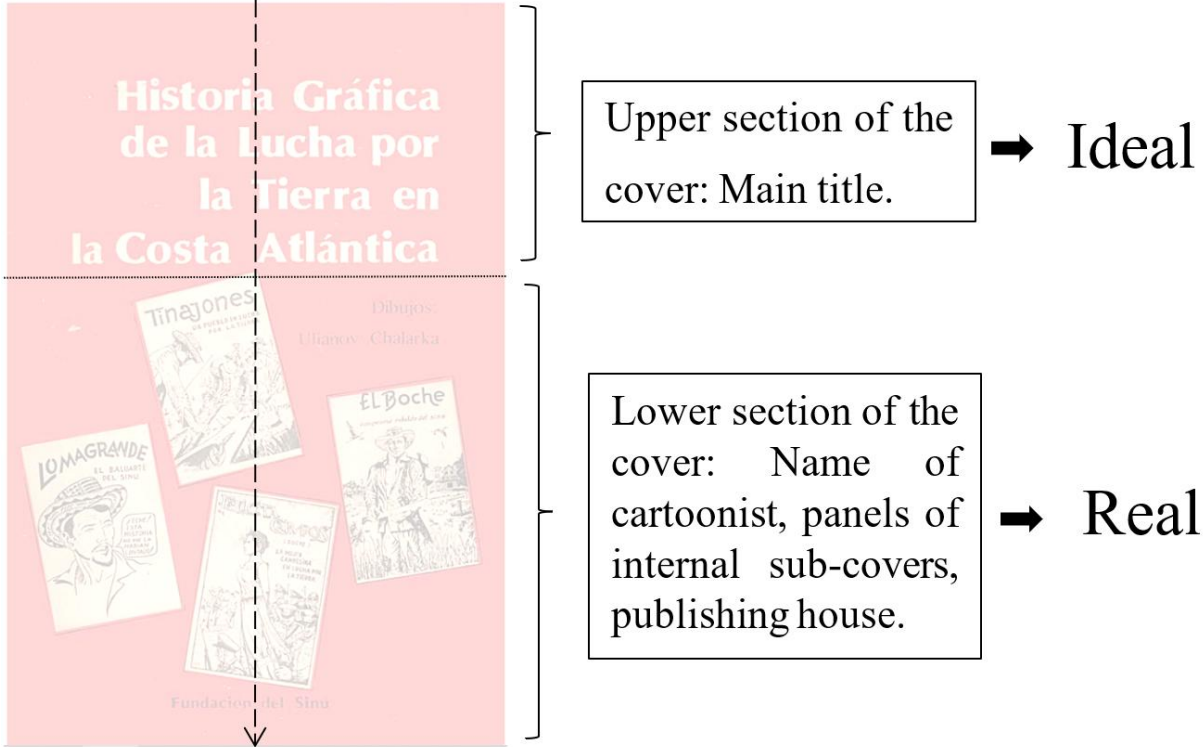


Figure 4-4: Information value of top and bottom in the cover of *Historia gráfica* (Chalarka 1985).

This cover of *Historia gráfica* shows an imbalance. Arnheim calls this “unevenness of space” because the visual zones are “dynamically unequal” (2010, p. 30). The top section, ‘the ideal,’ uses the title to give factual context—genre, topic, and place. Because it is mostly written, this section targets literate readers. The bottom section, ‘the real,’ appears mainly in images for potentially illiterate audiences, such as *campesinos* on the Colombian Atlantic coast, who are the comics’ main audience.

The lower section of the cover includes four panels of peasants and rural scenes, along with text, offering factual information (Figure 4-4). These panels present documentary evidence by showing real people, locations, and material through pictures and text. The images are more prominent than the text. The four illustrations in panels are actually mini-covers of the four comics composing *Historia gráfica*. They realistically depict Colombian peasants and landscapes, emphasizing the visual aspect of peasant memory.

Titles and subtitles under the mini-covers, plus the speech balloon, highlight the verbal aspect. In the *Lomagrande* panel, a young person says, “Eche! This story had not been told to me.”¹¹⁵ This uses a classic comic feature: the speech balloon. The titles and subtitles of the next three mini-covers emphasize the peasant struggle, such as *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra* (A town **fighting** for its land), *El Boche: campesino rebelde del Sinú* (El Boche: a **rebellious peasant** of Sinu), and *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en lucha por la tierra* (Felicita Campos: The peasant woman **in struggle for land**).¹¹⁶

These mini-covers focus on struggles for farmland. The cover’s lower part, ‘the real,’ combines images and words, showing a key comic feature. The observer sees that the documentary content consists of drawings depicting peasant memories and text that highlights both the story’s theme and its testimonial nature.

The specific and ‘down-to-earth’ information appears in stories and testimonies from peasants, in both verbal and pictorial forms. Because the comics focus on the struggle for farmland on the Atlantic coast, verbal-pictorial forms offer practical information. They present not only peasants’ memories, but also possible political actions tied to their experiences. With the title at the top in written form and the farmers’ information mostly in graphic form, the cover highlights a contrast, or opposition, between ‘the ideal’ and ‘the real’. This contrast arises from the placement and the verbal or graphic nature of information. Other visual elements on the cover further reinforce the idea of resistance.

¹¹⁵ The original text on the cover reads, “[i]Eche! Esta historia no me la habían contado.”

¹¹⁶ The booklet titles were translated by me. The use of bold is also my idea. I use it to emphasize concepts related to the struggle for farmland on the Atlantic coast.

Another element to consider on this cover concerns salience, which refers to how elements interact with observers. The large white (sepia)¹¹⁷ title of *Historia gráfica*, occupying nearly half the cover, contrasts sharply with the red background and black silhouettes of peasants and scenery in the sub-covers. This contrast creates a striking visual hierarchy. The interplay of colors—white, black, and red—adds symbolic meaning. According to Pastoureau, “color never occurs alone; it only takes on meaning, only fully “functions” from the social, artistic, and symbolic perspectives, insofar as it is associated with or opposed to one or many other colors” (Pastoureau, 2009, p. 12, emphasis by the author) as well as with other elements. As colors derive significance through their association with other elements, in this cover, black and white suggest exclusion and historical marginalization by the predominantly white ruling elite, who have historically oppressed indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasant groups. Hence, both black and white highlight themes of power imbalance and systemic exclusion.

The interplay of text and image—shaped by layout, scale, and color—creates visual contrasts on the cover that suggest a tension between memory and history. Four small panels, presented as mere two-dimensional pictures, stand out in the lower central part. The use of black upon a lighter background makes both lettering and characters stand out. This basic combination is known as “monochromatic color design,” in which one element is highlighted due to the emphasis “on a single color” (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 145). Monochromatism is not exclusive to cinema; photography and comic art also use this visual resource, in which the absence of color predominates (cf. Baetens, 2011, p. 114; Gockel, 2021, p. 45).

The cover panels depict peasants, identifiable by their attire, farming tools, and rural settings, highlighting Colombian rural identity. One panel shows a woman standing above armed men, suggesting themes of resistance and struggle. The black-and-white composition evokes sentiments of rural labor, memory, and hardship, implying a connection to past experiences and historical events. In fact, black-and-white imagery is a hallmark of comics that addresses memory within significant historical contexts, as seen in works like *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986/2003), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000/2008), and *Barefoot Gen* (Nakazawa, 1975/1987). Similarly, the cover of *Historia gráfica* signals that its content explores personal recollections tied to socio-political and historical conflicts.

The cover of *Historia gráfica* uses color contrast to juxtapose black-and-white panels—evoking individual memories—against a deep red background associated with violence,

¹¹⁷ As previously noted, the main cover of *Historia gráfica* uses sepia tones in the four panels that reproduce the booklet covers, evoking the appearance of aged photographs. However, this dissertation focuses on the use of white, as it is the most prominent color on the inside covers of the four comics. A more detailed discussion can be found in section 4.1.1.

disruption, and trauma. This visual opposition creates a sense of tension, suggesting a conflict between personal memory and public history, while the red backdrop reinforces the broader context of violence and historical rupture. Magali Compan and Madelaine Hron point out that “[comics] problematize the relationship between violence and memory, history, and counter-history [...] and celebrate visual expressions of culture as fertile sites of creation [...] that [...] intervene in tangible workings of violence” (Compan & Hron, 2015, p. 2). The cover uses color, contrast, and composition to draw attention while revealing tensions between personal memories and a violent past.

‘Framing’ in the covers highlights the connection and organization of elements. It has to do with those visible and invisible lines that a ‘visual composite’ displays and that indicate connection or disconnection as well as division and organization of elements (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 117). The four-panel frames that enclose the sub-covers, though seemingly disordered, guide the viewer’s eye in a circular trajectory, which suggests an interrelation or serialization of the stories. Each panel features varied lettering, characters, and settings, indicating distinct yet interconnected narratives. Peasants are central in all panels. Such centrality in the bottom zone of the cover emphasizes their role as both protagonists and creators of their own stories about the past.

Although the cover features a composition that emphasizes the value of information from top to bottom, the four panels in the lower section and their organization give prominence to the graphic representation of characters, specifically peasants. The centrality of the panels suggests that a bottom-up value of information also emerges and competes with the top-down composition. Arnheim states that “[t]o rise upward means to overcome resistance” (2009, p. 30). In this line of thought, the bottom-up flow of information from the four panels, which appear to resist the dominance of the large title, symbolizes the struggle of marginalized peasants to assert their narratives. This suggests that their stories, rooted in disadvantage and marginalization, challenge the dominant history perpetuated by privileged classes, where the powerful traditionally overshadow the weak.

The top-down composition of the *Historia gráfica* cover conveys a sense of inequality. The prominent title and dominant red background symbolize violence and the control exerted by privileged classes over peasant communities. The title’s size and placement above the four black-and-white panels, which depict rural peasants and their environments, further emphasize this hierarchical structure. The intense red background evokes the violent and traumatic history of land dispossession experienced by Colombian rural communities. However, the central arrangement of the four panels in the lower section of the cover signifies cooperation among

peasant communities. The inclusion of Ulianov Chalarka and *Fundación del Sinú* in this area reinforces the concept of collaboration between social organizations and campesinos. Collectively, the elements at the bottom appear to rise, suggesting resistance to the dominance represented by the title and red background, which symbolize the ruling classes in Colombia.

Despite its top-down composition, the cover centers on farmers by depicting their experiences through panels that evoke peasant memories, places, and testimonies. These elements foreground grassroots perspectives in shaping historical memory, while the combination of text and image highlights tensions between official history and lived experience.

4.2.2. Concentric System: Centering as an Organizational Principle of Memory in *Sin mascar palabra*

The cover composition of *Sin mascar palabra* contrasts with that of *Historia gráfica*. Graphic elements are at the top, while verbal components, including the title and sponsors, are at the bottom. The central section is particularly prominent, directing viewers' attention and shaping their interpretation of the composition. Arnheim notes that the central placement of dynamic elements significantly influences how viewers assign meaning to other components (cf. 1982, p. 37). The central elements on the cover attract attention and generate additional layers of meaning, thereby contributing to an understanding of how peasants' recollections and testimonies are collected and represented.

A key organizational element on the cover is a central structure, a house or hut, which immediately draws attention due to its prominent size and placement. This house organizes the viewer's engagement and directs attention outward. Thus, the arrangement establishes a concentric compositional system that structures the visual narrative, which is a core argument developed further below.

The cover of *Sin mascar palabra* (see Figure 4-5) utilizes a concentric composition, visually centering a house as the axis of information and community narratives. This central house symbolizes communal and familial space, serving as the origin of testimonies and memories. The cover foregrounds the significance of social and family connections in the construction of historical memory. Surrounding the house are images of people, speech balloons, and silhouettes, all of which emphasize interpersonal communication and collective storytelling. The following close reading demonstrates how the central composition directs attention, linking family and community as essential components in the preservation and formation of historical memory.

In the figure, viewers see the central element: the image of a construction standing on a hill. Its location on the cover and its visual characteristics catch observers' attention. These features also guide their gaze across the surface. One can argue that the cover's visual composition is structured around its center. In other words, it has a 'centric system of organization.' A component located at the center attracts the most attention. Other verbal-



Figure 4-5: Cover of *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b).

pictorial components are 'subordinate' to it (cf. Arnheim, 1982, p. 207; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, pp. 194–196). In this composition, the 'information value' comes from elements situated in the central zone of the visual composite. Such organization in comics draws viewers' attention to a specific central point. Their gaze does not roam as much across the page (cf. Schüwer, 2008, p. 90). While the central image carries most of the informational value, the other verbal-pictorial elements are somewhat subsidiary. In any case, "[t]he position of the central point of the image determines the interest of the whole, even if [viewers] hardly realize it" (Bal, 1994, p. 14).

The cover centers on a *bohío*—a traditional hut linked to Indigenous and peasant communities in Colombia—which symbolizes a communal space for storytelling, knowledge, and social interaction, similar to a *maloca*. Positioned at the center, it organizes the surrounding images and text, emphasizing storytelling as a dynamic process and highlighting its role in shaping collective memory and shared experiences within the community. The figures walking downhill and the speech balloon highlight storytelling as an active, interactive, and sequential process. These elements reinforce the central image as the origin and organizer of collective memories, traditions, and shared experiences within the *Tulapas* community.

The central element on the cover imparts significance to the surrounding components. For example, the figure with a child in the right panel of the *bohío* introduces the exchange of ideas and stories orally, as depicted by the speech balloon. The images of people descending the hill also suggest interaction, potentially representing 'walking to narrate' or 'walking as a

form of narration,’ in which “the structure of a walk from one place to another [...] is a classic narrative spine[:] it has a beginning, a middle and an end” (Christie, 2015, p. 132). The *bohío* thus serves as the core of the cover, from which additional verbal and visual elements unfold and acquire meaning. These elements become increasingly significant for storytelling and community remembrance.

With the *bohío* as the kernel of the cover, each element assumes a specific role (see Figure 4-6). The cover employs a ‘concentric system’ to arrange all verbal and pictorial elements.¹¹⁸ In this configuration, the *bohío* serves as the midpoint and orientation point for determining the roles of subordinate elements. The kernel functions as a “perceptual [...] gravitational” point (Arnheim, 1982, p. 37), attracting and defining the roles of other elements within the concentric visual composite. To facilitate visualization, organization, and the interplay of elements, the figure displays elliptical orbits that guide the placement of components around the kernel.

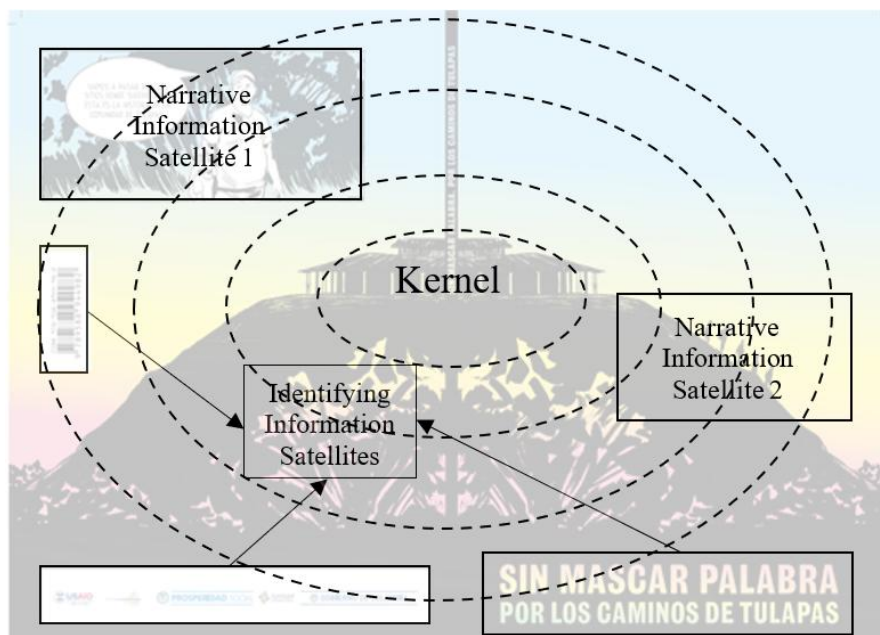


Figure 4-6: A concentric system in the cover of *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b).

The cover features significant verbal-pictorial components surrounding the central image (see Figure 4-6). The images of anthropomorphic characters possess substantial semantic

¹¹⁸ According to Rudolf Arnheim, a concentric system “deploys itself around a fixed point” or “point of reference” (1982, p. ix) through which other elements are organized “either two-dimensionally or three-dimensionally” (1982, p. 215). To create a concentric system, Arnheim combines a Cartesian grid composed of vertical and horizontal lines with a system of circles. The concentric system I present here is based on the solar system. It consists of elliptical orbits, a kernel, and some satellites. Independent of the system or model, Arnheim affirms that a “[r]eference is indispensable for any spatial statement we wish to make” (1982, p. ix) in relation to a visual composite.

value, providing information about the type of ‘memory telling’ narration that will occur. These elements can be designated as *narrative information satellites*. In contrast, certain elements on the cover do not serve a narrative function.

Examination of these non-pictorial elements reveals two primary characteristics. First, they are either numerical or verbal rather than pictorial. Second, these elements are positioned in the outermost orbits, farthest from the kernel. Examples include the title, a box for sponsoring institutions, and the ISBN, all of which function as identifiers for the comic. These elements can be termed *identifying information satellites*. Thus, within a concentric system of composition, two types of information satellites are present: *narrative information satellites* and *identifying information satellites*.

The *narrative information satellites* revolve around the center and depict human figures near the *bohío*. In the upper left zone of the cover, two white characters—a father and his son (*narrative information satellite 1*)—are displayed. The lower right section features black silhouettes of five smaller characters (*narrative information satellite 2*). Both sets function as preliminary narrative components. These narrative information satellites provide cues about the nature of the storytelling employed in the comic. They communicate visually through placement, size, color contrast, and differences in sharpness, rather than solely through verbal means.

According to the interrelated systems described by Kress and van Leeuwen (cf. 2010, p. 177), the information value of the cover composition is structured by a concentric system centered on the kernel. Other elements become salient through their interaction with the *bohío*. For instance, *narrative information satellite 1*, which frames the adult and child, is particularly prominent due to its visual properties and distinct frame. Both figures are depicted at a larger scale than the kernel and *narrative information satellite 2*, appearing from the waist up in what is termed a ‘medium shot’ (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 189; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 175; Monaco, 2000, p. 204). This format makes the figures’ posture, expressions, and gestures more noticeable to viewers.

In a medium shot, body parts such as the hands, arms, torso, and face become prominent, as illustrated in *narrative information satellite 1* in Figure 4-6. These body parts are instrumental in conveying non-verbal messages or complementing verbal information. Charles Forceville, Elisabeth El Refaie, and Gert Meesters emphasize the communicative role of arms and hands, stating that “we can gesture and simulate much more accurately with our hands and arms than with other body parts” (Forceville, El Refaie, & Meesters, 2014, p. 489). This is evident in *narrative information satellite 1*. The adult’s right hand gently placed on the child’s

back may signify a close familial bond and protective relationship, while the use of the left arm, combined with posture and facial expressions, reinforces the verbal message. The use of hand and arm movements to complement or emphasize spoken words is a widespread communicative practice that transcends cultural boundaries.

Gestures, postures, and body movements serve to convey emotions, thoughts, and intentions. In a broader context, arms and hands function as powerful conduits of nonverbal communication, a phenomenon vividly depicted in the comics medium. For example, the prominent panel featuring the father and son on the cover of *Sin mascar palabra* illustrates how the father's arms and hands amplify his assertions. This effect is further enhanced by the nostalgic expressions on both characters' faces. As Forceville et al. note, "[t]he depiction of eyes and mouths is especially informative" (2014, p. 489), which serves to enhance verbal information. Gaze and posture also play a crucial role in verbal communication, significantly enhancing the effectiveness of the message. The characters' gaze and posture in the main panel create the impression that they are looking directly at the viewer, emphasizing the testimonial nature of the speech balloon. These visual and textual elements collectively invite viewers to engage with the graphic narratives.

The silhouette of the group descending the hill also conveys meaning, providing insight into the graphic narratives that will unfold within the comic. This group is represented by *Narrative Information Satellite 2*. The semantic information of this satellite becomes apparent when it is compared with *satellite 1*. The contrasting pictorial properties of the two satellites communicate specific meanings regarding the characters on the cover. While *narrative information satellite 1* emphasizes oral testimony, the visual properties of the silhouettes in *satellite 2* also convey messages about the form of storytelling that will be presented.

The cover of *Sin mascar palabra* employs the placement, properties, and framing of visual elements to establish a dynamic interplay between stillness and movement. In *satellite 1*, the larger white characters appear stationary and close to the viewer due to their framing and upper-left positioning, which lends them visual weight. Conversely, *satellite 2* features smaller, darker silhouettes in the lower-right area, generating an illusion of motion through variations in size, placement, and contrast. The *bohío*, or kernel, functions as the narrative center, symbolizing interaction and the origin of communal stories.

This composition produces a sense of perceptual movement, guiding the viewer's gaze from *satellite 1* to the kernel and then to *satellite 2*. This visual sequence evokes narrative connotations, suggesting the characters' journeys through both physical and mnemonic landscapes. Walking is presented as a storytelling strategy that links memory and place within

the *Tulapas* community. The cover's arrangement introduces the graphic narrative's central themes and encourages readers to explore the interconnections among collective memory, movement, and storytelling in the main text.

4.2.3. Left and Right: Temporal Organization of Memory in *La Palizúa*

La Palizúa, similar to *Sin mascar palabra*, employs a double-page cover as a horizontal canvas for both text and imagery. This layout, frequently used in film and television, allows for a spacious arrangement of content. As Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith note, "since the film frame is a horizontal rectangle, the director usually tries to balance the right and left halves" (2017, p. 143). Although *La Palizúa*'s cover is not symmetrical, it achieves compositional balance through a vertical black line and the strategic placement of textual elements.

Following the discussion of compositional balance, Figure 4-7 displays a black line representing the spine of the physical comic *La Palizúa*. This line divides the cover into two nearly symmetrical halves, each resembling a frame—one on the left and one on the right—containing both verbal and graphic elements. The black line contributes to the compositional balance of the cover; in its absence, the viewer's gaze would likely move randomly across the composition.

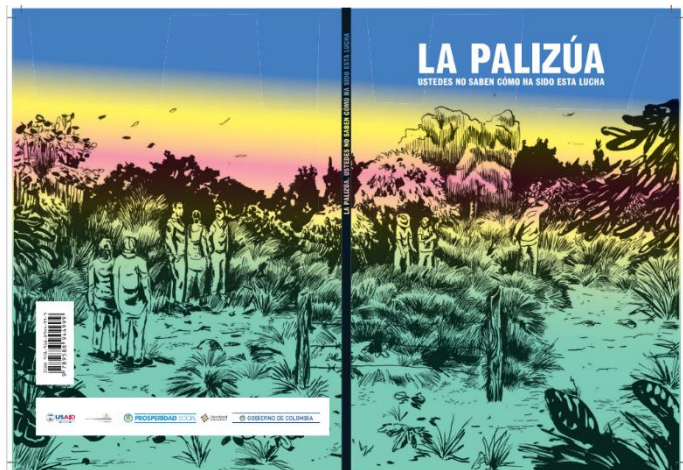


Figure 4-7: Cover of *La Palizúa* (CNMH, 2018a).

Building upon this, verbal elements further establish balance on the cover: sponsoring institutions are positioned in the lower-left, while the title and subtitle are located in the upper-right. Consistent with *Sin mascar palabra*, the information on the left represents content already familiar to viewers. Kress and van Leeuwen explain that left-side elements signify the "Given" (familiar), whereas right-side elements denote the "New" (unfamiliar or introduced) (cf. 2010, p. 181). Consequently, the institutional sponsors on the left anchor the context, while the title and subtitle on the right direct attention to the narrative's new focus.

If the informational value is interpreted as progressing from left to right, the viewer's gaze begins in the lower-left section of the cover, where the sponsoring institutions and the publishing house that financed the memory work for *La Palizúa* and *Sin mascar palabra* are

displayed. Both covers consistently present this information in the lower left, emphasizing the institutional construction of historical memory as a foundational element for understanding these comics. In contrast, the upper-right section of the cover introduces a new narrative titled *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha*. Here, the title and subtitle encompass the knowledge, facts, and testimonies that the rural community of *La Palizúa* contributes as new information. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the left and right quadrants in compositional organization reflect an “ideological” assignment of informational value. Thus, the creators of the cover employ this structure to highlight specific information and guide readers. However, viewers do not necessarily have to follow it (cf. 2010, p. 181).

This organization aligns with the authorship of the comics. Let us remember that the author of these comics is a collective. A group of people, including social institutions, researchers, social leaders, and campesinos, produces them. The collective author establishes a set of ideas or precepts and provides cues for reading the cover of *La Palizúa*. The information value from left to right acts as a kind of “ideology” or set of guiding ideas for exploring the cover. This ideology will also appear in the textual organization and storytelling of the paratexts and graphic narratives in the comics.

Though the title, subtitle, and sponsoring names use words, the main impression of the cover remains visual, as with prior covers. The arrangement, prominence, and framing of these elements are unclear, so no single feature stands out. With nothing positioned above, below, or at the center of the composition to direct the gaze, the collective rural scene draws all attention. This setting shapes viewers’ understanding and offers cues for interpreting the cover.

The rural landscape in Figure 4-7 acts as a landmark that may later help trigger memories within the graphic narratives. At present, the scene appears enigmatic. Unlike the two earlier covers, which provided clear reference points through character details, defined settings, and distinct element placement, this scene lacks precision and covers the entirety of *La Palizúa*’s cover. The composition indicates a relationship between nature and the characters, as their similar colors create an unsettling atmosphere.

All the graphic elements seem to have the same importance in the cover’s composition. This effect comes from the vivid colors that fill all the pictorial forms. The cover implements a technique called ‘tinting’. This is a cinematographic technique used mainly in silent films. In it, dark areas take on black, while lighter zones acquire a tinge of the color (cf. Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 163). Unlike monochromatic or sepia-toned, this cover uses a wide variety of digitized colors. All graphic elements, both background and characters, feature the same multicolor tint. Because their colors match the environment, human figures become part of the landscape. They

mingle with their rural surroundings. Shadows and outlines, including those of the human figures, are depicted in black.

As discussed previously, the use of color on the cover conveys the characters' traumas or psychological states. The cover of *La Palizúa* achieves this effect by depicting the characters in full-body, long shots, where the "figures are more prominent, but the background still dominates" (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 189). Although the characters' presence is highlighted through their depiction, their rigid postures, silence, and immersion in the landscape's vivid colors indicate a loss of individual identity. The blending of colors between the characters and the environment suggests mimicry, reinforcing the notion that the landscape subsumes their distinctiveness.

This cover features figures rendered transparent and almost invisible. In non-fiction stories, "[t]he basic assumption is that invisible characters stand in a complex relationship to [...] persons who are defined as socially, ethically, or politically invisible" (Guttzeit, 2021, 5th paragraph). On the cover of *La Palizúa*, the characters are present within the landscape, yet their bodies are almost transparent, visually integrated with the setting. The outlines of their bodies and the lines in their hair and clothing are the most discernible features. As the multicolored forms blend with the rural background, these characters appear to lack corporeal substance.

The cover suggests that the characters are rendered invisible, meaning viewers either do not see them or choose not to, even though they are present. The reason for this invisibility remains uncertain, but the motif may signal a form of powerlessness. Drawing on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952),¹¹⁹ Gero Guttzeit describes how invisibility represents social exclusion and a denial of recognition (cf. 2021, 12th paragraph). Although the context here differs, the cover employs invisibility to raise questions about social recognition and presence in the landscape.

The denial of recognition as members of Colombian society is visually manifested on the cover. The characters appear in the landscape, but viewers find it difficult to recognize them. Only their outlines and contour lines blend with the surrounding vegetation. This visual treatment may signify the presence of human remains in the landscape. The absence of verbal communication, indicated by the lack of speech balloons, and the prevailing silence further contribute to the characters' lack of recognition. Together, these elements illustrate what Gero

¹¹⁹ Do not confuse Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* with H.G. Wells' 1897 science fiction novel of almost the same title, *The Invisible Man*.

Guttzeit (2021) suggests about *Invisible Man*: social invisibility results in real individuals being treated as if they were fictitious or nonexistent.

Even when characters remain immobile, invisible, and silent within the rural landscape, their outlines serve as counter-strategies against the social invisibility and silence depicted in Figure 4-7. The spatial organization of characters within the landscape functions as a form of communication. Notably, “landscape formats” favor a horizontal arrangement of elements (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010, p. 185), as demonstrated by the eight characters on the cover. This format facilitates the horizontal distribution of visual components and encourages a smooth, left-to-right movement of the viewer’s gaze. Viewers typically regard elements on the left as a “point of departure,” following the pictorial composition as if it were arranged from left to right (cf. Arnheim, 1982, p. 37). This directional reading applies not only to written texts but also to visual compositions, such as the cover image, as well as paintings or photographs.¹²⁰ Art historian Heinrich Wölfflin has observed that “pictures are “read” from left to right” (Arnheim, 1954/2009, p. 33, emphasis by the author).

The alignment of characters on the cover reinforces a left-to-right compositional structure. The information value directs the viewer’s gaze from the two characters on the left toward the solitary figure on the right. This arrangement primarily guides the viewer’s eye across the composition. Cognitive processes tend to impose organization on seemingly unordered compositions, as observed in this landscape. Rudolf Arnheim notes that, “[f]rom tracings of eye movements we know that viewers explore a visual scene by roaming about irregularly and concentrating on the centers of major interest” (1954/2009, p. 36). On the cover of *La Palizúa*, the human characters constitute the primary points of interest.

As previously noted, reading from left to right is characteristic of Western cultures and applies to both written texts and images presented in a landscape format, such as this cover. This directional reading also extends to other artistic forms, including theater. Arnheim observes that, “when the curtain rises in the theater, the audience is inclined to look to its left first and to identify with the characters appearing on that side [of the stage]” (1954/2009, p. 34). This phenomenon has implications for how viewers scan the visual field of *La Palizúa*’s cover.

Figure 4-8 illustrates the trajectory of the viewer’s gaze from the left frame to the right on the cover. The initial focal points are the first two characters and the verbal information in the bottom left, corresponding to the sponsors and institutions involved in constructing

¹²⁰ This occurs in Western cultures where people are trained as children to read from left to right. In cultures where people read from right to left, the opposite is true. In exploring any type of image, including photos, paintings, or even web page layouts, observers tend to consider elements on the right side of the visual field as the starting point. For more information and examples, see Kress and van Leeuwen (2010, pp. 181–184) and Bal (1994, pp. 14–15).

historical memory. These elements serve as the *point of visual departure*, analogous to characters entering a stage. Perceived immediately, they guide the viewer’s gaze from left to right, traversing other characters, vegetation, and the vertical dividing line between the two frames, ultimately reaching the final character positioned alone in the right frame with his back turned. This character, along with the title, subtitle, and upper-right verbal information, forms the *point of visual arrival*.

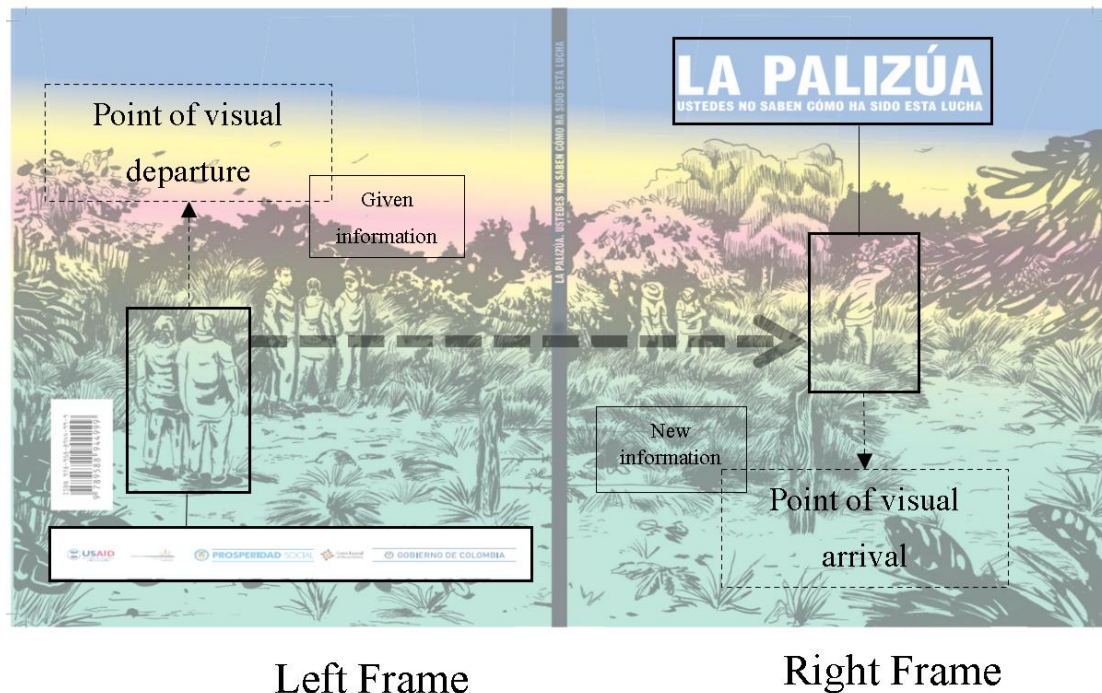


Figure 4-8: Composition of elements in the cover of *La Palizúa* (CNMH, 2018a) showing the value of information from left to right.

The figure above depicts the movement of the viewer’s gaze from left to right, represented by a dashed arrow connecting the *point of visual departure* in the left frame to the *point of visual arrival* in the right frame. As previously discussed, the information on the left serves as the given, or familiar, content, while the right side introduces new information that readers will encounter as they engage further with the graphic narratives in *La Palizúa*. Further analysis of this progression will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

The informational progression from the left to the right frame, where graphic and verbal elements intersect and guide the viewer’s gaze from an initial to a terminal point, can be interpreted as a representation of cooperative effort. This collaboration involves social institutions and marginalized communities working together to make visible the experiences, testimonies, and recollections of underprivileged rural populations through the comic *La Palizúa*.

In conclusion, the covers of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* utilize artistic techniques such as color symbolism, visual composition, and verbal-pictorial integration to foreground themes of memory, community, and identity. The analysis demonstrates that *Historia gráfica* employs red, black, and white to symbolize tensions between landowners and peasants, with a top-down composition reflecting conflicts between official and grassroots narratives. *Sin mascar palabra* centers the image of a *bohío* or house, representing home as the core of memory, and incorporates elements such as family portraits to emphasize oral testimonies and collective memory. *La Palizúa* adopts a left-to-right layout to convey temporal progression and the invisibility of *campesino* memories, with characters blending into the landscape to underscore collaboration between communities and institutions, thereby rendering these memories visible to readers.

The findings suggest that the verbal-pictorial elements on these covers introduce the oral histories of marginalized rural communities and propose potential approaches for reconstructing historical memory in Colombia. However, a more comprehensive exploration of these themes occurs within the comics themselves. The subsequent chapter will examine paratextual elements, offering detailed insights into the socio-political challenges and the efforts of research groups to document and preserve the memories of Colombia's rural communities.

5. Paratextual Components: Framing the Past

This chapter turns to the dimension of paratexts in comics. It examines the paratextual elements of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* to address the following research question: How do the paratexts of comics serve as scaffolding elements that contextualize and introduce memory work, research, recollections, and testimonies in Colombian peasant communities, and in what ways do they shape the understanding of historical memory?

The chapter argues that paratexts—both textual and visual—play a vital role in framing historical memory in comics. In other words, they serve as preliminary frames of reference for historical memory from the victims’ perspectives. As Johannes C.P. Schmid affirms, paratexts in comics “evoke [material] frames concerning the represented events” (2021, p. 65) within graphic narratives. Basically, paratextual elements indicate two important aspects. First, they inform readers about aspects of the production and creation of the material documented in comics. Second, paratexts provide contextual information that introduces readers to stories about recollections and testimonies of individuals and their respective social groups. This is particularly done through verbal-pictorial frames.

Paratexts enhance comprehension by gradually introducing themes and facilitating readers’ engagement with the graphic narratives. Rather than being peripheral, these elements provide structural and documentary value, immersing readers in both the historical and experiential dimensions of the three comics under study. As Schmid notes, “paratexts” guide readers “in how to make sense of [comics],” demonstrate “why they should care” about these works, and “situate graphic narratives within the frame of documentary” (Schmid, 2021, p. 65). Thus, the paratexts of these comics structure and organize peasants’ memories for communication, understanding, and sharing, functioning not only as narrative devices but also as documentary material that supports readers’ engagement on material, historical, and investigative levels.

5.1. Material, Historical, and Research Framing

Operating within the confines of comics’ physicality, paratexts contribute significantly to giving historical memory an initial form and presentation. They are not mere textual elements or visual embellishments for publishing purposes. Instead, they actively contribute to the initial form and identity of each work.

Beyond the cover, various paratextual elements are essential mediators connecting readers to the main content. Internal covers, tables of contents, dedications, and accompanying

graphic elements not only impart a distinct identity to each comic but also delineate their unique roles as material and research vessels for historical memory in Colombia. The interplay of these material and visual components frames the graphic narratives and guides readers, thereby enriching the historical significance of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* in the exploration of Colombia's violent past.

5.1.1. Material Framing

Paratexts function as key elements of material framing. In both print and digital formats, *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* prioritize the visual experience as central to conveying historical memory. Paratexts, together with the main text, remain materially present across formats, assisting readers in navigating and interpreting memory on individual, collective, and historical levels. Their consistent visual presence reinforces the role of these comics as tangible media for engaging with memory in the Colombian context.

The PDF versions of the three comics in question retain the identical organizational and presentational structures of the physical format, including both paratextual components and the main text. In these comics, paratexts encompass those “accompanying” elements, which can be either pictorial, verbal, or both, that “surround,” “expand,” or more precisely, “make present” the content enclosed within the core text, facilitating “its reception and consumption in the form of [...] a book” (Genette, 1997b, p. 1). On the other hand, the main text is where memories, experiences, and testimonies of peasant communities, as well as memory work, are verbally and pictorially portrayed, that is, in the form of graphic narratives.

The transition from analog to digital formats primarily alters how readers navigate these comics. In the analog format, readers engage tactilely by physically turning pages. In the digital format, navigation occurs through interaction with external devices such as a computer mouse, keyboard, smartphone, or tablet, facilitating movement from paratexts, specifically peritexts, to the main text.

The transition from print to digital comics reduces the tactile experience, such as the sensation of paper, while enhancing the prominence of visual elements. In digital formats, visual components become the primary mode of reader engagement with graphic narratives. Nevertheless, *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* maintain a strong visual consistency between paratexts and main content. This consistency enables readers to “recognize” these components, “even when [these comics are] published in [a] digital form”

(Borsuk, 2018, p. 241). The digital versions preserve the book-like appearance, organization, and presentation of covers, paratexts, and main text.

Two primary distinctions characterize the formats and material frameworks of the three comics. First, during the 1970s, *Historia gráfica* was released as thematic fascicles, whereas *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* were issued as standalone publications. Second, the creators' choices determined how these formats affected readers' experiences and engagement, thereby connecting publication methods to reader interaction.

Historia gráfica comprises four stories originally published as illustrated booklets: *Lomagrande: El baluarte del Sinú*, *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, *El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinú*, and *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en lucha por la tierra*. These booklets form part of a comics series that addresses key issues relevant to peasant communities on the Atlantic coast. The content encompasses the region's history, cultural traditions, lived experiences, and anecdotes. The comics were designed to return to these communities the knowledge and information about the past that they helped reconstruct in collaboration with researchers (cf. Chalarka, 1985, 4, paragraph 3).

The collaboration between researchers and peasants from the Atlantic coast aimed to achieve a "historical recovery" (Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A), sought to empower Atlantic coast peasants by documenting their perspectives. Each booklet serves as a record of themes central to Colombia's peasantry, emphasizing the efforts of peasants to defend their rights and lands (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A- 184A). The illustrated booklets comprising *Historia gráfica* were initially published in a serialized comic format and later compiled into a single volume.

The serialized distribution of these booklets follows a common comics practice and provides a structured, accessible way for peasant communities to engage with historical content. By fostering anticipation and sustained interest, serialization becomes a tool for organizing and conveying complex socio-historical information. This format supports the dissemination of knowledge among geographically and socially marginalized communities, with the installments collectively forming a meaningful cultural artifact.

In these booklets, *campesinos* are also recognized as the intellectual agents of their own experiences and recollections, woven into the fabric of Colombian history. Speaking up for vulnerable and marginalized people in Colombia involves serious risks. Within this context, Umberto Eco reflects on the "accusation against mass culture" (Eco, 1968/1988, pp. 41–45). Throughout history, according to Eco, there has persisted a pervasive "distrust towards egalitarianism, the democratic rise of the multitudes, the reasoning made by the weak and for

the weak”¹²¹ (Eco, 1968/1988, p. 42, my translation). The illustrated booklets of *Historia gráfica* emphasize working with and for vulnerable communities.

In contrast, *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* are presented as complete, standalone books rather than serialized installments. Both comics offer cohesive narratives from the outset. They are divided into sections, as will be seen in another important paratext: the table of contents, which guides readers through the material and enhances comprehension of the complex themes presented.

The paratextual framework of these comics, referred to as “the zone” by Genette (1997b, p. 16), integrates pictorial and verbal elements. This multimodal approach enhances the interplay of these elements, setting the tone and deepening readers’ engagement with the visual and textual content. Various paratexts, including introductions, dedication pages, bibliographies, frontispieces, and inner sub-covers, collectively establish the context for narratives about the past, facilitate comprehension, and foster engagement with comics addressing historical memory in Colombia.

5.1.1.1. Verbal-Pictorial Frames in *Historia gráfica*

The material framing of *Historia gráfica* is primarily shaped by verbal paratexts, including the inside cover, dedication page, table of contents, and introduction. These elements provide essential information, such as the title and publisher, and guide readers through the comic’s structure and context. Key paratexts—the dedication, table of contents, and introduction—emphasize significant socio-cultural and historical aspects, positioning the comic as a culturally significant artifact that contributes to the construction of historical memory.

5.1.1.1.1. Dedication Page

The dedication within *Historia gráfica* subtly underscores its significance and value as a paratext for remembering. On the dedication page, the act of recollection becomes a homage to the memory of Uliyanov Chalarka (Pereira, 1938 - Montería, 1977), the artifice of the verbal-pictorial forms of these comics. Hence, with this significant page, the book becomes a kind of

¹²¹ The complete sentence in the original reads: “[m]ás aún, en el filósofo alemán [en relación con Friedrich Nietzsche] existía ya en germen la tentación presente en toda polémica sobre este asunto [la de la cultura de masas bajo acusación]: la desconfianza hacia el igualitarismo, el ascenso democrático de las multitudes, el razonamiento hecho por los débiles y para los débiles, el universo construido no a medida del superhombre [Übermensch] sino a la del hombre común.”

“token of esteem to a person” (Genette, 1997b, p. 117) who was pivotal in transforming the oral histories of peasants and the knowledge of researchers into entrancing graphic narratives.

The dedication page has certain characteristics that set it apart as a fundamental paratext. They position the page not only as a crucial contextual element within the physical structure of *Historia gráfica* but also as a component that reflects the influence and contributions of the individual responsible for its visual and narrative content. The dedication page appears after the front and inside covers and follows a blank page. The dedicatory words, rendered in capital letters, solemnly read, “to the memory of Uliánov Chalarka G., author of these drawings”¹²² (Chalarka, 1985, n.d., my translation). Its words are centered on the right-hand page. This format seems to adhere to a longstanding convention, a customary practice in printed publications. According to Genette, “[s]ince the end of the sixteenth century, the canonical site of the dedication has obviously been at the head of the book, and today, more precisely, on the first right-hand page after the title page” (Genette, 1997b, p. 126).

Another important aspect, in addition to the placement of the words on this page of *Historia gráfica*, is that the dedication is also rendered in both capital letters and italics, which imbues it with a sense of solemnity. This format reflects the importance ascribed to Uliánov Chalarka and bestows upon him a kind of textual exaltation, highlighted by the reiteration of his name on both the front and internal covers. The intended placement and distinctive formatting of the dedication reflect a time-honored convention that recognizes Chalarka as a contributor to the creation of the graphic narratives in *Historia gráfica*.

The phrase “to the memory of” on the dedication page serves as a tribute to the comics artist Uliánov Chalarka. The brevity of the dedication may create a sense of mystification, especially for readers unfamiliar with the author, and the lack of additional context invites further inquiry into Chalarka’s biography. The significance of this paratextual element lies in its transformation of a verbal tribute into a heartfelt “posthumous dedication” (Genette, 1997b, p. 132). In this way, the dedication page assumes a retrospective pathos, honoring the memory and legacy of Uliánov Chalarka. This designation not only pays homage to Chalarka but also highlights the enduring impact of his contributions, preserved within the pages of *Historia gráfica*.

The dedication to “the memory” of the illustrator, Uliánov Chalarka, serves as a public acknowledgment of his contributions to the text during his lifetime. In essence, Chalarka becomes a “public dedicatee,” within the context of these comics, who Genette conceptualizes

¹²² The original reads, “a la memoria de Uliánov Chalarka G., autor de estos dibujos.”

as “a person [...] whom the author[s], by [their] dedication, [indicate] a relationship that is public in nature—[be it] intellectual, artistic, political, or other” (Genette, 1997b, p. 131). Equally important is knowing who makes this dedication. In Genette’s words, “who assumes the responsibility for the dedication?” (1997b, p. 129). While understanding these roles may initially seem trivial, they serve a purpose in uncovering the potential public relations between the dedicatee and the dedicator(s). By identifying the parties involved in the dedication process, whether they are individuals or institutions, we gain insight into the dynamics at play and the motivations behind the acknowledgment of Chalarka in the dedicatory page.

In this instance, the dedication page provides valuable clues regarding the identities of the dedicators. The arrangement of verbal elements on the page offers insights into this aspect. As previously noted, the dedicatory text, featuring the name of the dedicatee, occupies a central position, portraying its significance as the focal point of the dedication. Positioned near the bottom left corner of the page, *Fundación del Sinú* is featured in capital letters. The lettering format serves as a clear indicator of their significance. They highlight the role of *Fundación del Sinú* as the chief editor of *Historia gráfica*. Meanwhile, the co-publishers, *Fundación Punta de Lanza* from Bogotá, and *Fundación Óscar Arnulfo Romero* from Montería, are listed in lowercase letters. This suggests their assisting involvement in the publication process. Lastly, the information indicating “First Edition January 1985”¹²³ appears at the bottom of the page, providing details about the publication’s initial release of *Historia gráfica*. *Fundación del Sinú* published this 1985 edition to commemorate Uliánov Chalarka’s work (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 236, note 3).

The inclusion and placement of both the primary editor and co-editors on the dedication page, just before the publishing date, evoke the tradition of signing off a letter. In this analogy, it is as if the editors were the signatories, and the publishing date acted as the date of the letter’s composition. In other words, the placement of the editors alongside the dedication with the publishing date suggests a personal acknowledgment of Chalarka’s role in the project of making these comics. Accordingly, this dedication page takes on the form and function of a “dedicatory epistle [...] of the type “To So-and-So, for this reason [and not some other]”” (Genette, 1997b, p. 136, emphasis and complement by the author).

The dedication page, through its distinctive verbal composition, attests to the profound significance attributed to the artist Uliánov Chalarka. The brevity of the dedication reflects both the artistic and socio-political bond between Chalarka and the foundations that published the

¹²³ The original reads, “Primera Edición [e]nero de 1985.”

1985 edition of *Historia gráfica*. These foundations—*Fundación del Sinú*, *Punta de Lanza*, and *Oscar Arnulfo Romero*—operated similarly to *Fundación del Caribe*, which produced various media and materials specifically for peasants through accessible publications such as the illustrated booklets comprising *Historia gráfica* (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 67). Chalarka’s talent thus fostered a deep artistic and social connection with these institutions.

Uliánov Chalarka was also a dedicated advocate for peasants in the Colombian Atlantic region. Beyond his artistic acclaim, especially as caricaturist, Chalarka was also a fervent activist for peasant causes. His talent for drawing led him to work directly with Orlando Fals Borda and the *Fundación del Caribe* in the early 1970s, who employed him to produce illustrated booklets, or “pamphlets,” for illiterate populations (cf. Rappaport, 2020, pp. 69–71). This work, however, became quite risky for the artist’s life. According to Joanne Rappaport, amidst the turbulence of the Colombian State’s repression during the 1970s conflict over peasant lands in the region, Chalarka had to adopt the pen name “Iván Tejada” for his own protection (cf. 2020, p. 67). Even this precautionary step proved insufficient to safeguard his life. Based on research conducted by Joanne Rappaport, Uliánov Chalarka met an untimely demise under mysterious circumstances. Struck by a car, his relatives lamented the inadequate medical attention the artist received, leading to his passing. Chalarka’s life came to an end in Montería, Colombia, in 1977 (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 236, note 1).

While it is speculated that Chalarka’s active social advocacy for *campesinos* during a period of political upheaval on the Atlantic coast may have contributed to his demise, this aspect remains unresolved. However, the dedication page in the 1985 edition of *Historia gráfica* serves not only as a tribute to the artist but also as an expression of gratitude for his invaluable contributions to the work itself. This undoubtedly serves to immortalize Uliánov Chalarka’s legacy and imbue both the material and visual aspects of his work as a comic artist and social activist with deeper significance.

5.1.1.1.2. Table of Contents

The table of contents, often overlooked in comics studies, plays a crucial role in shaping the reader’s experience by organizing the structure and revealing thematic focus, narrative direction, and authorial intent. In comics addressing memory and historical violence, the table of contents also highlights socio-cultural and historical themes, making it an essential paratext for understanding complex representations. Titles, subtitles, and intertitles further contribute to this function (cf. Genette, 1997b, pp. 55–103). Johannes C. P. Schmid conducts a study akin to Genette’s, focusing primarily on the main titles on the covers of documentary comics (cf. 2021,

pp. 71–87). Unlike Genette, Schmid’s analysis emphasizes the significance of these main titles while paying less attention to intertitles within comics.

The table of contents functions as a crucial paratextual element, providing readers with a roadmap for the content ahead. Joseph A. Howley describes it as “a summary or abbreviated account of the contents of a [text], *in the order of their appearance within the book*” (2019, p. 67, emphasis by the author). For example, the concise table of contents in *Historia gráfica* outlines the key topics addressed. Its primary function is to organize and structure the main titles, offering readers a preliminary overview and initial understanding of the material. Beyond its organizational role, the table of contents imbues the subject matter with coherence, serving as a blueprint that shapes readers’ expectations and facilitates early engagement with the text.

Structurally, *Historia gráfica* is divided into five basic parts, with no subsections: *Presentación*, *Lomagrande*, *Tinajones*, *El Boche*, and *Felicita Campos*. Although the introduction, its first part, is laconic and spans only a single page, it proves notably informative as elucidated below. In contrast, the table of contents shows that the other four sections each consist of exactly nineteen pages. This page numbering not only facilitates easy navigation but also ensures swift access to specific titles by providing a clear roadmap.

By organizing information into five sequences, the table of contents in *Historia gráfica* establishes a logical flow for readers. This structure supports a “reference-style [type] of reading” (Howley, 2019, p. 68), enabling readers to digest content step by step. It enhances initial comprehension and retention by presenting a clear organization of ideas and allowing readers to navigate the text efficiently. This arrangement makes the content more accessible and conducive to comprehensive understanding.

While the significance of including a table of contents may seem evident, the truth is that these paratextual components “occupy an uncertain zone between the physical and the metaphysical text” (Howley, 2019, p. 68), including sometimes titles that refer to intangible experiences or culture-specific ideas known exclusively by those who produced the book. Accordingly, “tables of contents appear differently in different genres of books” (2019, p. 68). Some books do not even display a table of contents that provides readers with an overview of the content. Comics, such as *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*, omit a table of contents that permits readers to navigate them. The absence of this paratextual element in these two cases is not an oversight but rather a deliberate narrative strategy, a subject that will be thoroughly examined in the upcoming chapter.

At this initial point, the titles listed in the table of contents of *Historia gráfica* may appear somewhat elusive to the average reader. They seem to be related to historically and

culturally rich, as well as autochthonous, themes associated with significant people, places, and things, or, more specifically, to “symbols” of peasant communities in the Colombian Atlantic coast region. In this way, this table of contents becomes a kind of “keys in the hand” that functions as a paratext “guiding not just [an initial] access but [also] interpretation” (Howley, 2019, p. 69).

The titles in the table of contents likely carry greater significance for local peasants or residents of Colombia’s Caribbean region than for general readers. To facilitate understanding, these titles should be analyzed alongside other paratexts, such as the introduction and supporting epitexts, which provide additional context. This approach helps bridge cultural and historical knowledge gaps for unfamiliar readers. Beyond its structural function, the table of contents plays a key role in shaping interpretation by offering an initial socio-cultural and historical framework, a dimension often overlooked in academic analysis.

5.1.1.1.3. Introduction (*Presentación*)

The introduction emphasizes the influence of *Historia gráfica* on readers’ perceptions of history and its cultural importance in comics as a medium for representing memories rooted in specific historical contexts. This one-page paratext is a concise peritext that orients the reader. Despite its brevity, it establishes three principal arguments: it describes the physical characteristics of *Historia gráfica*, outlines elements of its production, and situates it within a defined historical period, thereby providing a solid foundation for analysis.

The first paragraph of the introduction defines *Historia gráfica* as a collection of “illustrated booklets” (*folletos ilustrados*), specifying that “the illustrated booklets that are part of this collection were produced from 1972 to 1974”¹²⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4, my translation). This format shapes the identity and character of these comics. The term “illustrated booklets” denotes an integration of visual and textual elements intended to guide readers through particular topics. Therefore, these booklets should be regarded not only as graphic narratives but also as comprehensive guides that facilitate historical exploration.

This approach is exemplified in volume 4 of *Historia Doble de la Costa – Retorno a la Tierra*, which forms the basis for *Historia gráfica*. In this volume, Orlando Fals Borda explains that the booklets were created for illiterate peasant communities using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, which he refers to as “militant research” (Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A). The relationship between the concept of “illustrated booklets” and the

¹²⁴ The original reads, “los folletos ilustrados que hacen parte de esta colección se elaboraron en el período comprendido de 1972 a 1974.”

structure of *Historia gráfica* is reflected in the table of contents, which organizes the work into five distinct yet interconnected sections: an introductory segment and four serialized booklets, each focused on a specific theme.

The second and third paragraphs clarify the research process behind the illustrated booklets. They present two primary arguments: first, that the booklets incorporated materials and testimonies from diverse contributors, including photographers, a cartoonist, researchers, and peasant communities; and second, that Participatory Action Research (PAR) guided interactions with peasants from the Atlantic coast. The second paragraph explains the methodology (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 4, paragraph 2), while the third justifies the adoption of PAR and demonstrates the effectiveness of comics in documenting and sharing information with the communities (cf. 1985, p. 4, paragraph 3). These points clearly establish the research framework for *Historia gráfica*.

The fourth paragraph asserts that “the integrity of the booklets is safe” (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4). However, their preservation is threatened by both the passage of time and the fragility of the materials, as well as by detractors. While peasant communities and academic circles in *Montería* received the material positively, some critics dismissed its value (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A-181A). Preservation efforts must therefore safeguard not only the physical booklets but also their cultural and political significance in the face of criticism, opposition, and censorship.

Censorship in Colombia continues to silence marginalized groups, especially when they employ comics or alternative media to convey their narratives. Such efforts are frequently met with distrust, suppression, and at times, violence. Orlando Fals Borda provides an example beyond *Historia gráfica*: the booklet *¡Escucha cristiano!*¹²⁵, illustrated by Uliánov Chalarka, and released on June 1, 1973. This booklet encouraged Christians to support unions and peasants, but it was labeled radical and politically dangerous, prompting a pastor to call for its destruction, and associating its message with Fidel Castro’s ideology (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 184A).

Despite these challenges, *Historia gráfica* comics have persisted and reemerged after fifty years. Technological advancements have enabled their digital preservation in university and library archives, enhancing their cultural importance, particularly following the 2016 peace agreements. Their value lies in illuminating the origins of Colombia’s conflict from rural perspectives, thereby enriching historical understanding.

¹²⁵ In English, “Listen Christian!”

The booklets have since been compiled into a single comic book titled *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*. The introduction explains that, for preservation purposes, “[w]e have simply removed the individual introductions from each booklet and replaced them with this general one”¹²⁶ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4), creating a unified volume.

The consolidation of the booklets into a single volume is presented as a preservation strategy, rather than a rejection of serialization. The introduction emphasizes two key points: each booklet retains its distinct focus, and the collected format enables readers to understand connections among the various topics. This approach reinforces the preservation of both content and form.

The final paragraph of the introduction underscores Ulianov Chalarka’s significant role in *Historia gráfica*, complementing the recognition given on the covers and dedication page. His name, as an illustrator, is prominently acknowledged, encouraging readers to appreciate his contributions.

Ulianov Chalarka’s presence in the paratexts may lead some readers to mistakenly attribute sole authorship to him. The introduction clarifies two points: Chalarka’s artwork bridges peasant knowledge and academic research, yet the work as a whole represents a collective achievement involving foundations, researchers, peasant leaders, artists, and *campesinos* (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 8). Chalarka thus symbolizes this shared authorship and the collaborative creation of historical memory on Colombia’s Atlantic coast.

Although Chalarka made significant contributions to the illustrated booklets, the introduction notes that he “has not yet been recognized for the extraordinary role he played in these years”¹²⁷ (1985, p. 4, my translation). Chalarka was not only a leading comics artist but also a member of *Fundación del Caribe*, translating peasants’ memories into graphic narratives. The editors pay tribute to him: “[t]his editorial effort represents for us a little but sincere homage to his memory”¹²⁸ (1985, p. 4, my translation). These acknowledgments complement the dedication page.

Historia gráfica’s cultural value for historical memory is defined by two main arguments: its dual structure (serialized booklets and combined volume) and its educational function. The booklets, developed during ongoing research with *campesinos*, served as free, accessible resources that facilitated gradual learning about local history. Their comic style,

¹²⁶ The original reads, “[n]os hemos limitado a suprimir las presentaciones que tenía cada uno para reemplazarlas por esta general.”

¹²⁷ The original reads, “a Ulianov Chalarka Grijales, autor de estos dibujos, todavía no se le ha reconocido el extraordinario papel que jugó en estos años.”

¹²⁸ The original reads, “[e]ste esfuerzo editorial representa para nosotros un pequeño pero sincero homenaje a su memoria”.

rooted in peasant views and documentary research, enabled the transfer of memories and experiences, fostering a collective rural consciousness.

The single-book format, as shown in 1985's publication honoring Ivanov Chalarka, preserves and unifies peasant memories and PAR research in a single volume. By consolidating rural narratives, this format encourages critical engagement and reflection. The linear arrangement of four stories ensures clarity and continuity, letting readers follow and understand the historical narrative and socio-cultural context.

5.1.1.1.4. Internal Sub-Covers

Historia gráfica comprises four works produced between 1972 and 1974, as indicated on the cover, the table of contents, and the introduction (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 4). These paratexts do not use the term “comics” to describe the works. Instead, they refer to them as “illustrated booklets”, which, as previously explained, were designed specifically to educate peasants of the Atlantic coast about socio-cultural and historical topics of their own communities. This educational goal was achieved through a combination of verbal and visual storytelling, presenting the material in a narrative graphic format characteristic of comics.

Each illustrated booklet was produced independently and featured its own covers, bibliography, and content. This section focuses on analyzing the covers of each booklet, following the approach used with the main cover of *Historia gráfica*. Specifically, the main cover serves as a model for identifying key information in both graphic and verbal forms, contributing to the reconstruction of historical memory. It is important to note that these covers are considered internal sub-covers because, as mentioned in the text's introduction, they are part of a single compilation created in the 1980s (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 4).

Each cover elaborates on central themes related to peasantry and its struggles for rural land. The visual aspect of the four covers introduces real settings, characters, objects, and situations as well as important historical events through verbal-pictorial forms. In Volume 4 of *Historia Doble de la Costa – Retorno a la Tierra* (Fals Borda, 1986/2002), Orlando Fals Borda provides detailed insights into the presentation of gathered information in booklet format. As mentioned earlier, they were published and gradually distributed to peasants between 1972 and 1974. This strategy functioned not only as a material frame for recollections, testimonies, and experiences but also as a cohesive resource to grant valuable insights and a profound understanding of the historical struggles of peasant communities on the Atlantic coast. Through “participatory action research” (PAR) or “militant research” (1986/2002, 185A), all

information about the past was researched, gathered, organized, and presented to peasants in an understandable, serialized manner.

The introduction of the PAR methodology in Colombia paved the way for the publication of the *Lomagrande*. According to Orlando Fals Borda, the PAR methodology was introduced in 1971 in Colombia. Just a year later, on September 12, 1972, the opening installment of *Historia gráfica* titled *Lomagrande: el Baluarte del Sinú* was published (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A). Its cover (see Figure 5-1) emphasizes the use of testimony as a communicative tool, conveyed through both imagery and text. Frederik Luis Aldama explains that comics use “visual stock forms,” such as specific “shapes and gestural and physical types,” along with “verbal schemas” like “monologues, or dialogue [to] “cue and trigger loosely directed way the reader-viewer’s cognitive and emotive responses” (Aldama, 2010, p. 322). This is evident in the cover of *Lomagrande*, which is designed to evoke both intellectual and emotional engagement from its readers.



Figure 5-1: Internal Cover 1 - *Lomagrande* (Chalarka, 1985, p. 5).

The mini-cover features a young peasant, identifiable by his traditional attire—especially the *sombrero vueltiao*, a cultural symbol of the Colombian Atlantic coast. His face is shown in a close-up that begins at the shoulders, with his gaze straight into the viewer’s eyes. This direct eye contact creates a powerful emotional connection, making it seem as if the character is addressing the reader personally. The composition emphasizes the face, with expressive details such as furrowed brows and subtle tension in the mouth, enhancing the image’s emotional impact.

The eyes, eyebrows, and mouth are among the most expressive features of the face, and in both comics and films, close-ups emphasize these areas to convey meaning. Discussing facial close-ups in films, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith explain that “the mouth, eyebrows, and eyes [...] work together to signal how the character is responding to [a] dramatic situation” (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 134). This principle also applies to static images, such as comics.

On the cover of *Lomagrande*, a close-up highlights the character’s facial features, enhancing his communicative intention. This framing creates the impression that the character is inviting readers into the conversation, fostering intimacy and emotional connection. The cover serves as an introduction to the broader narrative themes of *Historia gráfica*. As Tsai

(2018) notes, “the deployment of close-up techniques” in comics activates specific “emotions and mood” in the audience (cf. Tsai, 2018, p. 474).

The graphic elements on the cover interact closely with the verbal components, which operate on two levels. First, the cover features the booklet’s title: *Lomagrande: El baluarte del Sinú*. This title itself becomes a symbol of identity for people living on the Colombian coast. The term “*Lomagrande*” can be translated into English as “the greatest” or “the best.” The title in Spanish combines three words into one, which reflects the distinctive Colombian coastal accent. This accent in the country is much faster and more fluid than that of the central regions. Coastal speakers often omit the /s/ sound at the end of words, so instead of saying “*lo más*” in Spanish, they pronounce it as “*loma*.”

As illustrated in Figure 5-1, his speech is conveyed through the speech balloon. The prominent size of this element draws attention to the verbal component, underscoring the work’s testimonial nature. The text within the balloon conveys surprise: “[i]Eche! This story had not been told to me.”¹²⁹ The term “*Eche*” is a hallmark of Colombian coastal identity to express astonishment. This surprise is heightened by the exclamation marks and the phrasing in Spanish: “[i]Eche! *Esta historia no me la habían contado*” (Eche! This story had not been told to me). In this way, the cover invites readers into the broader work by sparking surprise, curiosity, and a sense of connection. It also underscores themes of identity, communication, oral history, and interaction.

The second cover (Figure 5-2) features the illustrated booklet titled *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*. It depicts a group of peasant farmers with machetes actively working rural lands. However, as shown in the figure, these lands are quite unique. They comprise both water and land that are characteristic of the Colombian Caribbean region. The plants cut by the farmers in the Figure appear to be mangroves, a distinctive species that thrives in coastal areas near salt or freshwater. The portrayal of these four peasants on the cover highlights their labor in wastelands near water. Unlike the first cover, which included verbal expressions, this cover focuses on the themes of collective work and struggle, as well as on the



Figure 5-2: Internal Cover 2 - *Tinajones* (Chalarka, 1985, p. 27).

¹²⁹ The original text on the cover reads, “[i]Eché! [i]Esta historia no me la habían contado!”.

natural setting of these activities. This emphasis is achieved through a wide shot that captures the scene's broader spatial context.

The wide shot featured on the cover (Figure 5-2) captures almost the entire bodies of the characters and the surrounding environment. The cover features four peasants working in a country field and emphasizes the rural landscapes they transformed. Their hands symbolize the hard work and struggle associated with farming. This representation of labor and peasant struggle is closely connected to the production and publication of the booklet *Tinajones*, which was released on December 1, 1972. As previously mentioned, the booklet addresses the struggles of the people of *Tinajones* against large landowners who were attempting to seize the colonized and cultivated lands of peasants in this region (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 182A).

The booklet *Tinajones* is based on a series of meetings held by Orlando Fals Borda, his wife María Cristina Salazar, and Víctor Negrete with peasants from the rural town of *Tinajones*, near the Sinú River. Organized by the Palermo peasants' union, these gatherings aimed to address the struggles of local peasants against large landowners who were invading and plundering their rural land (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 181A). This theme is reflected in the booklet's subtitle: *un pueblo en lucha por la tierra* (A Town in Struggle for Land).

All the details on the cover convey a sense of movement, reinforcing the themes of labor and struggle. The posture of the four peasants stands out; their bent stances symbolize the physical effort of farming. Body posture, a powerful form of nonverbal communication, is often used effectively in visual media to express characters' personalities and attitudes (cf. Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 135). Similarly, in this cover, the figures' positions signify not only the act of plowing or working the land but also their determination to defend their rights as peasants.

This dual action—working the land and fighting for its protection—is echoed in the slogans and signs used by peasants during protests and marches, such as: “The land is for those who work it!” (“*¡la tierra es pa'l que la trabaja!*”) (Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 182A). The cover of this illustrated booklet connects directly to these struggles. It also embodies the courage and defiance of the peasant community, as reflected in the following booklet that narrates the story of one of their legendary heroes, now a mythic figure in the Atlantic region of Colombia: *El Boche*.

On February 12, 1973, the third illustrated booklet about Manuel Hernández, known as “*El Boche*,” was distributed to the region's peasants. According to Fals Borda, this booklet's content was developed in collaboration with the comics artist Uliánov Chalarka at the *Fundación del Caribe*. The goal was to address the myths surrounding Hernández in the region

and to correct inaccurate accounts of his life (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 183A), particularly of his struggles to protect peasants' rights.

The booklet, titled *El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinú* (*El Boche: Rebel Peasant of Sinú*), explores the myth of Manuel Hernández. For the peasant community on the Atlantic coast, Hernández is a hero, while for the bourgeoisie, large landowners, and cattle breeders in Colombia, he is seen as a troublemaker and a criminal. The graphic narratives of this booklet will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Figure 5-3, the internal cover of *El Boche*, features a medium shot of the character of Manuel Hernández, offering a contrast to the covers previously analyzed. The first cover utilized a close-up to highlight facial features, while the second employed a wide shot to emphasize the setting and context of the action. In this case, the medium shot balances a focus on the character with a sense of his surroundings.

The medium shot in Figure 5-3 presents *El Boche* almost in full, emphasizing his physical details and attire. This includes a hat, machete, and backpack—symbols of a hardworking peasant. His posture and clothing in the cover elevate him beyond a peasant and portray him as a heroic figure. In visual media, attire plays a crucial role in conveying messages about a character's identity and evolution (cf. Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 119). While the booklet's cover cannot fully depict his transformation due to its single-panel design, it aims to convey his heroic image as seen by the peasantry of the Atlantic coast. The transformation of Manuel Hernández into the hero known as *El Boche* will be further explored in the analysis of this booklet's graphic narratives.



Figure 5-3: Internal Cover 3 - *El Boche* (Chalarka, 1985, p. 46).

The cover's setting enhances the hero's impact. As shown in Figure 5-3, *El Boche* is set against the backdrop of a rural Colombian *hacienda*, which symbolizes the controversial system of land monopolization and peasant exploitation in Colombia, as discussed earlier.¹³⁰ Two herons in the sky and large structures typical of *haciendas* frame the scene. The character's defiant posture, expression, and attire resonate with the cover's setting and with the meaning of *haciendas* and their historical context in Colombia. Accordingly, the setting enhances the

¹³⁰ For a review of the systems of *realengas*, *resguardos*, and *haciendas* that historically have meant land grabbing, forced labor, and exploitation for peasants and indigenous communities in Colombia, see section 2.1 of this dissertation. It examines these concepts in different phases of the Colombian socio-political and historical conflict.

character's presence and presents him as a figure of rebellion against the oppressive economic and social system imposed by *hacienda* owners. For the viewer, however, he is depicted as a hero. This highlights the subjective nature of interpretation in comics imagery and reinforces the idea that “meaning is in the eye of the beholder.”

The setting also adds layers of historical meaning. To the right of the character (from the reader's perspective), a sign reads *Misiguay*, which, according to Fals Borda, was the place where *El Boche* lived. This town is near *Martinica*, the site of the significant *Junco March* in January 1973.¹³¹ The march was organized in response to cattle ranchers from *Córdoba*, along with the governor, who attempted to expand their haciendas and seize junco-producing lands to control the trade in mats crafted by local peasants. The date of this protest aligns with the distribution of *El Boche: campesino rebelde del Sinú* (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 182A). Accordingly, the booklet, particularly its cover, further connects its significance to the broader historical struggle.

Felicita Campos, an Afro-Colombian woman and iconic peasant leader from Colombia's Atlantic coast, is the central figure in a booklet honoring her heroic legacy. The cover (see Figure 5-4), rich in symbolism, presents her in a solemn, heroic style using distinctive artistic and graphic techniques. Unlike other titles in the series, “Felicita Campos” features refined white lettering and unique visual elements that emphasize her significance as a historical figure among *campesinos*. For example, Felicita Campos is depicted prominently in the center of the cover. She appears to stand upright with her head held high, despite her hands appearing to be bound behind her back. This posture conveys an image of pride and leadership. Furthermore, Felicita is portrayed as much larger than the male characters, such as police officers, landowners, and politicians, who surround her. This portrayal among powerful men underscores her significance as a leader among peasants in the region.



Figure 5-4: Internal Cover 4 - *Felicita Campos* (Chalarka, 1985, p. 65).

The image of Felicitas commands strength and vigor as she stands above the men surrounding her. Her defiance is portrayed in a peaceful manner that contrasts with the authority represented by the military forces on one side and a group of influential figures, likely politicians or landowners, on the

¹³¹ Sedge (junco) is the name given to a group of grasses with thick and strong roots that form tall and dense bushes. The junco is especially used for basketry and papermaking. It is found from the United States to Argentina. In Colombia, sedge grows in swampy terrain and occupies large areas. For more, see Artesanías de Colombia (2024).

other. Bordwell et al. remind us that costumes and apparel enhance characterization and identification, highlighting the power dynamics at play in different scenes (cf. Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 119). In this case, the military is easily identifiable by their uniforms and weapons, while the politicians are characterized by their elegant attire, including sunglasses and hats, and are seen on the cover shaking hands with a high-ranking military or police commander.

The depiction of a single woman standing upright and courageous, towering over men of authority, symbolizes superiority and strength. This portrayal challenges the deep-rooted *machismo* that has historically dominated Colombian society across political, historical, and social realms. The cover's subtitle: "*La mujer campesina en lucha por la tierra*" (The Peasant Woman in Struggle for the Land), reinforces this message. The cover outstandingly combines imagery and text to celebrate the pivotal role of women in peasant struggles and in the coastal society in Colombia.

The cover design of Felicita Campos emphasizes her prominence through a carefully crafted background that enhances her centrality and importance. Unlike the nature-focused background of *El Boche*, the background in Figure 5-4 is divided into two contrasting sections: a human element below and a divine, almost sacred, element above. The lower section, extending from Felicita's waist down, features only men, visually placing them in a subordinate position.

The upper section is dominated by a glowing white circle, resembling a radiant sun or halo, surrounded by dark lines. This "highlight" effect draws attention to Felicita and elevates her presence, imbuing her with an aura of divinity. The use of contrasting black-and-white elements creates a dynamic interplay of light and shadow, emphasizing her as the most illuminated and significant figure on the cover. This combination exalts Felicita in an almost religious manner, with the radiant lines around the circle further intensifying her centrality and heroic portrayal.

The cover of Figure 5-4 emphasizes Felicita Campos' significance, particularly for the town of *Cieneguita*, which is referenced in the image. Felicita, an Afro-Colombian woman, is celebrated for her relentless fight for peasant land rights in the Caribbean region. While the cover highlights her importance, further biographical details about her character are expected to emerge from the graphic narratives. Regarding the publication of this installment of *Historia gráfica*, limited information is available in Volume 4 of *Historia Doble*. It is noted, however, that by mid-1973, Leopoldo Berdella de la Espriella had joined *Fundación del Caribe*, collaborating with the comics artist Uliyanov Chalarka to finalize the four booklets. This

suggests that the Felicita Campos booklet had been completed and likely distributed to peasants by then.

The four covers of the booklets explored serve as significant paratexts that offer valuable insights into the symbolic aspects of the historical memory being reconstructed. By combining verbal and visual elements, these covers serve as key tools for analysis. They provide initial clues about the comics' content and artistic and narrative visual elements to consider when reconstructing historical memory from peasants' perspectives. Each paratext plays a crucial role, gradually revealing details in a segmented manner, much like a staccato in music. Readers are encouraged to explore these parts step by step, connect them with other elements of the comics, and draw conclusions to fully grasp their contribution to elicitation and narration, as well as to the preservation of historical memory.

5.1.1.1.5. Bibliographies (*Fuentes*)

In the comics of *Historia gráfica*, paratexts following each cover provide an academic and documentary tone to the material. Unlike typical academic texts, where bibliographies are usually located at the end, these comics place their sources at the beginning, immediately after the cover. This unconventional placement emphasizes the factual basis of these graphic narratives from the very opening of the stories and underscores their grounding in research and historical documentation.

The bibliographies list the materials used to create each booklet, signaling to readers that the graphic narratives are based on real events and thorough research. This aligns with Schmid's observation that bibliographies in comics "signal scholarly ambition" (2021, p. 111). Thus, the inclusion of bibliographies at the outset enhances the academic and documentary character of the series of illustrated booklets in *Historia gráfica*. In plain words, these paratextual components, i.e., bibliographies, reaffirm the foundation of these comics in meticulous documentation and research.

The bibliographies in the booklets are concise and directly tied to the graphic narratives' verbal and visual content. Additionally, explanatory notes provide context for the sources. For example, in *Lomagrande*, a preface to the bibliography explains that the booklet is based on authorized eyewitness accounts and additional publications (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 6) found in local archives. Immediately afterward, the corresponding bibliographic list is given. Another explanatory note appears in *El Boche*. This note in the bibliography highlights that certain authors have advanced landowner-influenced narratives to discredit Manuel Hernández's memory and actions, portraying him as a villain (cf. 1985, p. 47). This contrasts with the graphic

narratives of the booklet, which celebrate and portray Hernández as a hero and myth for peasants of the Caribbean region. These notes not only clarify the sources but also emphasize the contrast between peasants' perspectives and often-biased accounts of opposing large landowners.

This section has analyzed some important paratexts in the comics of *Historia gráfica*, focusing on their verbal and visual components. These paratexts provide essential context, guiding readers into the graphic narratives that depict the historical memories of peasant communities on Colombia's Atlantic coast. They also reflect the memory work undertaken by researchers from the *Fundación del Sinú* and the *Rosca de Investigación*, led by Orlando Fals Borda and grounded in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology for the reconstruction of historical memory with peasants' cooperation. To broaden the scope and compare the use and functionality of paratexts in other rural and social contexts, the next section examines paratexts in the comics *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* sponsored by the National Center of Historical Memory in Colombia (CNMH).

5.1.1.2. Verbal-Pictorial Frames in *Sin mascar palabra*

Sin mascar palabra uses verbal and pictorial paratexts, like frontispieces and inner covers, to deepen reader immersion and reinforce its visual language. The frontispieces use fragmented panels to draw readers in, while the inner covers offer a unified rural setting linking the external and internal elements. These paratexts together set the tone, build suspense, and stress thematic continuity for the following graphic stories.

5.1.1.2.1. Frontispieces: A Fragmented Past

Immediately after its front cover, *Sin mascar palabra* presents a sequence of pages with predominantly pictorial content. In the digital version, two pages follow the front cover, and another appears after a brief pause of two blank pages. These immersive pages serve a purpose similar to that of traditional "frontispieces" in classical books. Gitta Bertram, Nils Büttner, Claus Zittel (2021b), and Luisa Calè (2019) note that frontispieces gained importance in the Modern Age, paralleling the rise of the printing press. Visual elements became prominent due to their key functions. They were often displayed on the back of books. Bertram, Büttner, Zittel, and Calè argue that frontispieces were not random but intentionally decorated these internal empty spaces. They transform blank areas into decorative, informative focal points. Further,

frontispieces visually presented the book’s content, using illustrations as compelling previews (cf. Bertram et al., 2021b, p. 4; Calé, 2019, p. 27).

Unlike traditional frontispieces, *Sin mascar palabra* differs in artistic style and in where it places its opening pages. Its visuals depart from the conventions of classical frontispieces.¹³² These graphic pages lack the ornate decorations usually found behind classical covers. Still, their paratextual function aligns with the historical use of visual embellishments in books. Bertram, Büttner, and Zittel explain that such illustrations introduce, clarify, and inform content. They help guide readers and create a connection between the reading experience and the book’s content (cf. Bertram et al., 2021a, pp. 4–6). Therefore, these initial pages can be called “comics frontispieces,” reflecting their role here.

Two pages of wordless images act as a cliffhanger in *Sin mascar palabra* (see figure 5-1), inviting readers to immerse themselves in its unfolding story. This is achieved through images of a rural setting: each page features seven panels, depicting farm animals, ornamental plants, and natural flora. Although there are no human figures, subtle traces—such as work rubber boots, a milking bucket, and a skeletal roof structure—suggest human presence. A child’s tricycle and an urban motorbike further imply habitation. This image mosaic offers glimpses of the countryside, setting the stage for the forthcoming stories.

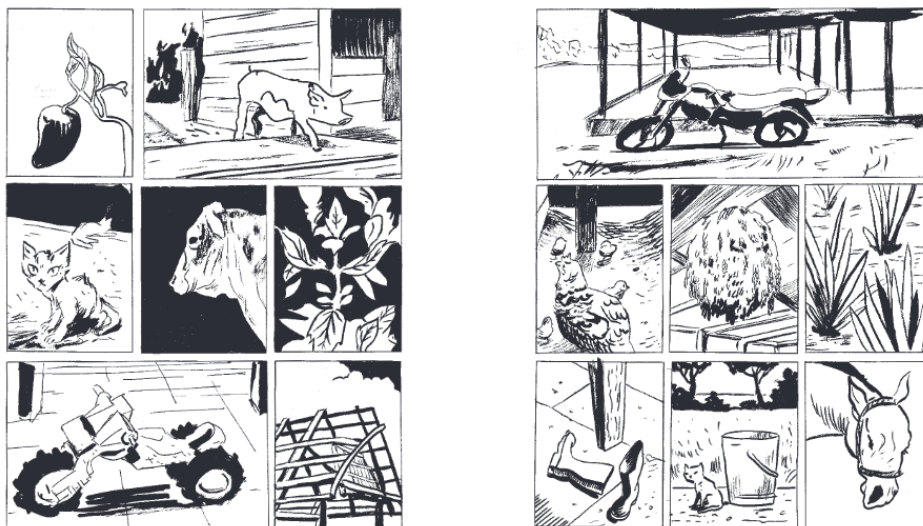


Figure 5-1: Opening pages of *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b, opening pages after the cover) working as frontispieces.

The frontispieces create an immersive experience by placing readers inside the viewpoint of a character observing rural life. Instead of a written first-person narrative, these panels simulate

¹³² Frontispieces in literature books typically appear as ornate, artistically intricate elements, often placed on the inside flap of classic book covers or within the introductory pages. To explore illustrative instances of these decorative features, consider the case studies presented in part three of the edited book *Gateway to the Book: Frontispieces and Title Pages in Early Modern Europe* (2021a). See also some examples in Calé (2019).

the character's field of vision, serving as a visual version of the autobiographical "I." This mirrors perspectives found in modern First-Person-Shooter (FPS) video games.¹³³ *Sin mascar palabra*'s frontispieces visually immerse readers as if they are viewers, participants, and characters—forming a 'reader-viewer-character' that experiences the story from inside the scene.¹³⁴

A first-person experience through a 'reader-viewer-character' perspective comes not only from visual focus but also from the rural objects and environment shown. This effect stems from the lack of characters besides the image observer. The absence of speech balloons, thought bubbles, and scripts increases the connection. These choices "place the reader more firmly in the shoes of an anonymous protagonist" (Arizpe, Colomer, & Martínez-Roldán, 2015, p. 161), who directly engages with the rural scene.

Arranging panels and images in first-person allows readers to feel that the character is not merely observing but actively inspecting the space. Unlike typical written introductions, these pictorial peritexts immediately immerse readers in the setting via a possible character's viewpoint.

This sequenced display of rural objects and scenes in panels creates space for reflection and interpretation. Meaning derives primarily from the images. Such visuals "can sustain interest and provide deeper opportunities for exploration and interpretation" (Arizpe et al., 2015, p. 3). While thematically linked, the rural images lack narrative cohesion, offering random objects and fragmented scenes. This prompts readers to examine details and search for the story's direction.

Through panel organization and illustration, *Sin mascar palabra*'s frontispieces create an immersive reading experience. Viewers can use both pages to think about possible "problems to consider" and "solutions." The images also "challenge [readers'] intuitions and comment on them" (Bielak, 2020, p. 210). Their arrangement encourages visual and cognitive engagement.

¹³³ Typical FPS video and computer games elicit physiological and emotional responses in gamers that are related to how the game frames are presented. Generally, players have a visual impression of characters in the universe of such games, most of which are violent. For more, see Weber, Behr, Tamborini, Ritterfeld, and Mathiak (2009).

¹³⁴ The formulation of my 'reader-viewer-character' concept draws inspiration from the scholarly exploration of the 'reader-viewer' term, as examined by researchers studying visual representations of sacred mysteries spanning the years 1500 to 1700 in modern Europe. These examples showcase its application not only for deciphering hidden pictorial secrets in highly religious images but also for engaging in contemplative interactions with visual representations. For a detailed exploration of the practical use of the 'reader-viewer' term, see Dekoninck, Guiderdoni, and Melion (2020), Melion (2020), and Bielak (2020). The 'reader-viewer-character' concept in comics combines the roles of reader, viewer, and character into one entity. By embodying a character's perspective, this dynamic entity creates an immersive, first-person narrative experience, enriched by symbolic elements on the page. Dekoninck, Guiderdoni, and Melion posit that, "[s]ymbolic devices of this type are closely related to recreational pastimes [...] that hinge on the discovery of an obscure *modus operandi* or the activation of a divinatory method of play" (2020, p. 10, emphasis by the authors).

It invites readers to contemplate themes and guess what might happen next. The images hint at past events, prompting viewers to explore objects and memories.

The significance of rural objects is both spatial and temporal, especially when they are memorable. Isolating these artifacts makes readers build meaning by connecting objects to the past. Readers also fill in gaps using personal experience and visual cues—a comics technique called “closure.” According to Scott McCloud, closure is “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (1994, p. 63). Combining panels evokes memories of these objects, also triggering nostalgia.

Showing rural objects alone in the frontispieces builds nostalgia and a sense of solitude. Readers are immersed in fragmented settings focused on animals and plants, revealing a longing for past moments and unresolved issues. These images act as mental “traces,” like fossils, for the reader and character to explore and better understand the scene. The absence of humans, paired with abandoned objects, evokes melancholy, transporting readers back in time. Here, nostalgia is a strong desire for an “idealized past,” marked by “longing, yearning, sadness, or regret” (A. Stein, 2007, p. 69).

This analysis demonstrates that nostalgic longing for the past grows in the presence of solitary objects and in the planned fragmentation of the rural setting. Such fragmentation functions as a deliberate visual strategy. It prompts readers to adopt the perspective of a character who connects the present scenes with the past. The interplay of these fragmented visual and conceptual elements in the introductory pages of *Sin mascar palabra* encourages readers to reflect beyond what is immediately shown.

5.1.1.2.2. Internal Cover: An Excursion to the Past

Following the fragmented rural scenes depicted in the frontispieces, an additional page appears as an internal cover, re-engaging readers and facilitating the transition to the next section of the comic. This page reiterates key pictorial elements introduced on the front cover through its use of color and composition, reinforcing aspects of the setting and characters.¹³⁵ In this instance, the pictorial forms are rendered in black and white. The transition from a colorful cover to a monochromatic page subtly signals a temporal shift.

On this supplementary cover (see Figure 5-2), human figures are depicted emerging from a farmhouse and descending a hill.¹³⁶ This moment establishes cohesion with the preceding frontispieces. Whereas the previous two pages exclusively depicted objects within a

¹³⁵ For a complete examination of this cover, see chapter 3 of this dissertation.

¹³⁶ The graphic information conveyed in the title page image was already analyzed in the previous chapter.

fragmented interior setting, this page expands the visual scope to the outdoors, presenting a broader rural landscape. It features a portion of the farmhouse, potentially the location of the previously depicted objects, and a hill down which five dark silhouettes of people are descending.

The focal point of viewers throughout these opening pages shifts from mere rural objects and a fragmented setting confined to panels within a house to the presence of people outside in the countryside. They appear to be embarking on an excursion, as shown in the figure. This journey, which the opening pages seem to signal, transcends not only spatial dimensions but also unfolds across time, adding a layer of temporal depth through shifts from color to black-and-white and from a closed place inside a house to a broader one outside the farmhouse.

By intertwining the frontispiece and the internal cover of *Sin mascar palabra*, as shown in Figure 5-2, readers are enticed to embark on a captivating journey into the comic's content. They should navigate verbal-pictorial forms in which both perception and imagination are necessary for the depiction of memories. Within pages and panels, the two pages indicate that a dynamic interplay of forms will unfold. This demands from readers not only a passive act of observation but also an active engagement of decoding symbols and verbal-pictorial forms that weave spatial and temporal dimensions. Accordingly, all the elements presented in these pages compel readers to transcend mere observation and immerse themselves in a spatiotemporal journey through rural, fragmented memories unveiled by characters representing *campesinos*, in a verbal and pictorial journey in *Sin mascar palabra*. Taken together, these opening pages serve as frontispieces that guide readers into the memories portrayed in the text. As Luisa Calè states, through frontispieces, “[t]he act of reading [...] becomes a journey into the interior of the text” (Calè, 2019, p. 27).

SIN MASCAR PALABRA POR LOS CAMINOS DE TULAPAS



Figure 5-2: Internal cover of *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b).

5.1.1.2.3. Introduction

The introduction of *Sin mascar palabra* plays a crucial role in framing the graphic narratives by establishing their thematic, contextual, historical, and research foundations. First, it provides a concise yet insightful overview of its principal content, though it is shorter than the

introduction in *Historia gráfica*. While the latter occupies a full page, the former covers less than a page to contextualize the core graphic narratives. Although brief, the introduction offers significant preliminary insight into the stories, but leaves interpretive gaps that readers may address through supplementary texts. These complementary texts, known as peritexts, exist outside the physical boundaries of the comics under analysis. Importantly, these supplementary paratextual elements, whether written or in other media, are closely connected to the central themes of *Sin mascar palabra*. Their primary function is to enhance readers' understanding and provide deeper contextualization of the main text's overarching themes.

Second, it is presented in verbal form, comprising three structured paragraphs that familiarize readers with the contextual background of the graphic narratives. Its primary focus is on the historical and research foundations underlying the stories in *Sin mascar palabra*. Instead of addressing details about creators, publishers, production, or material aspects, the introduction emphasizes the broader historical and scholarly context in which these narratives are situated. Thus, it prioritizes thematic and content dimensions over production or distribution processes.

Third, it situates readers in a historical context that frames the memories and testimonies of the peasants who serve as the raw material for the graphic narratives. In a verbal manner, the introduction lays out the fundamental spatiotemporal dimensions that other peritexts of *Sin mascar palabra* introduced visually. Accordingly, this introduction bridges the gap between frontispieces and the internal cover, situating readers in an unclear past within specific locales—from the confines of a rural household to the expansive overview of a rural house. Now the introduction is clearer and locates readers in the spatial landscape of a real geographical region within *Tulapas*.

Tulapas is identified as the region where violent events transpired, serving as the actual setting for the depiction of peasant memories. This peritext also establishes the temporal context for the narratives, which span from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s and into the 1990s. Additionally, the introduction outlines the socio-political dynamics underlying the expulsion of peasant families from territories they previously colonized, positioning these issues as central to the discussion.

The introduction also briefly addresses the research context framing *Sin mascar palabra*. The third paragraph notes that the comic “is part of the fulfillment of the commitments assumed by the [CNMH]” and seeks to promote “collective reparation [for] the community of the San Pablo de Tulapa (Turbo, Antioquia)” (CNMH, 2018b, n.d., paragraph 3). This research framework will be examined in greater detail in the section on research framing.

5.1.1.3. Verbal-Pictorial Frames in *La Palizúa*

Like *Sin mascar palabra*, the comic book *La Palizúa* employs frontispieces and an internal cover as verbal-pictorial frames, enhancing its visual composition. However, the immersive strategies of these peritexts differ markedly. *Sin mascar palabra* draws readers into a character's visual field through distinct panels, fostering a character-centric immersion. In contrast, *La Palizúa*'s frontispieces depict a lush rural landscape across two pages, functioning as expansive mega-panels. This panoramic format aligns with the double-page front cover, which features a broad horizontal canvas, as detailed in section 3.2.3. Although the landscape may initially seem decorative to casual readers, its importance becomes evident when analyzed alongside the verbal and pictorial elements on the front and internal covers, as elaborated below.

The internal cover of *La Palizúa* reiterates the title from the front cover but introduces a distinct visual representation. While the backdrop remains rugged, two human figures are now depicted actively shaping their environment. Consequently, the internal cover incorporates visual elements that immerse readers in the forthcoming graphic narratives. Two features are particularly notable: first, the use of onomatopoeia to convey the auditory dimension of the characters' actions; second, the dynamic portrayal of the landscape as it is transformed by these figures. This connection among the front cover, the frontispiece, and the internal cover encourages readers to draw meaningful associations. Together, these paratextual elements prepare readers for the central graphic narratives concerning peasant memories. The subsequent sections offer a detailed analysis of the frontispieces and internal cover of *La Palizúa*.

5.1.1.3.1. Frontispieces: Uncultivated Lands

The frontispieces of *La Palizúa* place uncultivated lands at the forefront and establish them as the main setting. After the front cover, which shows a rural scene with human interaction visible through barbed-wire fences, two pages act as a large frontispiece. These pages depict a rustic landscape. Trees and plants fill the two pages, providing a first-person perspective that immerses readers in rural wilderness (see Figure 5-3 below).

The two pages function as expansive panels, depicting a wild, untamed environment awaiting human intervention. Unlike *Sin mascar palabra*, these panels exhibit limited variety in their elements, resulting in a deliberate absence of randomness in object placement. Readers are not encouraged to contemplate potential past events within the setting. While a first-person perspective persists, providing insight into a possible character's viewpoint, the dense vegetation precludes opportunities for reflection or analysis. In this context, the observer

assumes a different role compared to the “viewer-reader-character” dynamic in *Sin mascar palabra*. Specifically, the frontispiece panels in *La Palizúa* position viewers as active explorers rather than passive onlookers.

Based on the frontispieces, viewers must withhold immediate interpretations. The wild landscape positions viewers as potential explorers expected to navigate the untamed vegetation across the two large panels. This immersive technique differs from *Sin mascar palabra*. There, the focus is on drawing conclusions from random



Figure 5-3: Frontispieces of *La Palizúa* (CNMH, 2018a, n.p.). It positions uncultivated lands at the forefront and establishes them as the primary setting for peasant memories.

rural objects and fragmented small-panel settings. In contrast, *La Palizúa*’s frontispieces invite readers to imagine traversing the enclosed wilderness displayed in two large panels.

This immersive strategy foregrounds the comic’s central themes of exploration, discovery, and settlement. By situating readers within the untamed landscape, *La Palizúa* strengthens their connection to both the natural environment and the experiences of peasant settlers, emphasizing the transformative impact of human activity on the landscape.

The rural landscape in *La Palizúa*’s frontispieces defines the setting of the graphic narratives. Unlike the enclosed spaces in *Sin mascar palabra*, these first two pages offer a wide, ambiguous backdrop. This evokes a sense of uncertainty and potential danger. The uniformity of the graphic elements guides the reader’s gaze to a focal point. Instead of letting attention wander, as in *Sin mascar palabra*, the two panels with wild vegetation compel focus on the immediate foreground, which is dominated by untouched vegetation. Within this lush wilderness, the rural landscape emerges as the main protagonist, commanding attention and setting the tone for the graphic narratives’ unfolding.

The frontispieces in *La Palizúa* are frequently dismissed as decorative elements. However, detailed analysis reveals their narrative significance. When considered alongside the main cover and other paratexts, these frontispieces provide a deeper contextual framework for the graphic narratives. Beyond establishing the setting, they symbolize a central issue in Colombia’s socio-political and armed conflict by representing the peasants’ struggle for land.

After this frontispiece full of vegetation, there are two empty pages, as in *Sin mascar palabra*. These empty pages act as an interlude and generate suspense. They give readers a

moment to absorb the previous imagery and anticipate what comes next. After the interlude, the following page offers verbal and pictorial information. It resembles an inside cover and features the title: *La Palizúa—Ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha*—and an image of two human figures working in the setting (see Figure 5-4). Both characters appear to change the previously pristine landscape depicted on the front cover.

The sequence of pages and panels serves as a pictorial tool to show the transformation of the rural environment. This approach differs from the conventional grid layout in traditional comics and the frontispieces of *Sin mascar palabra*. The introductory pages in *La Palizúa* act more like expansive canvases than traditional panels. These opening pages fulfill the role of large panels in the comic. The first two pages set up a clear sequential relationship among the large panels.

The opening of *La Palizúa* shows a natural landscape’s transformation into an urbanized rural environment. Peasants’ labor and construction sounds highlight this change. By combining visual imagery and onomatopoeic sounds, this internal cover actively involves readers. It encourages them to mentally reconstruct the auditory dimension of the scene.

The illustrated sound “¡YUUUC!” in Figure 5-4 suggests the noise made when cutting wood, much like the sound of a saw. The verbal depiction of natural sounds varies across languages. Sean A. Guynes notes that onomatopoeia’s representation depends on “a language’s phonetic inventory, phonological rules, and socio-historical practices” (Guynes, 2014, p. 59). So, the sound of a saw is perceived differently across cultures. Here, “¡YUUUC!” functions as the Spanish representation of a saw’s sound.¹³⁷

In this scene, the onomatopoeia is a sound effect not from nature but from a man-made tool. The tool is designed to shape and manipulate the environment. The image depicts a tool similar to a large saw, specifically a two-man crosscut saw, with dual handles at each end of

LA PALIZÚA

USTEDES NO SABEN CÓMO HA SIDO ESTA LUCHA



Figure 5-4: Internal cover of *La Palizúa* (CNMH, 2018a, n.p.). It shows human figures intervening the rural landscape.

¹³⁷ In other languages, this onomatopoeia would be different. In English, for example, this sound would be represented as *RR-RR-RR-RR-RR-RR*. The chainsaw would be like *WHER WHER WHER* or *BRUM-BRUM-BRUM-BRUM-BRRRRRRRR* (Atkins, Bauerle, & Chin, n.d., p. 11).

the blade. The two handles show that it requires two people, one at each end. This underscores the collaboration between the two peasants in the image.

Visually, the crosscut saw is almost centered in the picture. Its position makes it the panel's focal point and shows its significance within this internal cover. What captures attention more immediately is the dynamic picture of the saw's loud sound. The image displays the bold letters *¡YUUUC!*, making the sound seem very loud. This is obvious because of the large size and exclamation marks. In *La Palizúa*'s internal cover, the onomatopoeia takes up nearly half the page. This layout heightens the impression of a piercingly loud noise. Generally in comics, bigger letters mean a louder sound: "the bigger the letters, the 'louder' the sound, and vice versa" (Prorokova & Tal, 2018, p. 11, emphasis by the authors).

The illustration on the internal cover of *La Palizúa* not only features prominent letters but also infuses them with a sense of motion through accompanying lines and a distinctive zig-zag effect on the left side of each letter and exclamation marks. This letterform creates a visual effect suggesting that the sound is dynamically propelling towards the right side of the page. This refers to a kind of resonance produced by the saw when cutting wood.

Even though the onomatopoeia is not contained in a speech balloon or text box explicitly connecting it to the saw, it can be reasonably inferred that the depicted sound emanates from the act of sawing wood. This deduction is facilitated by the proximity of the sound representation to the pictorial depiction of the saw. In the absence of a graphic context, discerning the role of this tool in producing the sound would prove challenging. The absence of a text box further underscores that the sound is generated by an object within the setting, rather than by a human. This highlights the pivotal role of the synergy between verbal and visual elements in conveying sound effects. Sean A. Guynes identifies this "word/image modality" as a distinctive feature of comics associated with "the semiotics of visual language" (2014, p. 61).

However, the use of onomatopoeia on the internal cover of *La Palizúa* extends beyond creating an ambient sound to immerse readers in the scene and draw them into the main narrative. The verbal-pictorial representation of the sawing sound can also function as a stimulus connected to broader human experiences. In the context of comics, "onomatopoeia represent diegetic sounds that enliven the reader's experience [...] and call to mind other phenomena, experiences, and sounds in the natural world that further engage the reader" (Guynes, 2014, p. 63). Extending this perspective, particular sounds can evoke personal memories. For instance, music can prompt "a chain of associations evocative of past events and feelings, yet imbued with its characteristic quality of temporal immediacy; the past feels alive in the present" (A. Stein, 2007, p. 70).

Applying these concepts to the onomatopoeia of the saw, the resonant “¡YUUUC!” not only simulates the immediate auditory experience but also serves as a mnemonic device. It may evoke personal memories or associations with similar sounds. More broadly, the interplay between pictorial and verbal elements to render the sound of sawing and the two human figures in the natural environment on this page of *La Palizúa* symbolizes the arduous labor of peasant settlers in the Colombian countryside. All these verbal-pictorial elements provide readers with insight into the realities of the hardworking experiences of peasant colonizers. In general, the transformation of the rural setting, the portrayals of peasant characters, and the representation of the typical sounds of work on the opening pages of *La Palizúa* serve as a bridge connecting paratextual elements to the broader socio-cultural and historical graphic narratives in the main text.

5.1.1.3.2. Introduction

The introductory section of *La Palizúa* shares some similarities with its counterpart in *Sin mascar palabra*. Devoid of graphic elements, this verbal introduction also provides a general contextualization in three paragraphs. Together, they provide a broad yet genuine backdrop to the graphic narratives making up memories of peasants. In line with the introductory approach of *Sin mascar palabra*, it acts as a supplementary peritextual layer to other visual elements, enhancing readers’ understanding of the graphic narratives.

The distinguishing visual aspect of this introduction lies in its considerable length compared to those of *Historia gráfica* and *Sin mascar palabra*. Spanning a page and a half, this introduction offers readers more information than its counterparts. It follows a structural organization akin to that of the introduction in *Sin mascar palabra*, comprising just three paragraphs. That is, each paragraph is dedicated to expounding distinct facets of the historical and research-related insights of graphic narratives. This ensures a comprehensive but general overview of the context in which the graphic narratives are framed.

The introduction provides spatiotemporal context, followed by a brief preliminary explanation of the main challenges peasant communities face in accessing uncultivated lands. The stories take place in the peasant community of *La Palizúa*, in the department of Magdalena, Colombia. The temporal setting is in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, some of the problems faced by peasants in these regions are briefly mentioned. These hurdles involved ongoing

struggles with Colombian State agencies, such as the INCORA,¹³⁸ to obtain legal access to the rural territories of *La Palizúa*. Another hurdle was the different difficulties peasants faced from violent groups. The ones mentioned in the introduction are those paramilitary groups led by Jorge 40.

Furthermore, the introduction offers overall insights into the investigative dimension of *La Palizúa*. Unlike the introduction in *Sin mascar palabra*, the paragraph introducing the research aspect is much more substantial. That is, the introduction provides much more information, giving readers a general idea of how the fact-finding component is framed within the graphic narratives of *La Palizúa*. The period from 2013 to 2018 is when the data for these graphic narratives were collected. The content was based on the so-called collective memory encounters carried out by the CNMH with the peasant community. This is framed above all to create a collective reparation under Law 1448 of 2011.

A distinction from the introduction of *Sin mascar palabra* is evident in the introductory pages of *La Palizúa*. Here, the introduction highlights the invaluable contributions of various Colombian State institutions towards the content of the graphic narratives. Specifically, the involvement of the Land Restitution Unit (*La Unidad de Restitución de Tierras – URT*) and the Unit for the Attention and Integral Reparation of Victims (*La Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas – UARIV*) is underscored. In addition, the introduction mentions the legal advisory services provided by *Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro*. Moreover, recognition is given to the peasant community of *La Palizúa*, who, according to the introduction, strive to preserve their testimonies and memories, particularly to enlighten future generations so that they do not lose their peasant identity (c.f. CNMH, 2018a, n.d., paragraph 3). This unique cultural identity faces a particularly grave threat due to the widespread collective harm inflicted by forced displacements in various Colombian rural regions.

5.1.2. Historical and Memory Framing

The introductions of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* utilize a condensed paratextual approach to set the stage for the historical context in which traumatic events

¹³⁸ INCORA in Spanish means *Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria* (Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform). It was a Colombian institute founded under the Law 135 of 1961 of the Agrarian Reform under the Ministry of Agriculture during the second administration of Alberto Lleras Camargo (1945-1946 and 1958-1962). Due to the displacement of peasants by expansive livestock farming and the indiscriminate use of rural lands, the government decided to launch INCORA, whose function was to acquire land from large landowners, either by purchase or expropriation. The purpose of this was to legalize and give barren lands to farmers so that they could live in and cultivate them. For more, see Balcazar, López, Orozco, and Vega (2001).

unfolded for peasant communities. In just 1 to 1.5 pages, these comics clarify the timeframe, specific geographic locations, and the primary factors driving violence against rural populations. I refer to these components as “peritextual introductions.” While succinct, these introductory devices are potent paratextual components that serve as entry points into the complex stories of collective memories embedded within real historical frameworks. In these frameworks, spatiality and temporality cannot be separated. In historical and memory frames, “[t]he “when” and the “where” are inextricably linked so that, for example, to remember a scene” is “*ipso facto* to remember a scene that took place at a certain period” in the past (Casey, 2000, p. 70).

Despite their brevity, these introductions serve as critical signposts, guiding readers into the core of the graphic narratives by providing key historical context. Accordingly, the introductions offer glimpses into the historical landscape in which the main events of the storyworlds, which compose memories of individuals from different communities, are framed. Their function, therefore, is to shed light, in a preliminary manner, on the turbulent environments in which peasant communities struggled and suffered. Historical landscapes also serve as frames for memories. Such frames serve as the real historical setting “within which [the] specific content [of memories] is presented to us” (Casey, 2000, p. 68). However, due to their concise and limited nature, which precludes an exhaustive historical framework, these peritextual introductions necessitate supplementary materials to fully grasp the geographical, temporal, and socio-political backdrops of the events depicted in graphic narratives that represent memories and testimonies.

To enhance understanding, supplementary resources from institutions working on historical memory and the rights of marginalized communities, visual aids such as maps, and existing knowledge need to be integrated to complement the information provided in the introductions. These complementary materials serve to enrich readers’ knowledge by offering deeper insights into the socio-political dynamics, power structures, and other aspects that shaped the historical milieus of the depicted events. By combining brief information from the introductions with external textual resources, a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between collective memory and historical context can be achieved. All of this aims to position readers in a real historical milieu and to foster a richer appreciation for the graphic narratives that portray memories and testimonies in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*.

5.1.2.1. 1972 – 1974: Apex of *Campesino* Struggles on the Atlantic Coast

Earlier in section 4.1.1. Material Framing, the introduction itself was presented as a paratextual component within the text, a peritext that surrounds the core text, whose function in *Historia gráfica* was to frame the material form of this comic book. This introduction, along with elements such as the dedication page and table of contents, establishes a verbal frame that highlights the comic's physical nature. Two physical formats were identified: illustrated booklets (*folletos ilustrados*) and the 1985 edition published in memory of the peasant activist and comic book artist Ulianov Chalarka. The comic book studied in this dissertation is the actual format in which the four original booklets were compiled. Section 4.1.1. also indicated that from a material point of view, the introduction follows a verbal structure comprising a page with five paragraphs dedicated to various explanatory facets. Each paragraph is responsible for framing *Historia gráfica* through material, historical, and investigative lenses.

This section provides an overview of the historical framework presented in the first paragraph of the introduction in *Historia gráfica*. Within this paragraph, spanning just six lines, readers are introduced to the period from 1972 to 1974, characterized, according to the introduction, as the peak of peasant struggles in Colombia. Geographically, the introductory paragraph also situates readers on the Colombian Atlantic coast (see Figure 5-5), where the verbal-pictorial portrayals of peasants' memories, experiences, and testimonies converge. This historical frame, composed of a spatiotemporal setting, serves as a real backdrop for understanding the socio-political landscape in which events took place. Moreover, the introductory section superficially mentions the National Association of Peasant Users of Colombia (*Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos de Colombia – ANUC*), which played a pivotal historical role in organizing and mobilizing *campesinos* to advocate for their rights.



Figure 5-5: The Atlantic coast in Colombia (Alvarez, 2011/2020, Wikipedia Commons).

However, the introductory historical framework, while informative, is very brief and necessitates supplementation with external texts, in this dissertation termed as epitexts. By integrating insights from these external sources with the information provided in the introduction, a more comprehensive understanding of the broader historical landscape emerges.

Consequently, together the introduction complemented with external material forms the foundation upon which the historical frame of *Historia gráfica* can be better understood.

The initial paragraph of the introduction anchors readers in a real temporal and spatial framework, establishing a clear context for the events depicted throughout the graphic narratives. The paragraph defines the period from 1972 to 1974 as a time marked by widespread “peasant struggles” over “rural lands” in Colombia, particularly on “the Atlantic coast,” as emphasized in the introduction. But this introductory paragraph not only situates the narrative in a particular temporal and spatial setting but also establishes its tone. It also introduces a pivotal player in organizing these struggles: the ANUC (National Association of Peasant Users of Colombia).

While this paragraph briefly touches upon a specific timeframe and geographically situates the events in the Colombian Caribbean, highlighting the ANUC as a significant player in peasant organization, it is crucial to remember that issues concerning land theft and violence against rural communities in Colombia extend far beyond this temporal and geographical interval. The historical context, as seen in previous chapters, reveals that peasant struggles have deep roots that span a much broader timeframe and encompass virtually all rural regions of the country. Although ANUC is referenced as a guiding peasant organization, the true protagonists are *campesinos*. When the memories and testimonies of these communities are transcribed into verbal and pictorial forms, they become vital evidence of the peasantry’s significant role in the ongoing historical struggles in the Colombian countryside.

5.1.2.2. The 1990s Exodus: Forced Displacements in *Tulapas* and *La Palizúa*

While *Historia gráfica* unfolds between 1972 and 1974, a period hailed in its introduction as the zenith of *campesino* struggles along the Atlantic coast, both *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* make clear in their introductions that their graphic narratives primarily unfold in the 1990s. It was precisely during this decade that Colombia witnessed the highest number of forced displacements by paramilitary groups. Although these displacements affected various rural areas across the country, *Historia gráfica* illustrates the Atlantic coast region as the epicenter of this enduring issue that has afflicted peasant communities throughout history.

Sin mascar palabra and *La Palizúa* follow the historical narrative of the forced peasant displacements from the point of view of these marginalized communities. However, their narrative focus diverges from the broad strokes depicted in *Historia gráfica*. In the introduction of these illustrated booklets, the Atlantic coast serves as the overarching backdrop. In fact, it

frames the unfolding events within various local peasant scenarios that mirror the collective memories of peasant groups. While both *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* also unfold their narratives within the Colombian Atlantic coast, they adopt a markedly more localized approach. Each introduction delineates specific locales. *Sin mascar palabra* centers on the municipality of *Tulapas*. It specifically delineates *Tulapas* as the epicenter of massive, forced displacements catalyzed by paramilitary groups. It is also the primary setting of the graphic narratives. Conversely, *La Palizúa* zooms in on this eponymous peasant community, which is a mosaic of small rural populations, as outlined in its introduction.

Similarly, the temporal scope in *Historia gráfica* is considerably broader. Although, as elucidated below, testimonies within these graphic narratives transpire between 1972 and 1974, the depiction of peasant communities' memories spans a far-reaching timeframe. It commences from the arrival of the Conquistadors in the Americas, specifically in this region. It extends to the 1970s, a period marked by the onset of agrarian land struggles along the Atlantic coast, and narrators offer their testimonies and recollections in *Historia gráfica*.

Sin mascar palabra and *La Palizúa* anchor their narratives firmly within the 1990s, as indicated by their respective introductions. Nonetheless, as expounded upon in the forthcoming chapter, narrators also touch upon other temporal junctures, including the 1950s and 1980s. These periods are marred by forced displacement in these Colombian locations. Yet, the crux of these graphic narratives lies in the 1990s, which is a shaming time in the country when both regions bore witness to egregious acts of violence against peasant communities. This is why the graphic narratives in these comics, which portray peasants' testimonies, are pivotal for comprehending the Colombian conflict currently.

Regarding characters, it is also important to note that *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* are also quite specific in this regard. Although this narrative aspect will be further analyzed in the next chapter, it is worth clarifying that both comics select emblematic cases of forced displacement. In *Sin mascar palabra*, a particular peasant family group becomes the focal point for narrative development. Conversely, *La Palizúa* employs the perspective of a single peasant woman who recounts her firsthand experiences with the pressing issue of forced displacement in Colombia. Although it does not use multiple narrators and characters to construct its narratives as *Historia gráfica* does, the introductions to *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* frame their graphic narratives within the context of specific peasant cases affected by forced displacement. These cases, endowed with emblematic significance, serve as poignant parallels to similar experiences endured by other peasant communities, victims of the recurrent

persecution by paramilitary groups whose *modus operandi* to evict peasants from their lands was the same.

As a preliminary note, it is imperative to underscore that both introductions explicitly attribute the primary responsibility for mass forced displacement to illicit armed groups, specifically paramilitary factions. In the introduction of *Sin mascar palabra*, the Castaño family emerges as the central perpetrators of violence inflicted upon peasants. Conversely, the introduction of *La Palizúa* sheds light on the paramilitary figure of Jorge 40 and other mid-level commanders as the principal aggressors in this region. They orchestrated coercive measures to drive peasants from their rural lands. This stands in stark contrast to *Historia gráfica*, where the introduction omits specific references to perpetrators of violence against rural communities along the Atlantic coast. Subsequently, a more detailed historical context will be delineated, drawing upon the insights offered in the introductions to *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*.

Sin mascar palabra

The introduction of *Sin mascar palabra* uses three paragraphs to provide a concise understanding of the historical backdrop for the stories depicted in these graphic narratives. The opening paragraph establishes a geographical and temporal framework for the peasants' memories. It also highlights the reasons behind the expulsion of peasant families from the territories they once colonized.

The introduction highlights *Tulapas* as the epicenter of violent upheavals that have profoundly impacted the indigenous and peasant populace. Geographically, this region is in the north of *Urabá Antioqueño*, Colombia (see Figure 5-6). According to Alejandro Yepes Mejía, this region owes its name to the extinct indigenous community known as the “*Urabás* or *Urabaes*,” which settled along the northern coast of the department of *Antioquía*. *Urabá* means “*agua dulce*” (sweet water) (cf. Yepes Mejía, n.d., p. 7). However, INDEPAZ sustains that the *Urabaes* were not the sole indigenous group to inhabit this region. The indigenous families of the *Catíos* and *Cunas* also populated *Urabá*. However, the Spanish conquistadors initiated an “indigenous genocide” because they considered these peoples as “*rebels and savages*” (INDEPAZ, 2020, p. 16).

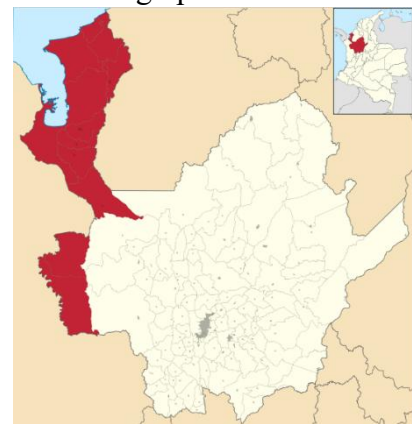


Figure 5-6: Region of *Tulapas* in *Uraba Antioqueño* (Milenioscuro, 2015/2017, Wikipedia Commons).

Within the Colombian geographical context, the region of *Urabá* has long been characterized as being an “open space.” Yepes Mejía explains that such a designation signifies that *Urabá* lacks defined “socio-cultural, political, and economic borders” compared to other regions in Colombia. Consequently, the region has historically served as a fertile ground for ongoing multiethnic peasant colonization (cf. Yepes Mejía, n.d., pp. 7–8).

Not only the introduction but also other paratexts within *Sin mascar palabra* accentuate *Tulapas* as the primary locus where the story unfolds. These paratextual elements underscore *Tulapas* as the focal point of evocative graphic narratives. The opening paragraph of the introduction enumerates 58 villages and key municipalities, including *Turbo*, *Necolí*, and *San Pedro*, that collectively form *Tulapas* (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 6). However, what warrants attention is the recurring presence of the word *Tulapas* across various paratexts – namely, the front cover, frontispieces, internal cover, and now within the introduction itself. This consistent reiteration of the term across these paratextual elements underscores its profound significance in these comics.

The introduction not only serves as a crucial temporal anchor but also establishes a narrative continuum that intertwines with other significant periods within the storyworld. Accordingly, the first paragraph of the introduction designates the 1950s as the period marked by the occupation of the territory by settler families fleeing rural violence. It also draws a parallel with the late 19th century, when peasants faced dispossession of their territories due to the rise of livestock farms (*haciendas*)¹³⁹ established in the region (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 6, paragraph 1). Furthermore, throughout the end of the 19th century, a prevailing, powerful, and influential white minority systematically marginalized indigenous and black populations, both socially and economically, deeming them as “inferior beings” (INDEPAZ, 2020, p. 16). This discriminatory practice of exclusion of rural populations has been constant in Colombia and has perpetuated unjust power imbalances.

The decade of colonization of *Tulapas* during the 1950s further intertwines with another serious, relatively recent moment mentioned in the subsequent paragraph of the introduction to *Sin mascar palabra*—land-grabbing in the 1990s orchestrated by paramilitary groups in association with businessmen from the *Córdoba* region. INDEPAZ affirms that paramilitarism

¹³⁹ Laws 200 of 1936 and 100 of 1944 consolidated immense power in the hands of large landowners. While these laws ostensibly aimed to mitigate conflicts between landowners and peasants regarding uncultivated lands, they exacerbated tensions. The appointment of “land judges” (*Jueces de Tierras*) often aligned with the interests of large landowners, resulting in unjust outcomes where lands rightfully belonging to peasant colonists were awarded to the privileged few. Consequently, such laws granted large landowners the authority to forcibly evict peasant settlers from their lands through both legal maneuvers and coercive tactics. For more, see LeGrand (1988, pp. 216–219) and INDEPAZ (2020, pp. 16–19).

arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first municipalities affected were *Córdoba*, *Urabá*, *Antioqueño*, and *el Darién*. Large landowners, businessmen, and banana growers began to create private security groups with the support of politicians and state security agencies. This marked the beginning of grave and massive violations against civil society, characterized by the systematic terrorization of peasant populations aimed at coercing them into abandoning their lands (cf. INDEPAZ, 2020, pp. 26–29).

In the second and third paragraphs of the introduction in *Sin mascar palabra*, some indications emerge regarding the primary catalysts of the violence inflicted on peasants in this region. These include the bipartisan conflict, the cattle latifundia, the establishment of cattle farms, as well as the paramilitary project initiated and organized by Carlos Castaño and businesspersons from *Córdoba* (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 6). This brief introduction signals that violence in rural Colombia transcends a singular temporal instance. Instead, it conveys that violence in the country assumes an enduring pattern that takes root in the 19th century and persists in the present.

La Palizúa

The introduction to this comic provides socio-cultural and spatiotemporal insights into *La Palizúa*, located in the department of *Magdalena* in northern Colombia (see Figure 5-7). Such a location serves as the main backdrop for the traumatic events depicted in *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha*. Such events have left an indelible mark on the collective memory of the community's peasant families. As the introduction states, *La Palizúa* encompasses the municipalities of *Chibolo*, *Sabanas de San Angel*, and *Plato*. *La Palizúa* is not a small rural community at all. In fact, it extends across larger territories such as *Santa Martica*, *La Boquilla*, *Las Planadas*, *Mulas*, *Altamacera*, and *El Mulero* (cf. CNMH, 2018a, n.d., paragraph 1). The diverse geographic and cultural landscape of *La Palizúa* and its surrounding communities has been a catalyst for disputes among armed groups. Particularly concerning are the paramilitary groups, often backed by influential economic and political elites in the Caribbean region. Power over territorial control even goes beyond the immediate confines of *La Palizúa*. This has resulted in unfortunate consequences for innocent and working peasant families.



Figure 5-7: Department of Magdalena, Colombia (TUBS, 2011, Wikipedia Commons).

The introduction specifies that the events unfolding in the comic book span from the 1980s onwards. This period coincides with the establishment of the community in the region, which was called *La Palizúa* (cf. CNMH, 2018a, n.d., paragraph 2). In the case of the communities of *La Pola* and *La Palizúa*, firsthand accounts collected by the *corporación jurídica Yira Castro*¹⁴⁰ reveal that peasant settlers began to establish themselves in these areas in the early 1980s. Motivated by the prospect of cultivating previously barren rural lands, numerous families ventured into these territories.

Nevertheless, peasants' efforts to establish themselves in these rural lands were met with hostility from Colombian State authorities, particularly the police, who subjected the population to incessant harassment and pressure to abandon these territories. Essentially, the state's actions amounted to bolstering the interests of the landowning elite, who sought to assert ownership over the lands in *La Pola* and *La Palizúa*, lands that had been occupied and cultivated by the peasant community in the *Chibolo* municipality (cf. Cifuentes Chaparro, 2016, p. 43; Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro, 2016a, pp. 10–11). Despite enduring violence at the hands of wealthy and powerful landowners, some peasant families chose to remain in the territories they cultivated. They even initiated legal proceedings to secure rightful ownership of the land, but the cases were ultimately dismissed due to the involvement of public officials (cf. Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro, 2016a, p. 32).

As outlined in the comics book's introduction, in the 1990s, the territories of *La Palizúa* suffered a violent invasion by paramilitary forces commanded by "alias Jorge 40." This led to the forced displacement of communities in these areas (cf. CNMH, 2018a, n.d.). The displacement was marked by coercion and brutality, leaving peasant communities abandoned by the state. Based on accounts shared by peasants with the *Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro*, illegal armed self-defense groups (*autodefensas*) of *Urabá*, referred to by Jorge 40 as "*Los Mochacabezas*,"¹⁴¹ forcibly infiltrated the region. They imposed a deadline for peasants to abandon their lands (cf. Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro, 2016a, pp. 18–19).

¹⁴⁰ In English, Legal Corporation Yira Castro. The *Corporación Legal Yira Castro* (CJYC) is a Colombian non-profit and non-governmental organization established in 2001. Dedicated to human rights advocacy, it provides support to victims and grassroots organizations to empower peasant communities and assert their rights. CJYC also initiates legal proceedings to defend victims' fundamental rights, including the rights to truth, justice, and material reparation. CJYC is named after the prominent Colombian Communist Party leader and activist Yira Castro, who died on July 9, 1981. She was also the mother of the current Colombian Senator Ivan Cepeda Castro. For more information, see Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro (2024).

¹⁴¹ *Los Mochacabezas* are those who cut off heads. There are macabre testimonies from peasants who claim that paramilitary groups slit the throats of many people who resisted abandoning their parcels of land. For more, see Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro (2016a, pp. 18–22) and *Rutas del Conflicto* (2021).

5.1.3. Research Framing

The introductions to each comic book provide an initial, broad overview of the research framework within which the graphic narratives are situated. They also offer general outlines of the methodologies used. This includes the main objectives the comics aim to achieve by conveying information through graphic narratives.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and approaches to collective and symbolic reparation are present across the three comics. The following section provides a concise overview of how these methodologies are introduced in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*. It also examines how such approaches, through their symbolic significance, contribute to the reconstruction and shaping of historical memory.

PAR constitutes the cornerstone of *Historia gráfica* as underscored in the second, third, and fourth paragraphs of its introduction. While the individuals involved in the research process are acknowledged, the introduction does not provide details about personal or private information. It instead references the collective contributors to the illustrated booklets without explicit identification, for example, by name. Furthermore, it highlights the incorporation of cultural artifacts into the participatory action research framework, emphasizing their role as supplementary materials that enrich the narratives depicted. The primary objective of the previous research, prior to the creation of the comics, is also underlined. Thus, the introduction states that the main purpose is to return the gathered information to rural communities. This information consists predominantly of their own testimonies, experiences, and recollections.

The approach is not just a research procedure, but a legal mandate under Law 1448 of 2011, known as the Law of Victims and Land Restitution. Under this law, the comics *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* are considered cultural artifacts integral to the comprehensive plan of collective and symbolic reparation outlined in this legislation. This means creating both comics is more than simply collecting testimonies and memories from victims of the armed conflict. Rather, they serve as powerful representations of the gathered information. This lets others bear witness to the voices, testimonies, and memories of those affected by the conflict through comics.

5.1.3.1. Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR served as the basis for the methodology used to obtain information from both *campesinos* and researchers. This research approach is first announced on the introductory page, in specific paragraphs that set the stage for understanding the study conducted in *Historia gráfica*. The

second paragraph of the introduction highlights key research and production aspects of the illustrated booklets, including an overview of the individuals and supporting artifacts integral to their creation. The paragraph explicitly highlights the utilization of the PAR methodology in crafting these comics. This paragraph states that in the creative process, “a photographer, a cartoonist, researchers, as well as peasant leaders and grassroots”¹⁴² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4, my translation) contributed. It also underscores the multimedia approach by mentioning the integration of comics with various cultural artifacts, such as “films, cassette programs, stories, theater, and puppets”¹⁴³ (1985, p. 4, my translation). This mixture of participants and media underscores that these comics serve to disseminate information.

The introduction of *Historia gráfica* expands on the methodology used for the illustrated booklet: PAR, or “militant research.” This methodology is a collaborative, investigative approach that Orlando Fals Borda and the *Fundación Rosca* used with the peasant population on the Atlantic coast of Colombia from 1971 onwards (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180A). This approach is not just a research tool but also a collective learning process in which peasant communities actively contribute important information from their own memories, testimonies, and experiences. The advantage of PAR is that both peasant communities and researchers engage in learning and critical thinking to assess real-life circumstances and improve them.

The primary aim of employing the PAR approach was to undertake a profound “historical recovery” of pivotal events, often fraught with humiliation and violence, even bordering on the traumatic, that have deeply impacted the existence of peasant communities in rural areas of the Atlantic coast region. In alignment with Orlando Fals Borda, such “historical recovery” was primarily grounded in firsthand narratives, memories, and mementos from *campesinos*, augmented by the insights of researchers, with the overarching goal of enhancing the living standards of these peasant populations. The innovative approach of PAR not only captivated the interest of the Colombian rural populace but also garnered attention from scholars, researchers, artists, and foundations alike (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 180 A). This collective effort resulted in an unprecedented collaborative initiative in the Colombian countryside along the Atlantic coast.

The collaborative effort between farmers and researchers to gather data is evident in the introduction of *Historia gráfica*. The final two sentences of the second paragraph in the introduction underscore “trunks” and “archives” as important mechanisms to gather

¹⁴² The original text in Spanish reads, “[e]n su elaboración [referring to *Historia gráfica*] intervino un equipo integrado por fotógrafo, dibujante, investigadores, dirigentes y bases campesinas.”

¹⁴³ In Spanish, “[y] junto con las proyecciones de filminas, programas grabados en casetes, cuentos, teatro y títeres, hicieron parte de las técnicas o modalidades de la [IAP – PAR (Participatory Action Research)]”.

information about peasant communities. Both concepts are linked to the act of storing and preserving memories. That is why its symbolic role is highlighted in this introduction. Both the trunk and the archive assume a profound significance in the construction of historical memory, in this case, in the Colombian Caribbean. The former concerns individual memory, whereas the latter relates to the collective memory of peasant communities along the Atlantic coast.

The notion of the trunk evokes the image of an old-fashioned receptacle once used to safeguard people's personal mementos, such as documents, photos, briefs, toys, and other items connected to the past. While its use may be less prevalent in modern times, the symbolic function of the trunk within the introduction of *Historia gráfica* is paramount. It serves as a symbol of a private repository of memories.

The concept of "trunk" reveals a profound connection to historical struggles and personal recollections of *campesinos* on the Atlantic coast. On the one hand, the trunk stands as a repository of material individual relics meticulously stored by peasants, serving as silent witnesses and documentary evidence for the recollections shared by *campesinos*. On the other hand, the trunk takes on a symbolic resonance that goes beyond its materiality. Metaphorically speaking, the trunk goes from being a material container of old objects and mementos to representing a poignant vessel that carries peasants' memories and experiences, which are transformed into testimonies.

In contrast, the archive, within the context of this peritext, represents a more sophisticated, systematically organized system with a storage capacity that surpasses that of a trunk. The archive stands as a symbol of a modern approach to research and as a repository of memories. The second paragraph refers to PAR practitioners' use of "private and official" archives, as well as documents and materials stored in "local and regional bibliography" (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4). The management of this complex and multifaceted information across different archival locations demands more sophisticated work, not only in researching and storing, but also in narrating memories. Consequently, the concept of the archive described in the introduction becomes a testament to the meticulous efforts of PAR researchers to explore, safeguard, and methodically document information about the past.

The third paragraph of the introduction outlines the primary goal of *Historia gráfica*, which is realized through the integration of peasant memories and archival sources. The primary objective is for *campesinos* to "receive" and comprehend "in an orderly and systematized form the history of the events that they themselves produced, especially if they help to reconstruct

it”¹⁴⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4, my translation). *Historia gráfica*, presented in booklet form, is primarily intended for rural communities, enabling them to engage with the history and past events in which they participated. However, this initial aim has evolved. In the early 1970s, these comics were instrumental in fostering grassroots engagement among peasant populations on Colombia’s Atlantic coast. They promoted self-awareness and encouraged active participation in both historical reconstruction and political activism.¹⁴⁵

While retaining their informative function, these comics have increasingly become cultural artifacts that facilitate the investigation of processes involved in constructing historical memory in Colombia. Additionally, *Historia gráfica* serves as a source of inspiration for other comics addressing historical memory, such as *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*. Overall, it has evolved into a multimodal, multifaceted academic tool that not only educates communities about their own past but also highlights the efforts of *campesinos* to defend their territories and their rights throughout history.

5.1.3.2. Collective and Symbolic Reparation

As previously stated, the methodology employed in the creation of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* aligns with Law 1448 of 2011, the Victims and Land Restitution Law. This legislation is fundamental to addressing injustices experienced by victims of violence and displacement in Colombia. Within this legal framework, the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH) supervised the production of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*. These comics function as significant cultural artifacts within the CNMH’s broader strategy for collective and symbolic reparations.

Both comics include methodological outlines in their introductions, clearly defined in separate sections. The research framework appears in the concluding paragraphs of these introductions. By situating the framework in this position, the texts emphasize the methodology’s central role in shaping their graphic narratives. This organizational structure demonstrates a clear commitment to scholarly rigor and historical accuracy.

In *Sin mascar palabra*, its concluding paragraph in the introduction establishes the primary research framework, detailing both the research process and the comic’s intended purpose. It also highlights the implicit connection between this work and historical memory as

¹⁴⁴ The complete paragraph in the original introduction reads as follows: “[e]ste proceder [el uso de memorias y archivos] no era fortuito. Era y sigue siendo, opinamos nosotros, la más firme convicción del derecho que tienen las bases o comunidades de recibir de forma ordenada y sistematizada la historia de los hechos que ellas mismas produjeron, mucho más si ayudan a reconstruirla”.

¹⁴⁵ These aspects will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter when the graphic narratives are explored.

a symbolic form of restitution for peasant communities in *Tulapas*. Although this is not explicitly stated, the paragraph implies that the comic book serves as a significant cultural artifact within the reparations process for *Tulapas* victims. Peritextual information alone does not sufficiently reveal this relationship. Instead, examining the epitexts as complementary texts and media provides further insight into the comic's production, particularly its investigative dimension.

Sin mascar palabra aligns with the CNMH's overarching mission of reconstructing historical memory from the perspectives of the affected communities in the Colombian conflict. Indeed, the final paragraph of the introduction states that this comic "is part of the fulfillment of the commitments assumed by the National Center of Historical Memory in the framework of the Integral Plan of Collective Reparation of the Community of the village of San Pablo de Tulapa (Turbo, Antioquia)"¹⁴⁶ (CNMH, 2018b, p. 6, my translation). To comprehend the core duties of the CHMN and their connection to the plan of collective reparation, it is necessary to consult ancillary written materials and multimedia.

A pivotal external resource that functions as the comic's main epitext is the CNMH official website, along with the documents attached to it. One of these documents clarifies that the commitment of CNMH is framed in "the Victims and Land Restitution Law"¹⁴⁷ that seeks to investigate, document, and report acts of violence as well as to represent, make visible, and dignify victims' memories and testimonies embedded within the conflict in Colombia (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015, pp. 9–10). In this context, the comics of *Sin mascar palabra* function as an alternative medium that contributes to a broader societal understanding of victims' perspectives by conveying testimonies and recollections in a verbal-pictorial manner.

The so-called plan of collective reparation (*reparación colectiva*) for victims appears to be significant within the introductory context provided by the peritext. However, the introduction lacks sufficient elaboration on the concept. It necessitates a more detailed exploration to enhance readers' understanding of the relationship between collective reparation and the graphic narratives presented in the main text.

An integral element of the research frame in *Sin mascar palabra*, and one highlighted in its introduction, is the concept of "Collective Reparation." The Victims and Land Restitution Law (decrees 4633, 4634, and 4635) stipulates "Collective Reparation" as a significant program

¹⁴⁶ The original reads, "*Sin mascar palabra. Por los caminos de Tulapas* hace parte del cumplimiento de los compromisos asumidos por el Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica en el marco del Plan Integral de Reparación Colectiva de la Comunidad del corregimiento de San Pablo de Tulapa (Turbo, Antioquia)."

¹⁴⁷ This law is also known as the Law 1448 of 2011 – *Ley de Reparación y de Sustitución de Tierras*.

designed to address harms within communities in the framework of the Colombian armed conflict that have impacted particularly “peasant populations” and “ethnic peoples.” The program endeavors to contribute to the multifaceted reparation of victims by focusing on various dimensions¹⁴⁸ (Unidad para las Víctimas, 2015, paragraphs 1 and 2). Collective reparations extend beyond material compensation, acknowledging the profound losses endured by the peasants of the *Tulapas* region.

The symbolic aspect, along with the political and material ones, plays a pivotal role as a fundamental component in unraveling the truth behind the violent events that unfolded in rural communities. In its introduction, *Sin mascar palabra* establishes an initial reading pact between producers and readers, presenting comics as a medium for the representation of memory. Here, the context and groundwork for the social reality of *Tulapas* communities in the violent past emerge. In the final paragraph of the introduction, readers should understand that *Sin mascar palabra* does not simply represent memories but also serves as a “symbolic form” that gives voice to peasants of this region.

The research framework of *La Palizúa* is essential for understanding its graphic narratives and is presented in the third paragraph of the introduction. This section is more comprehensive than those of the other two comics examined in this study, which enables a more detailed presentation of relevant information. The methodology utilized in *La Palizúa*, similar to that of *Sin mascar palabra*, is grounded in the legal framework established by the Victims and Land Restitution Law in Colombia. Consistent with the precepts of the National Center for Historical Memory (CNMH), *La Palizúa* also forms part of the collective and symbolic reparations plan for victims of the conflict.

The introduction offers overall insights into the investigative dimension of *La Palizúa*. For instance, it states the timeframe of data collection, spanning from 2013 to 2018. This introduction also emphasizes that the graphic narratives in this work are based on “collective memory encounters” facilitated by the CNMH within the peasant communities that comprise *La Palizúa*. The methodology for the realization of these collective memory meetings begins with individual narratives to identify a collective meaning for what has been lived and remembered by the community’s members (cf. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2023, paragraph 12). The so-called collective memory encounters seek to elicit diverse perspectives and personal accounts that can foster a deeper understanding of shared histories and communal

¹⁴⁸ To learn more about the legal, political, and social guidelines for collective reparations for victims of the armed conflict in Colombia, see Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas (2013, 2015, 2022).

identities in *La Palizúa*, which falls under the Law 1448 of 2011's collective and symbolic reparation.

Another noticeable distinction from the introduction of *Sin mascar palabra* is the acknowledgment of fundamental Colombian institutions. The introductory pages of *La Palizúa* highlight the invaluable contributions of various Colombian State institutions towards the content of the graphic narratives. Specifically, the involvement of the Land Restitution Unit (*La Unidad de Restitución de Tierras – URT*) and the Unit for the Attention and Integral Reparation of Victims (*La Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas – UARIV*) is underscored. Both units were created under the Law of Victims and Land Restitution to provide integral assistance to victims of the conflict in Colombia.

In addition, the introduction mentions the legal advisory services provided by *Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro*. Moreover, recognition is given to the peasant community of *La Palizúa*, who, according to the introduction, strive to preserve their testimonies and memories, particularly to enlighten future generations so that they do not lose their peasant identity (c.f. CNMH, 2018a, n.d., paragraph 3). This cultural identity faces a particular threat due to the widespread collective harm inflicted by forced displacements.

To conclude this section, it might be argued that paratexts in graphic narratives are essential for framing and contextualizing stories dealing with historical memory and testimony. They can be classified into material, historical, and research frames. Paratexts, such as covers, provide initial structure and context, linking historical and cultural information to the narrative. Other paratextual elements, such as introductions, footnotes, and tables of contents, guide reader expectations and add context to the graphic narratives. In Colombian comics like *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*, these elements help organize content, bridge personal and historical narratives, and deepen understanding of identity and socio-political conflict. Graphic paratexts, including frontispieces and internal covers, create suspense, situate the reader in specific settings, and showcase the authors' styles. Overall, paratexts are integral to the storytelling process, not merely supplementary.

6. Graphic Narratives: Exploring Untold Histories

This chapter investigates the role of graphic narratives in representing, narrating, and dramatizing the memories of Colombian communities affected by violence. Through imagery and multimodal elements, these works illustrate diverse methods for evoking and narrating memory. They present multiple perspectives, providing insight into the reconstruction of historical memory from rural communities' viewpoints. The central research question addressed is: How do the graphic narratives in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* convey individual and collective memories through verbal-pictorial components that contribute to the reconstruction of historical memory in Colombia?

To address this question, the analysis focuses on three key aspects of these graphic narratives. First, it investigates how collective and individual memories are elicited and narrated. Techniques and strategies that pictorially narrativize memories help evoke, recount, and structure them in different ways. The visual and textual elements in these works illustrate how memories of rural peasants are evoked and reflected upon by various narrators, who are depicted as characters representing their communities.

Second, the chapter analyzes how narrators are represented and the roles they play in recounting the past. Both their graphic representation and verbal expression are examined. Equally significant is the narrator's role, as their graphic verbal-pictorial representation shapes readers' engagement with the story. Whether depicted as an omniscient construct, a collective, or a single voice, the narrator serves as both a guide and an interpretive lens. This blending of personal and communal perspectives enriches the narrative process.

Third, the analysis considers how individual and collective memories are portrayed through verbal and pictorial components. The imagery contributes to the *mise en scène* of the graphic narratives, encompassing key settings, characters, events, and motifs associated with the past. These elements are depicted through diverse drawing styles, frames, panel juxtapositions, and the interplay between gutters and closure. Collectively, these verbal-pictorial elements create a space for dramatizing memories and serve as visual research objects for examining the past from the perspective of peasants.

These three aspects—ways of eliciting and narrating memories, the verbal-pictorial representation of narrators, and the depiction of the past—constitute the foundation of the mnemonic modes that characterize *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*. The mnemonic mode of **recognizing** is central to the four graphic narratives of *Historia gráfica: Lomagrande: El baluarte del Sinú*, *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, *El Boche:*

Campeño rebelde del Sinú, and *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en la lucha por la tierra*.

The verbal-pictorial forms of these works highlight the struggles of rural communities on the Atlantic coast, enabling peasants to recognize and reconnect with their collective past. The narratives activate memory by integrating cultural objects, historical figures, and past stories—preserved in so-called “memory trunks”—as symbols of previous struggles. These elements, presented through panels, frames, speech balloons, and narratorial captions, serve as visual and tangible links to peasant struggles for rural lands. Additionally, the graphic narratives show how peasant characters emerge as politically active agents, using lessons from the past to guide present action and shape their futures.

In contrast, the mnemonic mode of **reminiscing** is central to the graphic narratives of *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas*. In this context, memory is evoked through place-based methods, including geographical maps and those created by the communities themselves. Unlike the narrators in the four graphic narratives of *Historia gráfica*, who emphasize regional perspectives, those in *Sin mascar palabra* are depicted as members of different peasant families in *Tulapas*. These narrators connect histories to memory and post-memory, as the characters span two generations within the same families. By sharing experiences and recollections across generations, these narratives offer a personal perspective on community memories, highlighting how memory is transmitted, reconstructed, reinterpreted, and preserved.

The mnemonic mode of **reminding** is explored in *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha*. In this narrative, memory is conveyed through personal reflections from an individual narrator recounting the history of their rural community. Unlike *Historia gráfica* and *Sin mascar palabra*, this work does not activate memory through symbolic objects or maps. Instead, it centers on the narrator’s own recollections, shaped by an oral testimony that appears to have been recorded. Through analepsis, these memories are presented both graphically and verbally, connecting moments from the narrator’s life as a child, adolescent, and adult. This integration of individual experience with communal history demonstrates how personal memory intertwines with collective identity, enriching the community’s past.

The central hypothesis is that, through the mnemonic modes of recognizing, reminiscing, and reminding, these graphic narratives reveal distinct mechanisms for eliciting and narrating historical memory. By engaging with untold histories of Colombia’s rural communities, the graphic narratives in these three comics illuminate the struggles, resilience, and identities of groups often marginalized in official accounts.

6.1. Recognizing in *Historia gráfica*

The mnemonic mode of “recognizing” plays a central role in the graphic narratives of *Historia gráfica*. This mode serves as a tool for eliciting and recounting the past of communities on the Atlantic coast. Drawing on Casey’s insights, “recognizing” highlights “items in our [past] experience[s]” that have significantly shaped the past, making it not only “identifiable” and “accessible” but also contributing to “the constitution of the present itself” (2000, p. 123). Within this framework, the mode of “recognizing” operates in the graphic narratives of *Historia gráfica* as a mnemonic tool that prompts readers to identify and reflect on key elements in the construction of historical memory on the Atlantic coast region of Colombia.

Four main aspects can be recognized in these comics: investigative and documentary work, visual elements, narratives rooted in grassroots *campesino* experiences, and strategies for eliciting and narrating memory. Together, these aspects are essential for understanding how historical memory is collectively reconstructed.

6.1.1. Research and Documentation

The research and documentary aspect takes center stage in *Historia gráfica*. This important element serves as a vital component in reconstructing Colombia’s historical memory. The content of the four booklets that comprise the text results from collaborative efforts between researchers and peasants. As discussed earlier, the PAR methodology is crucial for understanding the scope of Colombia’s long-standing, systemic rural issues. Here, the victims—primarily peasants—are not merely subjects of study but active collaborators. Through their wisdom, knowledge, and especially their memories and lived experiences, they bring to light their struggles, stories, and perspectives, and contribute meaningfully to the graphic narratives. To fully understand these comics, it is necessary to engage with other related texts. One key intertextual and intermedial reference is Orlando Fals Borda’s *Historia Doble de la Costa*¹⁴⁹. This work delves deeply into the research, historical context, and cultural background underlying *Historia gráfica*.

Historia Doble de la Costa offers readers a behind-the-scenes look at the investigative and documentary elements found in *Historia gráfica*. Consisting of four volumes, this work showcases Fals Borda’s pioneering sociological research and his evolving ideas during the

¹⁴⁹ In English, the translation would be: Double History of the Coast.

campesino struggles for rural land rights in Colombia in the 1970s. The first volume, *Mompox y Loba* (1979/1979/2002), was published in 1979; *El presidente Nieto* (1981/1981/2002) followed in 1981, *Resistencia en el San Jorge* (1984/1984/2002) appeared in 1984, and *Retorno a la tierra* (1986/1986/2002) completed the set in 1986. Fals Borda conducted research and wrote these volumes throughout the 1970s on Colombia's Atlantic coast. They reflect the sociopolitical and cultural dynamics, the difficulties faced by *campesinos*, and their strategies for resilience in the face of adversity.

After its publication in the 1980s, *Historia Doble* drew attention in Colombia's academic world. The compendium is, "for various critics, the leading work of Sociology ever produced in [the country]" (Riveros Torres, 2012, p. 5, my translation).¹⁵⁰ Joanne Rappaport refers to the four-volume as a "masterwork [...] that narrates the agrarian history of the Colombian coastal plain and recounts [...] the research methodology [Fals Borda] used in Córdoba from 1972 to 1974" (Rappaport, 2020, p. 5).

Historia Doble, in particular its fourth volume, *Retorno a la tierra* (1986/1986/2002), is closely related to *Historia gráfica*. Both works emphasize not only the collaborative and investigative efforts of researchers and peasants but also the importance of presenting findings clearly and in an organized manner. This approach ensures accessibility for readers, especially peasants of the Atlantic coast, who were the primary audience for the research conducted by Orlando Fals Borda and his collaborators at that time.

The primary objective of research conducted by Fals Borda and others, as demonstrated in both *Historia Doble* and *Historia gráfica*, was to critically recover the peasants' past (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 58–66; Rappaport, 2020, pp. 94–129) and systematically return this knowledge to their communities (Fals Borda, 1988, pp. 53–58; Rappaport, 2020, pp. 130–168). Given the importance of this process, research findings needed to be communicated in ways that enabled peasants to recognize, understand, and utilize the results for their own benefit.

The documentation included farmers' testimonies, recollections, and memory-related artifacts, as well as academic and research contributions from researchers. In both *Historia Doble* and *Historia gráfica*, this material was organized to authentically reflect the voices of peasants, complemented by information from researchers. This ensured a balanced and collaborative representation of peasant communities' perspectives.

Historia Doble uses two communicative channels that Fals Borda clearly differentiates. On the one hand, channel A conveys peasants' testimonies and recollections in an artistic and

¹⁵⁰ The original reads, "'*Historia Doble de la Costa*' [...] es, para muchos críticos, la obra cumbre de la sociología producida en [Colombia]".

cultural manner while maintaining the idiosyncrasy of the Colombian coastal people. On the other hand, channel B presents descriptions, explanations, and interpretations by the researcher, in this case, Orlando Fals Borda, along with other scholars who collaborated with him. Alexander Pereira Fernández describes the interplay of both channels as follows, “[t]he four volumes are written in a polyphonic manner, where the author’s voices are interwoven with those of the subjects investigated, in the manner of a choral song, music in which Fals Borda was an expert”¹⁵¹ (Pereira Fernández, 2009, p. 237, my translation).

In *Historia gráfica*, the polyphonic nature of its narratives is evident in the diverse characters and narrators across its four stories, as well as in the documentary material, both visual and verbal, that helps give depth to the testimonies and experiences of *campesinos*. The polyphony in *Historia gráfica* reflects a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that enrich the visual storytelling of the past of peasant struggles on the Atlantic coast. In the verbal track, the graphic narratives employ what Orlando Fals Borda referred to as the integration of “Channel A” and “Channel B.” This communicative approach combines formal academic discourse (Channel A) with more accessible, community-driven narratives (Channel B). This polyphonic integration is further enhanced by the interplay of text, photos, and other visual material, such as maps, that create cohesive graphic narratives in the language of comics, where channels A and B merge into a single visual storytelling. The narrators in these stories not only guide readers but also embody the duality of these channels, blending historical accuracy with past experiences and recollections, as well as with imagery.

The A–B narrative structure not only organizes the storyline but also evokes the dual-sided format of cassette tapes, establishing a productive analogy between form and medium. In this sense, *Historia gráfica* functions as an allegorical recording device, akin to the cassettes historically used by ethnographers and journalists to document interviews. Just as a tape recorder enables the retrieval of stored voices, the work preserves and rearticulates the recollections, testimonies, and lived experiences of communities on Colombia’s Atlantic coast through an interplay of textual and visual expression.

Building on *Historia Doble de la Costa*, the comics of *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica* further develop this allegory by emphasizing the cassette’s material and dialogic qualities. The term ‘material’ refers to the cassette as a tangible object that can be used, listened to, and manipulated, while ‘dialogic’ denotes its function as a medium that enables exchange and interaction among diverse perspectives. The A–B structure functions

¹⁵¹ The original reads, “[l]os cuatro tomos están escritos de una manera polifónica, donde se intercalan las voces del autor con las de los sujetos investigados, al modo de un canto coral, música en la que Fals Borda era experto”.

not merely as a formal device but as an integrative framework that juxtaposes and interweaves distinct yet complementary viewpoints. One side foregrounds the voices and memories of peasants, whereas the other incorporates the academic, interpretive, and contextualizing work of researchers and scholars. This layered configuration generates a cohesive, multimodal representation of collective memory, in which testimonial and analytical registers coexist and inform one another.

6.1.2. Visual Representations

A defining aspect of *Historia gráfica* is its conversion of diverse voices into primarily visual material. While the verbal narrative is significant, the graphic narratives in the booklets were designed to be easily understood by Colombian peasants, particularly those from the Atlantic coast. This emphasis responds to the high rates of illiteracy prevalent in rural communities. Peasants and indigenous populations, who are often marginalized in Colombia's countryside, frequently lack reading skills. Consequently, the illustrated booklets were intentionally crafted to reach illiterate audiences (cf. Rappaport, 2020, pp. 69–71), employing visuals as the principal mode of communication.

The graphic narratives across the four booklets are notable for their visual richness. Ulianov Chalarka's illustrations depict peasant characters, including social leaders, in cartoon-like representations. The booklets adopt a documentary approach, presenting systematically organized information and historical content from the perspective of marginalized groups. Additionally, graphic humor is used to capture Colombian cultural idiosyncrasies, particularly those of the coast. The inclusion of photographs of significant figures and maps further enhances the narratives, providing additional authenticity and contextual depth.

Another notable visual characteristic of these graphic narratives is the use of large panels. Most of the booklets, except *El Boche*, use only two panels per page. This design decision permits greater graphic detail and more effective organization of visual information. Each panel contains multiple characters, objects, and settings, resulting in compositions that are visually dense. These compositions reflect the collaborative research and collective memory work that underpin the booklets.

The use of large panels also facilitates rapid and accessible reading. Ulianov Chalarka, himself both a peasant and an artist, possessed an intimate understanding of the Atlantic coast's peasant population and their informational needs. This insight enabled him to present content visually in ways that resonated with his intended audience. Large panels, which occupy nearly

the entire page, streamline the reading process by minimizing the need to navigate conventional grid-like structures. The design focuses readers' attention on the imagery within each panel rather than on transitions, resulting in a more fluid and engaging narrative experience.

6.1.3. Histories from Below

On Colombia's Atlantic coast, peasant communities have endured sustained land dispossession by political and economic elites, resulting in their marginalization and exclusion from official histories. *Historia gráfica* addresses this absence by foregrounding "histories from below," amplifying *campesino* voices and validating oral history through graphic narrative. The narratives presented in the *Historia gráfica* booklets not only serve as a subject of study but also as key sources for reconstructing historical memory. Through testimonies from various regions of the Atlantic coast, peasants share their experiences, enriching the stories with realism and authenticity.

In *Historia gráfica*, peasants are the protagonists who narrate their experiences. Their histories address issues such as rural land dispossession, labor exploitation, conflicts between ruling classes and large landowners and peasants, and the *campesinos*' efforts to defend their rights and territories. These narratives also challenge hegemonic versions of history by offering critical, collective perspectives from the peasantry. Initially, these stories aimed to inspire other generations of peasants to recognize past struggles and encourage their participation as political actors in defending their land rights. However, over time, their purpose has evolved. Today, *Historia gráfica* is a narrative, graphic, and verbal resource that contributes to the reconstruction of historical memory in Colombia. This is achieved through the graphic representation of cultural artifacts, objects, and oral accounts that emphasize the importance of peasant struggles in reconstructing historical memory.

The four booklets share a consistent structure that conveys histories from peasants' perspectives, engages readers, and promotes social change by mobilizing the peasantry through political and activist themes. Each booklet includes: first, a cover and a source page (paratext that was already analyzed) that establishes the context. Second, an introductory section that serves as a reflective and engaging "hook" to entice readers. Third, graphic narratives where the stories are developed in depth. This section will be explored later. Finally, a conclusion that summarizes key aspects, emphasizes peasant struggles, and/or outlines actionable steps in an organized format (e.g., bullet points, numbered list, or poster-style visuals). This structure integrates verbal and pictorial elements to effectively communicate its activist message.

A key element of these comics is the “mnemonic mode of recognition” (*recognizing*), which permeates both the introduction and the four stories that comprise *Historia gráfica*. This mode of remembering enables a critical, collective reconstruction of peasant struggles while highlighting their historical significance. The primary objective is for other peasants, both in the region and in future generations, to recognize these struggles as part of their history and to continue defending their rights. Through these graphic narratives, *Historia gráfica* uses both cultural and material elements to evoke and narrate memory, underscoring the role of peasants in shaping Colombia’s history.

6.1.4. Cultural and Material Ways to Elicit and Narrate Memory

Material objects play a key role in memory by triggering recollections of meaningful events and associations with people. They also help situate personal memories within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Thus, objects function not only as prompts for memory but also as narrative devices for recounting associated events. Alan Radley observes that cultural artifacts and objects influence both the content of memory and the way remembering occurs (cf. Radley, 1997, p. 47). This underscores the importance of cultural artifacts in forging connections to the past. In *Historia gráfica*, cultural and material approaches to eliciting and narrating historical memory are fundamental.

The introduction to *Historia gráfica* foregrounds the concept of the “trunk of memories” maintained by Atlantic coast peasant communities (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4). These trunks contain objects, photographs, maps, stories, and references to historical figures, serving both as documentation and as reflections of collective struggles. Such mementos commemorate ongoing efforts for rural land and underscore the importance of personal and historical memory in the region. The introduction notes that cultural artifacts were stored “in trunks, private and official archives, and local and regional bibliographies,” and subsequently used to “return the information collected [to] the communities”¹⁵² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 4, my translation). This practice exemplifies material and culturally grounded strategies for eliciting and preserving memory, ensuring that historical narratives remain accessible and meaningful to peasant communities.

The graphic narratives in *Historia gráfica* recognize peasant struggles by drawing on the collective memories of communities in this Colombian region. The memorabilia of Atlantic

¹⁵² The original reads: los objetos estaban guardados “en báculos, en los archivos particulares y oficiales y en la bibliografía local y regional” y se usaban para “devolver la información recogida [a] las comunidades”.

coast peasants elucidates the evolution of the movement as a response to persistent land dispossession by large landowners. This movement constitutes a significant social phenomenon. Social movements are defined as collective actions aimed at social change, unified by the objective of transforming the status quo (cf. Eyerman, 2019, p. 79). This conceptualization closely corresponds with the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, which is designed to address injustices and foster social change in Colombia.

Within this context, the acknowledgment of peasant struggles is mediated through objects of memory. The mnemonic approach relies on the material aspects of memory to evoke and narrate the collective experiences of Atlantic coast communities, particularly those associated with the peasant movement and its ongoing challenges. This method enables peasants to “have a still closer look” at past events and locate their communities “on the inside of the phenomenon, and gives [them] the feeling of immediate access to it” (Casey, 2000, p. 124).

Historia gráfica foregrounds cultural and material artifacts as central elements in the processes of remembrance. These artifacts play a significant “role [...] in social life [...], and they are implicated in how people go about establishing their individual and collective pasts” (Radley, 1997, p. 47). From its cover and table of contents to its graphic narratives, *Historia gráfica* presents a variety of cultural objects from grassroots peasant communities, demonstrating how these groups reconstruct and preserve the memory of their struggles. Each booklet—*Lomagrande: El baluarte del Sinu*, *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, *El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinu*, and *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en lucha por la tierra*—highlights specific cultural artifacts and items used by these communities to evoke and narrate their historical memory in Colombia’s Atlantic coast.

6.1.4.1. Bastions (*Baluartes*) as Sites of Peasant Organization and Resistance

Lomagrande: El baluarte del Sinú reveals persistent land theft and violent appropriation faced by peasants on Colombia’s Atlantic coast since Spanish colonization. The narrative shows how foreigners—including Spanish, French, and Americans—seized these lands, often aided by corrupt Colombian politicians. This continued as coastal politicians, landowners, and stockbreeders also displaced indigenous people and peasants, perpetuating injustice and marginalization.

The illegal appropriation of peasant lands through violence—manifesting as slavery, repression, marginalization, and eviction—prompted peasants to create their first forms of organized resistance, known as bastions (*baluartes*). They functioned as collective units of productivity aimed at improving peasants’ standards of living, sustaining their struggles, and fostering awareness of the need for political and social action to secure their own welfare and that of their communities (cf. Negrete Barrera, 2018, p. 142). The bastions served as peasant



Figure 6-1: Page working as a reading hook in *Lomagrande* (Chalarka, 1985, p. 7).

associations that embodied collective resilience and self-determination. Besides, they emerge as a central theme in the history of *campesinos*. *Lomagrande* brings these early peasant organizations and the broader struggles of the region’s peasant movement into sharp focus.

The primary narrator of *Lomagrande* is a young peasant who serves as the storyteller but plays no central role in the past events. He appears sporadically throughout the story and re-emerges at the conclusion to tie the graphic narrative together. In the opening pages, verbal and visual elements work together to capture readers’ attention. This hook is established by the interplay of provocative newspaper headlines and the peasant narrator’s reaction.

In Figure 6-1, the narrator voices his thoughts in a speech balloon: Why is all this happening if the government claims there is peace in the countryside?¹⁵³ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 7, my translation). This question is prompted by nearby news headlines that highlight peasant issues and draw readers’ attention.

The floating verbal elements, in both form and font, closely resemble newspaper headlines. As Miguel Ángel de la Fuente González explains, press or newspaper headlines are typically concise, usually consisting of a single sentence and rarely exceeding 13 words. This brevity ensures that the content is as concise as possible (cf. DeLa Fuente González, Miguel Ángel, 1991, p. 162). This is precisely what the figure’s headlines show: the repression and attacks suffered by peasants, along with their resistance. Examples from the headlines

¹⁵³ The original reads: “¿por qué será todo esto, si el gobierno dice que hay paz en el campo?”

highlighting the repression include “Torture and death threats to peasants” and “200 peasants imprisoned in Córdoba.” Conversely, headlines reflecting peasant resistance include “Without authorization, a peasant force was installed yesterday” and “23 peasants detained for occupying Incora property.”¹⁵⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 7, my translation). These headlines encapsulate the dual narrative of victimization and defiance that defines the peasants’ struggle in *Lomagrande: baluarte del Sinú*.

Another feature of the press headlines is their linguistic style: they use nominal forms and the historical present. To remain brief, headlines often drop verbs, using nouns or adjectives instead (cf. Nadal Palazón, 2012, p. 187). For example, “Tortures and death threats to peasants” instead of “Peasants were tortured and threatened.” The historical present, common in Western journalism, uses the present tense for past events to add immediacy (cf. Nadal Palazón, 2012, pp. 187–188). For instance: “Another peasant march dissolved” and “Land invasions continue”¹⁵⁵ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 7, my translation).

Nominal structures and the historical present in headlines make the events feel ongoing or brought into the present. Placed near the narrator’s speech balloon and around his head, the headlines blend with his words and become part of the oral history shared by the peasant. It seems the narrator is witnessing past events and recounting them in real time. This technique hooks readers, drawing them into a story about peasants’ memories of the bastions on the Colombian Atlantic coast.

In *Lomagrande: El baluarte del Sinú*, the narrator often recalls historical abuses in which groups from other countries seized peasant territories. This theft dates to the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean coast. Figure 6-2 graphically depicts violence inflicted by the Spanish conquistadors. It emphasizes land theft and the displacement of Indigenous communities in the region. While the text provides an explanatory narrative, the accompanying images in the panels distinctly convey the gravity of these events.

The first panel of Figure 6-2 depicts the brutal violence inflicted by the Spanish conquistadors on the *Zenúes*, the original inhabitants of Colombia’s Caribbean region. Visually, it portrays the physical subjugation of this Indigenous community, but the violence extended beyond physical force. The narratorial caption reveals that the Spaniards not only “killed many” *Zenúes* but also “destroyed crops and works of art”¹⁵⁶ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 10, my translation).

¹⁵⁴ The headlines in Spanish read, “Torturas y amenazas de muerte a campesinos,” “200 campesinos presos en Córdoba,” “Sin autorización se instaló ayer for campesino,” and “Detenidos 23 campesinos por ocupar propiedad del Incora”

¹⁵⁵ The original reads, “Disuelta otra marcha campesina” and “Prosiguen invasiones de tierra.”

¹⁵⁶ The original reads, “los zenúes resistieron fieramente a los invasores que destruyeron cultivos y obras de arte, robaron oro y mataron a muchos”.

This systematic violence undermined the community's livelihoods and cultural heritage, enabling land expropriation and forced displacement. The second panel illustrates the expulsion of the *Zenúes* during the Spanish conquest, reflecting the ongoing displacement of rural communities throughout Colombia's history as a result of violence. This theme, also examined in works such as *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*, underscores the enduring consequences of land dispossession and displacement.

The third panel depicts the Spaniards as triumphant and dominant, portrayed as larger figures in contrast to the smaller, fleeing Indigenous communities. This visual disparity underscores the Spaniards' perceived supremacy and the dispossession of Indigenous lands. In the panel, the leading Spanish conquistador is shown holding a sword, symbolizing violence, and a crucifix, signifying the imposition of Catholicism. These objects represent the strategies employed to subjugate Indigenous communities throughout the country.

The third panel also highlights the dual aspects of colonization: the Spanish conquest and the settlement of wastelands by displaced communities, including Afro-descendant populations. The narratorial caption of the panel notes that, "[t]he Spaniards brought black slaves for the mines. The Cimarrones, or free blacks, founded towns on the coast"¹⁵⁷ (Chalarka, 1985, 10, panel 3, my translation). This reflects how some enslaved Africans escaped and established independent communities in the Colombian Caribbean, far from Spanish control. Meanwhile, the new colonial system, like the *hacienda*, facilitated the arrival of foreign settlers on the Atlantic coast, enabling them to exploit communities for their own economic gain.

The appropriation of fertile lands on the Atlantic coast was not limited to the Spaniards. Other foreigners also arrived. They imposed exploitative labor systems like matriculation (*la matrícula*) that tended to abuse local communities. Figure 6-3 illustrates this, showing that, by



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Figure 6-2: Panels depicting Spanish conquistadors inflicting violence and displacing the *Zenúes* from the Colombian Caribbean region (Chalarka, 1985, p. 10).

¹⁵⁷ The original reads, “los españoles trajeron esclavos negros para las minas. Los negros cimarrones o libres fundaron pueblos en la Costa”.

the late 19th century, foreign companies such as “Casa Americana” had already established themselves in the country. With the support of wealthy Colombians, these companies perpetuated the exploitation of Indigenous and peasant communities. This image highlights the abusive practices carried out by some *haciendas*, like *Hacienda Burgos* and *Hacienda Marta Magdalena*, which further used systemic oppression over the region’s inhabitants.



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Figure 6-3: Panels illustrating foreign and local companies abusing indigenous people and peasants (Chalarka, 1985, p. 12).

Figure 6-3 highlights the years when key events took place, with 1886 and 1892 emphasized in bold. By the late 19th century, several foreign companies had already established operations in Colombia, exploiting the country’s natural resources through cheap labor and, in many cases, forced labor or slavery. Two examples include rubber companies, such as *La Casa Arana*, and the banana companies, most infamously the United Fruit Company. The latter has become notorious for its role in massacring workers and, more recently, for revelations of its alliances with paramilitary groups to suppress and eliminate peasant union

leaders. As illustrated in Figure 6-3, foreign companies and the *haciendas* of wealthy *criollos* were responsible for significant abuses and injustices against the indigenous and peasant communities working for them. Furthermore, Colombian laws at the time largely favored these landowners and corporations, which exacerbated the hardships faced by the working indigenous and peasant populations.

The figure highlights how laws enacted by the Colombian government favored large-company owners at the expense of workers’ rights. In effect, these laws legalized slavery and

the exploitation of peasants, Black communities, and Indigenous peoples. The final panel, located in the right corner, graphically depicts some of the tortures endured by these communities while working for these companies. The images convey the humiliation and inhumane treatment inflicted on the inhabitants of the region. The narratorial caption in this panel states: “The ordinance 54 of 1892 of the department of Bolívar and the decree 34 of 1908 of the department of Sincelejo guaranteed the service of personnel with a new form of **slavery** called **matrícula**”¹⁵⁸ (Chalarka, 1985, 12, panel 3, emphasis by the author; my translation).

It is noted that this information does not originate from the communities themselves but was instead derived from historical research on the laws of the time. However, in these graphic narratives, the text is presented as if narrated by a peasant. This narrative device illustrates how the A and B channels discussed earlier converge in the figure, blending the perspectives of academic research and peasant memory.

In *Lomagrande*, photographic material highlights key figures involved in the creation of the *baluartes* and the locations where these societies were established. These photographs appear to have originated with the villagers themselves or to have been found in local archives. Consequently, their quality is often poor. However, their value lies in serving as visual evidence of the historical records and relics preserved by peasants. Figure 6-4 features the photos of two

significant figures, Vicente Adamo and Juana Julia Guzmán. It also highlights their roles in the creation of the *baluartes*. The inclusion of this material in the narratives emphasizes that these characters were real and remain present in the collective memory of the communities.



Figure 6-4: Panels showing photos of two significant figures. The upper panel presents a photograph of Vicente Adamo (Chalarka, 1985, p. 13), while the lower panel displays a portrait of Juana Julia Guzmán (1985, p. 15).

¹⁵⁸ The original reads, “la ordenanza 54 de 1892 del departamento de Bolívar y el decreto 34 de 1908 del departamento de Sincelejo garantizaron el servicio del personal con una nueva forma de **esclavitud** llamada **matrícula**”.

Their roles as political activists are underscored through the graphic narratives of *Lomagrande*. Adamo, an Italian immigrant, encouraged peasants to unite against their oppressors. In the upper panel of the figure, he says, “[!] Let’s unite to fight against the exploiters!” The images show that Vicente Adamo wielded significant influence among peasants on the Atlantic coast, who listened to him with fervor. In fact, two characters, representing peasants and inspired by Adamo’s words, express their own perspectives. One peasant says, “I’ve been a [matriculado] of the Lacharme for 15 years. With an organization, we don’t get screwed like the Boche.” Another adds, “They pay me five cents a day”¹⁵⁹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 13, my translation). These dialogues among characters illustrate how Adamo’s ideas sparked deep reflection among peasant communities working under powerful landowners.

These graphic narratives also highlight the groundbreaking participation of women—a progressive aspect for its time, given Colombia’s deeply patriarchal society. The lower panel of the figure portrays Juana Julia Guzmán as the president of the Society of Women Workers Redemption (*Sociedad de Obreras Redención de la Mujer*) on August 7, 1919. The society’s name is prominently displayed on a large banner above a group of women. In *Historia Doble*, it is noted that Juana Julia Guzmán “became familiar with Adamo’s socialist preachings—he appears to have been her only love (only Juana Julia preserved the portrait of the Italian)—and began attending the workers’ meetings, where unexpectedly, at the age of 27, she was elected as the first (and only) president of the society”¹⁶⁰ (Fals Borda, 1986/2002, p. 142; parenthesis by the author; my translation).

The combination of photographs with the drawn medium of comics enhances the documentary quality of these graphic narratives. They highlight the interplay between memory and history. Memory emerges from communities, while history is constructed from documented events and historical figures captured in photos. As Marianne Hirsch observes in her discussion of photographs in *Maus*, “the photographs included in [comics], and through them, [...] become what Pierre Nora has termed *lieux de mémoire*,” where “a play of memory and history” becomes evident (Hirsch, 1991-1993, p. 8, emphasis by the author).

¹⁵⁹ The original dialogue in this scene in Spanish goes like this. Adamo says, “[!]unámonos para luchar contra los explotadores!” One peasant replies, “yo soy matriculado de los Lacharme hace 15 años. Con una organización no nos joden como al Boche.” Finally, another peasant adds, “a mi me pagan cinco centavos diarios”.

¹⁶⁰ The original reads, “[Juana Julia Guzmán] supo de las prédicas socialistas de Adamo, quien según parece fue su único amor (sólo Juana Julia conservó el retrato del italiano) y empezó a concurrir a las reuniones de las obreras, donde inesperadamente para ella al cumplir 27 años resultó elegida como primera y (única) presidenta de la Sociedad”.

6.1.4.2. The Town of *Tinajones* as a Symbol of Historical Land Struggles

Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra (hereafter *Tinajones*) depicts the peasant communities of *Tinajones* and their significant struggle for rural land against corrupt landowners and politicians. At the center of this conflict is José Santos Cabrera, a powerful figure who exploits the labor of peasant settlers to cultivate previously uncultivated lands near the Sinú River. After the land becomes fertile and productive, Santos Cabrera seizes it through threats and political corruption, with enduring consequences for the community's sense of justice.

The narrator, an old man, serves as a guide, recounting the history of *Tinajones* without directly participating in the events. He is presumed to be a resident of the town. *Tinajones* employs maps as a narrative device to evoke memory, a feature also seen in other graphic narratives like *El Boche: campesino rebelde del Sinú* and *Felicita Campos: la mujer campesina en la lucha por la tierra*. Joanne Rappaport notes that, “[w]hile the vast majority of ANUC activists, [most of them peasant], at the time were illiterate, maps had become important props in the [*campesino*] movement, especially for determining the boundaries of [*baluartes*] and reclaimed lands” (Rappaport, 2020, p. 124). Thus, maps serve as essential tools for documenting processes and for identifying peasant towns and communities that defended their rural territories and land rights. This narrative strategy is evident in the story's opening image: a map.



Figure 6-5: Map of Colombia representing towns where peasant struggles for rural land have taken place (Chalarka, 1985, p. 29).

The opening image is a map of Colombia, as depicted in Figure 6-5, highlighting rural towns such as *Sucre*, *Manatí*, *Ríosucio*, *Viota*, *Planas*, and *Marquetalia*, which were the sites of origin of the FARC-EP guerrillas in the 1960s. These towns, frequently marginalized due to Colombia's centralist political, social, and economic emphasis on major cities, have been consistently neglected by the state. Consequently, these areas have become focal points of violence, poverty, neglect, and marginalization.

As shown in the map in Figure 6-5, it lacks regional or city divisions, showing only town names. This suggests a unified peasant movement spanning the entire country. Rappaport points out that “cartographic documents” were inserted or attached in the illustrated booklets of *Historia gráfica* “to provide peasants with a sense of the broader regional and national scope of their

efforts” (Rappaport, 2020, p. 124). Here, the map serves as a reminder for peasants of the national impact of their struggles in different regions.

In addition to the verbal markers identifying campesino villages, the map features a prominent title located in the northern region, corresponding to Colombia’s Caribbean area. Positioned at the top of the map, the slogan “[t]he peasant struggle is not new!”¹⁶¹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 29, my translation) emphasizes the long history of *campesino* movements across various towns. This slogan highlights that these struggles are not confined to a particular place or moment in time but reflect an enduring fight, especially over rural lands, in areas historically considered marginal or peripheral to the country.

On the following page, the narrator declares, “[t]hat’s right, comrade! Our struggle for land and power is not new. For a long time, we have been fighting the landowners and politicians who have exploited us”¹⁶² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 30, my translation). This statement underscores the persistent historical conflict between rural communities and Colombia’s social and political elite—a powerful minority that has gained control through land expropriation and exploitation. While the graphic narratives of *Lomagrande* illustrate the abuse suffered by rural populations, *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra* centers on the town of *Tinajones*, which the narrator presents as a symbol of the broader *campesino* struggle for land rights.

As noted earlier, the mnemonic mode used in the *Historia gráfica* booklets relies on the concept of “recognizing,” which involves acknowledging the town of *Tinajones*’s struggle. Edward Casey describes a form of recognition called “recognizing-in,” which “occurs whenever we recognize one thing *in* another: in its form or on its terms [, or even context]” (Casey, 2000, p. 132, emphasis by the author). This concept is applied in *Tinajones* through the rhetorical device of synecdoche, where the town of *Tinajones* represents all Colombian communities that have struggled for their rights across various regions and periods. Consequently, the graphic narratives emphasize the part/whole relationship, with *Tinajones* symbolizing a broader collective struggle.

Carmen Sánchez Manzanares explains that the part/whole relationship in narratives can be understood differently depending on the perspective. When the focus is on the interaction between constituent parts, it is considered a case of metonymy. However, when the relationship emphasizes the whole over its parts, it is considered a synecdoche. Accordingly, synecdoche

¹⁶¹ The original reads, “[i]la lucha campesina no es nueva!”.

¹⁶² The original reads, “[i]eso es cierto, compañero! Nuestra lucha por la tierra y el poder no es nueva. Desde hace tiempo hemos combatido a los terratenientes y políticos que nos han explotado”.

can be understood as a specific type of metonymy, as it involves a semantic shift in which a part represents the whole or the whole represents a part (cf. Sánchez Manzanares, 2007, p. 205).

In *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, synecdoche functions not only as a graphic-narrative device, where a part stands for the whole or vice versa, but also as a mechanism of recognition. The town of *Tinajones* serves as a symbol for the broader rural landscape, encompassing nature and its inhabitants. This setting captures the struggles of Colombian peasants against powerful landowners and corrupt politicians. Likewise, the character José Santos Cabrera, among the campesinos' adversaries, represents all exploitative landowners and politicians who appropriate fertile land cultivated by peasants.

As previously mentioned, the town of *Tinajones* symbolizes all rural towns that have fought for the right to land, which is essential for work and housing in the Colombian countryside. According to the narrator, these rights have been undermined by landowners and politicians (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 30). In the graphic narratives, this oppressive group is personified by the character José Santos Cabrera. According to *Historia Doble*, the peasants of the region recognize and remember this large landowner as a greedy person with a craving for political and economic power. Peasants recount that Santos Cabrera inherited rural lands from his father in 1883 but showed no interest in the town of *Tinajones'* lands near the mangroves until peasants made them productive. Once the previously uncultivated lands became fertile, Santos Cabrera began harassing the town's inhabitants, asserting ownership and attempting to reclaim the territories as his own (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, 152A-153A).

The town of *Tinajones* serves as a character representing all towns in the region. As the central figure of the story, *Tinajones* is defined by its proximity to the Sinú River. The narrative begins in 1920, with the narrator describing how the river, “when approaching the sea, ran through rich and unexploited wastelands”¹⁶³ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 31, panel 1; my translation). The setting is richly detailed, emphasizing its connection to nature, as illustrated in the first panel of Figure 6-6.

The first panel of the figure depicts scenes of nature, with detailed depictions of fauna, flora, and the Sinú River, emphasizing the fertility of the surrounding land. In contrast, the second panel shifts the focus to the region's mercantile and social aspects. This panel depicts boats on the river, bunches of bananas, and three figures of Afro-Colombian peasants working on the boats. This comic panel reflects the historical context, as international banana companies established themselves on Colombia's Atlantic coast in the late 19th century. Together, both

¹⁶³ The original reads, “El río Sinú al acercarse al mar corría por baldíos inexplorados y ricos.”

panels of the figure highlight the vital role of the Sinú River in providing resources, livelihood, and transportation for the region's inhabitants. Indeed, the river is portrayed as the key driver of progress for the people of *Tinajones*, as further illustrated in subsequent panels within these graphic narratives.



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Figure 6-6: Panels depicting nature around the *Sinú* River (Chalarka, 1985, p. 31).

Preliminary panels in the story of *Tinajones* depict the gradual development of this rural area, driven by the efforts of peasants who colonized previously uncultivated lands near the Sinú River. The town's rural, social, and economic transformation from wasteland to a thriving community is illustrated through a sequence of interconnected images across multiple panels. As explained previously, comics require readers to actively participate in making sense of scenes by mentally connecting images encapsulated in panels and filling in gaps. This process, known as "closure," involves observing individual parts and synthesizing them into a cohesive whole, thereby enhancing the narrative flow of the graphic narrative (cf. McCloud, 1994, p. 63).

The three panels shown in Figure 6-7 illustrate the gradual development of the *Tinajones* peasant zone from a wasteland to a rich town. This is shown graphically through three types of panel transitions as described by McCloud: action-to-action, subject-to-subject, and scene-to-scene. The first type of interaction (action-to-action) focuses on an action performed by the same subject(s) (cf. McCloud, 1994, p. 70, panel 2). The figure emphasizes the direct involvement of peasants in transforming the area. Through their actions, viewers of the three panels observe the gradual development of the land.

In the subject-to-subject transition, readers remain engaged with the same overarching theme but must bridge gaps between graphic and verbal elements to create a cohesive narrative (cf. 1994, p. 71, panel 3). The readers of the scene across the three panels should understand that the setting remains the same but changes over time and with the collective action of the community.

Finally, the scene-to-scene transition reveals substantial changes in setting that transport readers “across *significant distances of time and space*” (McCloud, 1994, p. 71, panel 4; emphasis by the author). This type of transition underscores the long-term nature of peasants’ work. This work includes adapting the rural land, building their houses, and establishing plantations or feeding animals. These transformations, while not instantaneous, collectively depict the passage of time and the enduring impact of the community’s labor, as shown in the figure. The three comics panels in Figure 6-7 together illustrate the socio-cultural and economic development of *Tinajones*.

In conclusion, the three panels of the figure showcase peasants’ intelligence and adaptability in managing terrain where land and water meet, as in the town of *Tinajones*. They highlight the resilience of the Atlantic coast communities, which skillfully used and understood natural resources to sustain themselves. The construction of water-adjacent housing, the cultivation of crops suited to both land and water, and the creation of simple yet effective canals all demonstrate their ability to adapt and flourish. Together, the elements shown in the panels reflect the “amphibious culture” (Fals Borda, 2015, p. 125) described by Orlando Fals Borda, a term that captures the harmonious relationship between the peasants of northern Colombia’s Atlantic coast and their environment.

Historia gráfica not only highlights the collective efforts of peasant associations, as exemplified by *Lomagrande: El Baluarte del Sinú*, and the cooperative resistance of entire towns, as depicted in *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, but also illuminates the individual struggles of key figures who have opposed powerful stockbreeders, landowners, and corrupt politicians. The subsequent sections analyze the graphic narratives of two emblematic figures: Manuel Hernández, known as *El Boche*, and Felicita Campos. The analysis first addresses the verbal-pictorial representation of *El Boche* as a campesino hero, followed by an examination of Felicita Campos’s significance as an Afro-Colombian leader.



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Figure 6-7: Panels showing the progressive development of *Tinajones* thanks to peasants’ work (Chalarka, 1985, p. 32).

6.1.4.3. A Peasant Hero: Remembering *El Boche*

El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinú exposes the labor exploitation endured by peasants at the hands of wealthy stockbreeders through an abusive labor practice known in Colombia as “*la matrícula*.” This system, considered a modern form of slavery, allowed the abuse of peasants, Indigenous peoples, and Afro-Colombians, who were treated as property in livestock *haciendas*. According to the story of *El Boche*, *la matrícula* was sanctioned in the Caribbean region as early as 1892. These rural populations in the Caribbean—and likely in other rural and jungle areas of Colombia—were loaned, exchanged, sold, or rented as though they were objects. The abuses they suffered, along with their families, ranged from physical torture to outright murder (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 53).

The story of *El Boche* graphically and verbally narrates the rise of large cattle *haciendas* on Colombia’s Atlantic coast in the late 19th century. The story is set in the regions of *Sinú* and *San Jorge*, where the extensive cattle industry was established. To do this, the story highlights how powerful local and foreign landowners, exemplified by the Frenchman Alejandro Lacharme, amassed wealth through the exploitation of peasant labor. Abusive practices such as *la matrícula*, slavery, mistreatment, verbal aggression, and torture were used to control workers. These graphic narratives portray peasants’ efforts to abolish these oppressive systems. This struggle is depicted through the legendary figure of Manuel Hernández, known on the Colombian coast as *El Boche*. Graphic and verbal storytelling capture both the historical and mythical dimensions of Manuel Hernández’s resistance.

The narrative is presented through the perspective of an elderly woman, most likely Juana Julia Guzmán, who was previously referenced in *Lomagrande*. Recognized as a leader and near-heroine in the first booklet of *Historia gráfica*, Juana Julia also served as president of a peasant association. Her extensive knowledge of her community’s struggles, histories, and collective memories establishes her as an authoritative narrator for this account. Furthermore, her comprehensive understanding of Manuel Hernández’s experiences and his legacy as a peasant hero on the Atlantic coast further positions her as the central voice within these heroic graphic narratives.

Similar to *Tinajones: Un pueblo en lucha por la tierra*, *El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinú* begins with a map that highlights significant figures from rural communities (see Figure 6-8). These characters, celebrated for their leadership and contributions to *campesinos*’ movements and peasant struggles, are placed on the Colombian map by their regions of origin. Such representation elevates them to the status of popular heroes. The list includes prominent names among peasantry in Colombia, such as *Quintín Lame*, *María Cano*, *Manuela Beltrán*,

Vicente Adamo, *el Mulato Pablo*, and Juana Julia Guzmán, who, as noted earlier, serves as the primary narrator.

When each key figure is placed on the map of Colombia alongside their respective towns, as seen in Figure 6-8, a headline declares, “people have their heroes”¹⁶⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 48, my translation) (Chalarka, 1985, p. 48, my translation). On the following page, the narrator, Juana Julia Guzmán, reinforces this idea, saying, “[t]hat is true, *compañeros!* But we don’t know them well. Why? Because the rich and the landowners of Colombia and abroad have tried to hide them. They have told us many lies about them”¹⁶⁵ (1985, p. 49, my translation).

This aligns with the paratextual elements analyzed in the bibliographic section, which explain that *El Boche*’s bibliography includes a note clarifying that coastal landowners disseminated “*patrañas*” (falsehoods) to damage *El Boche*’s reputation (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 47). The narration presenting Juana Julia Guzmán’s words is more extensive than in other *Historia gráfica* booklets and underscores the importance of recognizing all heroes, thereby introducing the narrative of Manuel Hernández (*El Boche*), a prominent peasant hero of the Colombian Caribbean.

The graphic narratives of *El Boche: Campesino rebelde del Sinú* emphasize the archetype of the popular hero, serving as a mnemonic mode of “recognizing,” as defined by Edward Casey. Casey notes that recognizing often includes the influence one person has on another, offering the example of Wittgenstein’s disciples and students who “were said to mimic him (often unconsciously) in clothing, gesture, wording, and even smoking habits” (Casey, 2000, p. 132, parenthesis by the author). In *El Boche*, this recognition extends to historical influence: rural populations identify with the character of *El Boche* and use his heroic actions



Figure 6-8: Map of Colombia and its popular heroes (Chalarka, 1985, p. 48).

¹⁶⁴ The original reads, “el pueblo tiene sus héroes”. The term *el pueblo* has been translated as “people” to highlight the cosmovision of individuals, particularly those living in rural villages, as shown in the illustrated booklet of *Tinajones*. Notably, *pueblo* also refers to small geographical areas distinct from cities. In this context, the word specifically pertains to rural, peasant communities rather than urban populations, who tend to hold different beliefs.

¹⁶⁵ The original reads, “[i]eso es verdad *compañeros!* Pero no los conocemos bien. [¿] Por qué? Porque los ricos y terratenientes de Colombia y el extranjero han procurado ocultarlos. De ellos nos han dicho muchas mentiras”.

as a model for remembering *campesinos*' struggles. His story reflects not only admiration for his role as a hero but also his significant impact on the peasant movements that also advocate for the rights of rural laborers.

From the outset, *El Boche* is presented as a heroic figure. In general terms, a hero may be understood as a figure who, in the face of adversity, acts with courage and self-sacrifice on behalf of others, thereby embodying collective values and aspirations (cf. Allison & Goethals, 2010, pp. 47–50). These characteristics define this character.

Within the narrative, the designation “*Boche*” is traced to a term used by the French during World War I to describe Germans as aggressive or unruly (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 62). Although its continued usage on Colombia's Atlantic coast remains uncertain, it may have influenced the colloquial term *bochinche*, meaning uproar or disturbance. Consistent with this etymology, El Boche emerges as a disruptive force within the cattle haciendas of the late nineteenth century, challenging the exploitation and violence inflicted upon rural communities by powerful landowners and stockbreeders.

The graphic narratives of *El Boche* align with Pilar Riaño Alcalá's perspective on collective memory, which, according to her, is shaped by cultural practices, individual and collective histories, and shared popular resources, including stories about popular heroes (cf. Riaño Alcalá, 2006, p. 105). Through the story of *El Boche*, *Historia gráfica* reconstructs the collective memory of marginalized Caribbean communities, using his story to preserve the cultural and historical legacy of peasant struggles to defend their rights.

El Boche's graphic narratives follow the archetypal “hero's journey,” or “monomyth,” as outlined by Joseph Campbell. This narrative structure includes three phases—departure, initiation, and return—common to stories of mythological and popular heroes (cf. Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 28). The departure is constituted by five components: “The Call to Adventure,” “Refusal of the Call,” “Supernatural Aid,” “The Crossing of the First Threshold,” and “The Belling of the Whale” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, pp. 45–88). The initiation contains the elements of “The Road of Trials,” “The Meeting with the Goddess,” “Woman as the Temptress,” “Atonement with the Father,” “Apotheosis,” and “The Ultimate Boon” (1949/2004, pp. 89–178). Finally, the return is composed of “Refusal of the Return,” “The Magic Flight,” “Rescue from Without,” “The Crossing of the Return Threshold,” “Master of the Two Worlds,” and “Freedom to Live” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, pp. 179–226).

Prior to examining *El Boche*'s journey, it is necessary to define the concept of a hero in collective memory. A hero represents a collective construct, embodying an idealized image, legend, or symbol that holds significant meaning for a community (cf. Bigazzi et al., 2023,

pp. 830–831). Achieving authentic heroic status requires overcoming specific limitations. Joseph Campbell asserts that “the hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 18). Through sacrifice and the surmounting of great challenges, Campbell further notes, “the hero of myth [finally achieves] a world-historical, macro-cosmic triumph” consisting in “the regeneration of his society as a whole” (1949/2004, p. 35).

El Boche emerges as a transcendent figure for peasant communities along Colombia’s Atlantic coast. His narrative, grounded in the socio-political and historical crises these communities have experienced, serves as a model for reconstructing historical memory from the peasants’ perspective. The graphic narratives in the booklet illustrate harsh labor conditions on *haciendas*, injustices endured by peasants, and the lessons derived from resistance against oppressors. *El Boche*, representing the collective struggle of the peasants, confronts adversity and ultimately sacrifices his life for his community.

In *El Boche*, Manuel Hernández embarks on a transformative journey that establishes him as a hero among *campesinos*. The narrative, as recounted by Juana Julia Guzmán, generally follows the monomyth's structure, though not rigidly. Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney observe that “a story [of a hero] does not need to have all of the elements Campbell mentions, nor do the elements have to be in the specific order he identifies as typical” (2009, p. 160). In *El Boche*, the principal phases of the monomyth—departure, initiation, and return—are present, though their components may appear out of order or overlap. Despite these variations, the hero’s journey framework remains discernible. This structure enables Juana Julia Guzmán to narrate the history of working peasants in the Colombian Caribbean cattle *haciendas*, which emerged at the end of the 19th century and developed into a dominant social, economic, and political elite.

The narrative is set in a historical context marked by significant events that precede the hero’s emergence. According to the illustrated booklet of *El Boche*, the events occurred in 1844, when peasants who escaped slavery established communities that relied on the resources of the *Sinú* and *San Jorge* mountains. By 1854, foreign companies had exploited the region and compelled peasants to plant grass. Although slavery had been formally abolished, politicians and landowners in *Ciénaga de Oro* disregarded anti-slavery legislation, employing forced labor to clear forests and convert wasteland into livestock *haciendas* (cf. Chalarka, 1985, pp. 50–51).

El Boche’s narrative underscores the unchecked expansion of cattle *haciendas*, during which slaves and peasants suffered significant abuse. Eduardo Posada Carbó identifies the

hacienda Berástegui, owned by the Burgos family, as a representative example of this feudal economic system, highlighting the dominance of latifundia and the exploitation of labor. The Burgos family accumulated considerable wealth through extensive cattle ranching and subsequently through sugarcane production. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their landholdings on the Colombian Atlantic coast expanded from 8,000 to 12,000 hectares. *Hacienda Berástegui* is particularly notorious for its reliance on slave labor to exploit and develop previously uncultivated land (cf. Posada Carbó, 1986, p. 5). These circumstances form the backdrop for the emergence of the main character, Manuel Hernández.

After illustrating the indiscriminate expansion of cattle *haciendas*, the story introduces Manuel Hernandez. It places him in the “departure” phase of the hero’s journey. In *El Boche*, this phase marks a transformative shift as Hernández leaves his home in the little town of *San Jacinto* for an unfamiliar environment: a large cattle *hacienda* in Colombia’s Caribbean region. This departure aligns with the first stage of Joseph Campbell’s framework.



Figure 6-9: Panels featuring the departure of Manuel Hernández (Chalarka, 1985, p. 52).

region. The rural landscape of wasteland, once characteristic of the area, as graphically illustrated in *Tinajones*, had undergone a dramatic transformation. In *El Boche*, the panels—as

Figure 6-9 visually introduces the departure stage. The first three panels portray the new world Manuel Hernandez is about to encounter. The opening comics panel of the page, presented in a horizontal format, depicts part of the story’s primary setting—a large cattle *hacienda*. Within the panel, a large, fenced area is depicted, containing images of cows and a group of peasant workers. At the center of the scene, a foreman commands peasants to continue clearing trees to make more space for incoming cattle. He orders them, “[t]he Norman and Zebu bulls are about to arrive. We have to cut down more mountains. Work!”¹⁶⁶ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 52, panel 1; my translation).

By 1880, as depicted in the second panel of Figure 6-9, large haciendas dominated the Sinú

¹⁶⁶ The original reads, “[e]stán para llegar los toros normando y cebú. Hay que derribar más montañas. [i] A trabajar!”.

seen in panels one and two of the figure—now depict scenes filled with cattle and expansive pastures, replacing the diverse crops such as rice and coconut that previously thrived there.

The narratorial caption in the second panel highlights the exploitation of labor, stating, “the landowners got rich with our work”¹⁶⁷ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 52, panel 2, my translation). The third panel reveals a tactic used to keep peasants compliant and content: intoxication. One peasant remarks, “[this] bourgeois rum is good for keeping people drunk and happy!”¹⁶⁸ (1985, p. 52, panel 3; my translation). The panel also features a label reading *Hacienda Berástegui of the Burgos house*, suggesting that the Burgos family, previously mentioned, was involved in rum production as part of their operations.

In the fourth and final panel of Figure 6-9, we see a key element of the departure stage known as “The Call to Adventure.” From Campbell’s perspective, this signifies that the “[d]estiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 53). The narratorial caption in this panel states, “peasants from other regions migrated to Sinú and San Jorge to work in the new haciendas”¹⁶⁹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 52, panel 4; my translation). This panel emphasizes how this call to adventure often arises from necessity, such as the need for work.

According to Campbell, “The Call to Adventure” can be voluntary or instigated by an external force or entity. In *El Boche*, this call occurs through a character named Goyo. Manuel Hernández, with his name placed beside his image within the panel, says to someone who appears to be his wife, “Goyo came to look for people to work. I’m going with him!”¹⁷⁰ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 52, panel 4; my translation). The story does not clarify Goyo’s identity. He is apparently an overseer seeking workers for the cattle ranches of large landowners on the Atlantic coast. Campbell notes that when the call to adventure is imposed on the hero, “he may be carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant agent, as was Odysseus, driven about the Mediterranean by the winds of the angered god, Poseidon” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 53). Similarly, Goyo functions as the catalyst who draws Hernández into his journey.

The departure phase in *El Boche* includes pivotal advice given to the protagonist before he embarks on his journey into the unknown—the *haciendas* of Sinú and San Jorge. In the fourth panel of Figure 6-9, it becomes evident that Manuel Hernández’s path is troubled with

¹⁶⁷ The original reads, “los terratenientes se enriquecieron con nuestro trabajo”.

¹⁶⁸ The original reads, “[i] este ron burguero sí es bueno para mantener a la gente jodía y contenta!”.

¹⁶⁹ The original reads, “campesinos de otras regiones emigraron al Sinú y San Jorge para trabajar en las nuevas haciendas”.

¹⁷⁰ The original reads, “Goyo vino a buscar gente para trabajar. [i] Me voy con él!”.

potential dangers. In this panel, a woman cautions him, “[b]e careful! The “whites” are meaner than the plague”¹⁷¹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 52, panel 4, emphasis by the author; my translation).

In the last panel of Figure 6-9, the woman appears to serve as a “protective figure,” a key element of the departure phase known as “Supernatural Aid.” According to Campbell, this figure provides guidance to the hero as he prepares to confront malignant forces that lie ahead on his journey (cf. 1949/2004, p. 63). The woman’s warning reflects the perception indigenous and peasant communities held of the “whites” who were seizing and exploiting their lands. This moment highlights both the cultural tension and the hero’s looming challenges as he moves into the perilous and abusive new environment of *haciendas*.

Figure 6-10 features two large panels that illustrate the conclusion of the departure and the initiation stage. In *El Boche*, the final element of the departure phase is represented by “The Crossing of the First Threshold.” According to Campbell, this moment occurs when the hero “reaches the gates of an **unknown zone**, where he encounters a threshold guardian who represents the limits of his current life” (Thury & Devinney, 2009, p. 162, emphasis by the authors). The two panels on the page mark a critical transition from departure to initiation, during which Manuel Hernández will face the challenges of the unfamiliar new setting.

In the first panel of the figure, Manuel Hernández arrives at his destination—a cattle *hacienda* in the town of *Montería*, Colombia, renowned for its cattle culture and the socioeconomic structure of its ranching system. The upper panel of the figure depicts domestic animals, fences, a stable with cows and horses, and peasant workers. These elements, along with vast areas of land, are emblematic of the Colombian hacienda landscape. The narratorial caption states, “[in] 1898 Manuel Hernández arrived in Montería”¹⁷² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 53, panel 1; my translation).



Figure 6-10: Panels depicting the end of the departure and the entry to the threshold (Chalarka, 1985, p. 53).

¹⁷¹ The original reads, “[i] ten cuidado! Los “blancos” son más malos que la plaga”.

¹⁷² The original reads, “[en] 1898 Manuel Hernández llegó a Montería”.

At this point, Hernández encounters a character who appears to be an overseer. Within the framework of the monomyth, Campbell explains that when the hero enters the unknown zone, he often meets the “threshold guardian,” a figure who oversees access to the new domain. In Campbell’s view, such characters, often present in “folk mythologies,” can be “deceitful and dangerous presences” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 71). The meeting between the two characters marks the beginning of an essential step in the hero’s transition from departure to initiation, where he faces different trials and tasks in the unknown.

The overseer in the first panel of Figure 6-10, serving as the guardian of the *hacienda*, addresses Hernández: “You look strong. Talk to the white *‘Musiú’ Lacharme. We are in need of matriculados.” The asterisk next to *Musiú leads to a footnote explaining the term. In the lower-left corner of the panel, the explanation reads: “*On the Coast, the French are called ‘Musiú’”¹⁷³ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 53, panel 1; emphasis by the author; my translation). This regional dialectical variation of the French word *Monsieur* is used in the story to refer to hacienda owners coming from France.

Another term explained in the panel in Figure 6-10 is “*matriculado*.” When the foreman tells Hernández, “We are in need of matriculados,” Hernández questions the term, asking himself, “[M]atriculados? And what will that be?” At the bottom of the panel, the term is clarified: “[T]he slavery continued under the name of *matricula*. An ordinance of the Department of Bolívar allowed it since 1892”¹⁷⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 53, panel 1; emphasis by the author; my translation). The subsequent panel further elaborates on the meaning and implications of this practice, which can also be considered a difficult and humiliating task, part of the initiation.

The second panel of Figure 6-10 represents the initiation phase, the central part of the hero’s journey. This phase is described as “[t]he stage of *the trials and victories*” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 34, emphasis by the author). In this panel, Hernández faces his greatest adversary: Alejandro Lacharme, a French landowner who, like many regional and foreign elites, amassed wealth by seizing peasant lands and converting them into cattle *haciendas*. According to Campbell, “having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a [...] landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials”

¹⁷³ The overseer says in Spanish, “te vez fuerte. Habla con el blanco *‘Musiú’ Lacharme. Estamos necesitando matriculados”. The explanation of the word Musiú is: “* en la Costa a los franceses se les dice ‘Musiú’”.

¹⁷⁴ Manuel Hernández asks himself in Spanish, “[¿]matriculados? [¿] Y eso qué será?” The narratorial caption provides an explanation: “[I]a esclavitud siguió con el nombre de **matricula**. Una ordenanza del departamento de Bolívar la permitía desde **1892**”.

(Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 89). The trials that Hernández must undergo take place in Lacharme's *hacienda*.

The initiation phase requires the hero to overcome numerous challenges, including confronting the ultimate enemy. As Campbell explains, after the hero has “made his way past the numerous perils, he comes at last to the Lord of the Underworld” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 92), who, in many myths, takes the form of archetypal figures such as dragons or monsters (cf. 1949/2004, pp. 92–93). In *El Boche*, Manuel Hernández encounters his nemesis, the *latifundista* and cattle breeder Lacharme, early in his journey. This initial encounter sets the stage for the severe trials that will ultimately transform Hernández into a hero for peasant communities on the Atlantic coast.

As depicted in the lower panel of Figure 6-10, the Frenchman Alejandro Lacharme embodies greed and the abuse of power. In this scene, Lacharme, holding a document, asserts his dominance over Hernández, saying, “We already signed the contract for you. You owe me 10 days of work for the 50 cents I paid”¹⁷⁵ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 53, panel 2; my translation). This labor contract marks the beginning of Hernández's trials, signaling his arduous journey toward heroism.

The labor contract contained numerous clauses that, for the time, were designed to confuse and deceive the mostly illiterate peasant workers. Joanne Rappaport highlights this reality, noting that “most *campesinos* could not read the document, nor could they sign their names to it” (Rappaport, 2020, pp. 29–30). As a result, these workers were at a significant disadvantage, often treated as mere objects rather than individuals with rights.

The inability to comprehend the terms of the *matricula* is portrayed in the second panel of Figure 6-10. Surrounding Manuel Hernández's character on the left side is a depiction of what the *matricula* required for work on Lacharme's livestock *hacienda*. Visually, the panel presents a series of densely packed letters strung together, creating an overwhelming, incomprehensible effect. This visual representation mirrors the experience of working peasants when faced with such contracts, emphasizing their alienation and vulnerability.

The panel's text reveals the extent of the exploitation, stating that “the rich and landowners” kept peasants as slaves for life. These communities were treated as property—they could be borrowed, sold, or traded. Under the abusive labor clauses of the *matricula*, landowners had the authority to punish, torture, and even kill workers and their relatives. One clause could even be interpreted as granting the right to sexually exploit women. Item three on

¹⁷⁵ The original reads, “ya firmamos el contrato por ti. Me debes 10 días de trabajo por los 50 centavos que pagué”.

the list explicitly states that landowners could “freely use us and our daughters” (Chalarka, 1985, p. 53, panel 2; my translation). As Juana Julia Guzmán narrates this account, it becomes clear that she is referring to the sexual abuse of peasant women by *hacienda* owners, highlighting the grave injustices these populations endured.

When Hernández began working at the Lacharme *hacienda*, he quickly recognized the inhumane treatment inflicted upon peasants and their families. One panel explicitly declares,



Figure 6-11: Panels illustrating some trials in the initiation phase (Chalarka, 1985, p. 55).

“the exploitation was inhuman”¹⁷⁶ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 54, panel 1; my translation). Figure 6-11 displays the initiation phase during Hernández’s journey and some of the trials he faced: his reflections on how Catholicism was used to deceive and manipulate peasants; his ability to inspire and convince the exploited workers to recognize the injustices perpetrated by landowners and cattle ranchers; and, finally, the severe punishments he endured for resisting the oppression on the *haciendas*.

The first panel highlights how peasants were often deceived through the manipulation of the Catholic religion. The narratorial caption explicitly states, “the church helped to exploit us better”¹⁷⁷ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 55, panel 1; my translation). The imagery reinforces this message, portraying

priests as corrupt figures who accepted bribes to deceive and manipulate the peasantry. In the panel, a priest named Moisés Gómez—his name embroidered on his robe—is shown receiving a bag containing a stack of bills from a well-dressed man. The dialogue in the panel depicts an interaction between the priest and the listening peasants, including Manuel Hernández. This interaction further emphasizes the Catholic church’s role in exploiting the vulnerable.

The speech balloons in the panel reveal both the priest’s deceptive rhetoric and the peasants’ reactions and naivety. The priest declares, “You as matriculates owe obedience and consideration to the masters. Otherwise, you will go to hell! God rewards resignation and meekness.” As he speaks, a group of impoverished peasants listens intently, including Hernández, who begins to reflect on the situation: “[H]ow they deceive us! How many

¹⁷⁶ The original reads, “la explotación era inhumana”.

¹⁷⁷ The original reads, “la iglesia ayudó para que nos explotaran mejor”.

haciendas might he have?” Among the listeners, a peasant child innocently asks Hernández, “Manuel, is God the Musiú?”¹⁷⁸ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 55, panel 1; my translation). The child’s question, symbolizing innocence and naivety, underscores how Lacharme, or the *Musiú*, was elevated to a godlike status in the eyes of the exploited peasants.

The second panel of Figure 6-11 above portrays Manuel Hernández engaging with peasants, urging them to recognize the exploitation they endure at the hands of *hacienda* owners. A narratorial caption reads, “Hernández opposed all this exploitation”¹⁷⁹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 55, panel 2; my translation). While the peasants listen attentively, their physical demeanor reveals exhaustion and resignation to their circumstances. In this scene, a dialogue unfolds between Hernández and the group. He declares, “We are sick and hungry. They steal our work!” A peasant among the group agrees, saying, “That’s true!” Another responds, “We have to do something!”¹⁸⁰ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 55, panel 2; my translation). This exchange illustrates that peasants are not merely passive listeners; they are beginning to contemplate action against the abuses they suffer in these *haciendas*.

The subsequent panel depicts the physical and humiliating abuses inflicted on the working peasants under the labor contracts established through the *matricula*. As Joanne Rappaport explains, “the *matricula* became a kind of bondage, made more bitter by the physical brutality of hacienda foremen and the ubiquitous use of the stocks as a form of public humiliation” (Rappaport, 2020, p. 30, my emphasis). The last panel of Figure 6-11 graphically represents these harsh realities, showing dungeons and various torture devices such as the stocks (*cepo*) and the *muñequero*. The *cepo* immobilized peasants by securing their feet and hands in round holes, subjecting them to torment. The *muñequero*, designed to restrict wrist movement, forced individuals to remain standing for prolonged periods.

Manuel Hernández himself is shown enduring these punishments. In the panel of Figure 6-11, a foreman leads him, hands bound, and taunts him, saying, “[h]ere you will last 10 days. Then you will work another 10 in public works!”¹⁸¹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 55, panel 3; my translation). This panel sequence employs an “aspect-to-aspect” (McCloud, 1994, p. 72, panel 1) transition to emphasize different facets of Hernández’s journey.

¹⁷⁸ The interaction in Spanish develops as follows: The priest says, “vosotros como matriculados debéis obediencia y consideración a los amos. [i]Sino iréis a los infiernos! Dios premia la resignación y la mansedumbre.” Manuel Hernández reflects on the priest’s words, “[i]cómo nos engañan! [¿] Cuántas haciendas tendrá?”. Finally, a kid asks Hernández, “[¿]Manuel, Dios es el Musiú?”.

¹⁷⁹ The original reads, “Hernández se opuso a toda esta explotación”.

¹⁸⁰ In Spanish, the interaction between Hernández and the other peasants unfolds as follows: Hernández asserts, “[e]stamos enfermos y hambrientos. [i] Se roban nuestro trabajo!”. A peasant responds, “[i] eso es verdad!” Another says, “[i] tenemos que hacer algo!”.

¹⁸¹ The original reads, “[a]quí durarás 10 días. [i] Después trabajarás otros 10 en obras públicas!”.

The trials shown in the panel correspond to “The Road of Trials” in Campbell’s framework and are integral to Manuel Hernández’s transformation into a hero, helping him fully grasp the suffering of his fellow peasants, recognize their exploitation, inspire rebellion, and take steps toward collective resistance. “The Road of Trials” is described as a passage through a “world of death and darkness, governed by the enemy” (Joseph Campbell, 1949/2004, p. 97). The final panel encapsulates this theme, illustrating the brutal conditions within the cattle *haciendas*—depicted here as veritable centers of torture.

Throughout the story, Hernández persuades hardworking peasants to rebel against the humiliating labor system imposed by the *matricula*. This is a pivotal moment in the initiation phase: many peasants initially remained passive and did not resist the mistreatment they suffered at the hands of *hacienda* owners and their foremen. Encouraging them to recognize this injustice and inspiring them to rise against the powerful cattle rancher Lacharme marked one of the most significant and impactful actions in Hernández’s journey to become a hero for these oppressed and humiliated communities.

As depicted in Figure 6-12, particularly in the first and second panels of page 58, Hernández and the group of peasants relocate to another part of the *hacienda*. Many of the peasants listen to him, motivated by a desire to end the injustices they have endured. Even women join the cause, determined to fight against the oppressive system. In response, one

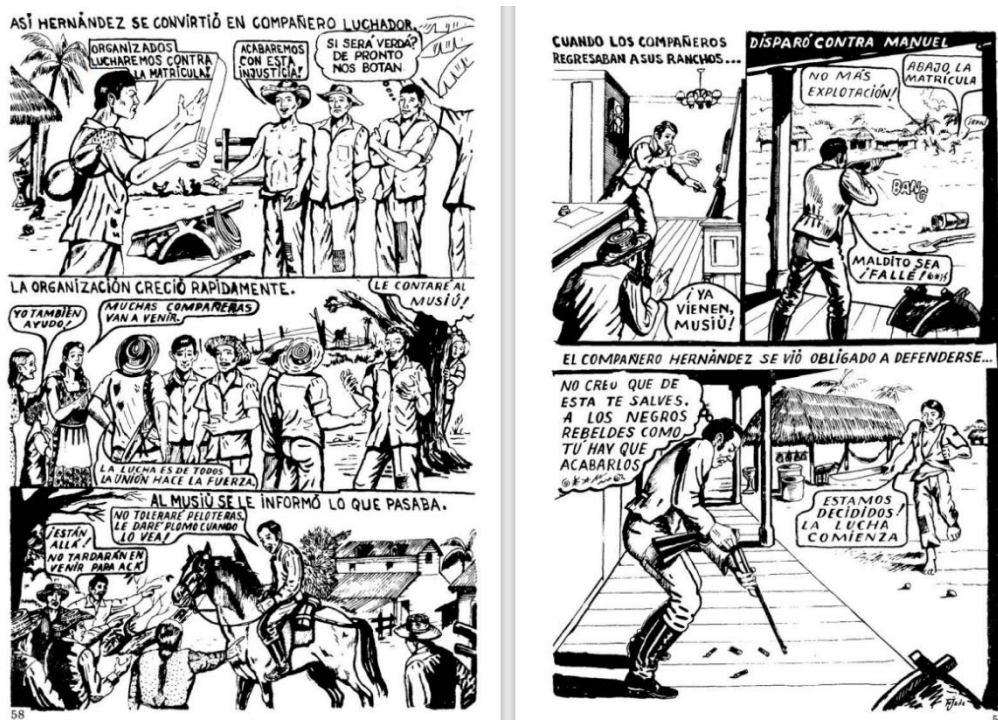


Figure 6-12: Two pages depicting Hernández rallying peasants to resist hacienda mistreatment and Lacharme’s violent reaction (Chalarka, 1985, pp. 58–59).

farmer asserts, “[t]he struggle belongs to all, unity is strength”¹⁸² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 58, panel 2; my translation). Meanwhile, as depicted in the third panel of page 58, the Frenchman Lacharme becomes aware of the rumored uprising led by Manuel Hernández and the peasants. Determined to suppress any rebellion, the landowner prepares to confront the group of *campesinos* at the *hacienda*.

The second page of Figure 6-12 above uses three panels to illustrate Manuel Hernández’s return to the *hacienda* and the peasants’ protest against exploitation and the *matricula*, during which Lacharme responds violently by shooting at them. This moment highlights Hernández’s ordeals during the “Road of Trials” phase, contrasting the peasants’ calm demeanor with Lacharme’s aggression, a behavior reminiscent of José Santos Cabrera in *Tinajones*.

The final and most challenging task Hernández must complete during his initiation as a hero is overcoming the peasants’ enemy. Campbell describes this stage metaphorically, stating, “[d]ragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed” (1949/2004, p. 100). This idea is illustrated in Figure 6-13. Defeating the enemy is the ultimate moment that transforms Hernández into a hero. As Thury and Devinney explain, “[t]he hero’s quest, if successful, incorporates the defeat of an ogre or villain” (2009, p. 164). In this graphic narrative, the villain

is embodied by the menacing Lacharme, who meets his end in a direct confrontation with Hernández.

The first two panels of Figure 6-13 depict Hernández killing Lacharme in self-defense. The figure primarily employs the subject-to-subject transition between panels, requiring readers to infer meaning through the combination of verbal and pictorial elements (cf. McCloud, 1994, p. 71, panel 2). Following the confrontation, Lacharme is killed, prompting the landowners and overseers to begin hunting Hernández. The caption in the third panel states, “[d]ead the Musiú, the landowners began the persecution”¹⁸³ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 60, panel 3; my translation). Here, readers must use “closure” (McCloud, 1994, p. 63) to infer that Hernández escapes. This panel also shows *hacienda*



Figure 6-13: Panels of Hernández defeating Lacharme and hacienda owners plotting Hernández murder (Chalarka, 1985, p. 60).

¹⁸² The original reads, “[I]a lucha es de todos, la unión hace la fuerza”.

¹⁸³ The original reads, “muerto el Musiú, los terratenientes empezaron la persecución”.

owners, ranchers, and their workers pursuing him, creating a chaotic scene filled with characters and horses, which conveys a sense of urgency and commotion.

The final two pages of these graphic narratives depict Hernández's physical death and the rise of *El Boche* as a hero to the populations of the Atlantic coast. These pages illustrate the last phase of the monomyth: "the return." According to Campbell, this phase represents the hero's "reintegration with society, which, [...] from the standpoint of the community, is the justification of the long retreat, the hero himself may find the most difficult requirement of all" (1949/2004, p. 34, emphasis by the author). The return establishes Hernández as a symbolic figure for his people.

Hernández's return to the community is portrayed in two ways. Physically, it is marked by his death on October 5, 1908, as stated in the caption of the second panel, when he is hunted and killed like an animal. The first two panels in Figure 6-14 portray this. *Hacendados* and foremen who orchestrated his murder then humiliate him further by dragging his lifeless body through the town of *Montería* for public display. The third panel shows this degrading act taking place in front of the public and the mayor's office. His physical return highlights the brutality of his oppressors and the degrading way his murderers display his body to the town.

Figure 6-14 highlights two key elements: the visual portrayal of characters and the use of verbal elements. Across the three panels, a clear contrast is drawn between the depiction of the enemy figures (panels 1 and 2) and peasants (panel 3). In the first two panels, the landowners and foremen are depicted in stark black-and-white with heavy shadows that imply death. In contrast, the third panel portrays peasants and Hernández's body predominantly in white, symbolizing purity. This visual contrast reinforces the moral divide between good and evil.

Another noteworthy aspect is the linguistic element, conspicuously featured in the third panel of Figure 6-14. This panel contains several speech balloons capturing the comments made about Manuel Hernández as his body was dragged through the streets of *Montería*. Most of



Figure 6-14: Panels showing Manuel Hernández being hunted, killed, and humiliated by hacienda owners and foremen (Chalarka, 1985, p. 61).

these remarks begin with the phrase “they say,” such as: “they say he made mincemeat of the Musiú;” “they say he killed out of jealousy;” “they say he burned the hacienda;” “they say he killed 10!;” “they say they killed him with a bullet in cross;” and “they say he drank rum and gunpowder”¹⁸⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 61, panel 2; my translation). The repeated use of “they say” underscores both the proliferation of rumors and narratives surrounding Hernández, as the *hacienda* owners displayed his body as a trophy, and the ways these rumors contributed to the collective retelling that ultimately transformed him into the legendary hero of *El Boche* after his death.

The hero’s return to the community is spiritual rather than physical. Manuel Hernández is sacrificed for his people, and his memory serves as a symbol and model for peasant struggles.



Figure 6-15: Panels illustrating the symbolic transformation of Manuel Hernández into the hero of *El Boche* (Chalarka, 1985, p. 62).

them warn, “[w]hoever keeps bothering us will be destroyed like Hernández. The police will help us. Keep this in mind!” (Chalarka, 1985, p. 62, panel 1; my translation). While the peasants remain silent, their thoughts, represented in thought bubbles, reveal their resolve. One farmer

As Thury & Deviney explain, “The journey of the hero is not [...] a mere story. Nor is it merely a psychological phenomenon. Rather it represents a **spiritual reality**” (2009, p. 165, emphasis by the authors). This spiritual reality is evident in *El Boche* when the community commemorates Hernández’s sacrifice and draws strength from his memory, demonstrating how his story guides and unifies them.

The two panels of Figure 6-15 depict how *El Boche*’s actions inspired a bigger rebellion among the working communities of the cattle ranches against their oppressive patrons. In the first panel, a large group of peasants is gathered in front of the porch of Lacharme’s *hacienda*. Two figures, likely foremen or landowners, stand before the crowd, issuing threats. One of

¹⁸⁴ Some of the sayings in Spanish about Manuel Hernández are: “dicen que hizo picadillo al Musiú”; “dicen que mató por celos”; “dicen que quemó la hacienda”; “dicen que mató a 10!;”; “dicen que lo mataron con una bala en cruz”; “dicen que tomó ron con pólvora”.

thinks, “Let’s see what happens,” while another reflects, “We’ll keep organizing”¹⁸⁵ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 62, panel 1; my translation). These brief thoughts stand in stark contrast to the foreman’s aggressive remarks, highlighting the peasants’ quiet determination.

This panel sheds light on why Manuel Hernández came to be known among peasant populations as *El Boche*. At the bottom of the first panel, Antonio Lacharme, Alejandro’s brother, appears and emphatically declares, “Hernández was a **Boche!**”¹⁸⁶ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 62, panel 1; emphasis by the author; my translation). As explained earlier in this section, the term *Boche* refers to someone who is combative or agitational, a characterization that landowners and ranchers attributed to Hernández. This interpretation is further supported by a note in *El Boche*’s bibliography, which indicates that the elite continued to perpetuate this image (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 47). In contrast to these disparaging perspectives, Hernández is celebrated in the collective memory of Atlantic coast peasants. For these agricultural workers, he symbolizes resistance to labor exploitation on cattle *haciendas*, particularly under the coercive *matricula* system. *El Boche* thus exemplifies defiance and the defense of workers’ rights, as the following discussion demonstrates.

The lower panel of Figure 6-15 presents the peasants’ perspective on *El Boche*. The scene depicts men and women together, holding tools such as machetes, shovels, and axes—symbols of their labor and resilience. The peasants are shown cheering, with some carrying banners representing various *campesino* societies¹⁸⁷ (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 62, panel 2). This collective struggle reflects the ideals Manuel Hernández championed. The peasants’ voices echo these sentiments, with one exclaiming, “Down with the matrícula!” and another cheering, “Long live Comrade El Boche!” The narration concludes the story by stating, “[i]n 1921, with the determination of the people and the example of El Boche, the matrícula could not last! A party of socialist workers and peasants put an end to it!”¹⁸⁸ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 62, panel 2; my translation). This achievement was made possible through the resistance led by Manuel Hernández and the solidarity of the working peasants.

The two panels of Figure 6-15 contrast the perspectives of the *hacendados* and the peasants regarding *El Boche*. The upper panel highlights the landowners and cattle breeders’ negative perception of this figure, while the lower panel illustrates what *El Boche* symbolized

¹⁸⁵ The interaction in Spanish unfolds as follows: One peasant thinks, “vamos a ver qué pasa.” Another ponders, “seguiremos organizándonos”.

¹⁸⁶ The original reads, “[i]ese Hernández era un **Boche!**”.

¹⁸⁷ Some of these societies are: *Sociedad de obreros artesanos de Montería* and *Sociedad de obreras redención de la mujer*.

¹⁸⁸ One peasant affirms in Spanish, “abajo la matrícula.” Another responds, “viva el compañero El Boche”. The narratorial caption reads, “[i]n 1921 con la decisión del pueblo y el ejemplo de El Boche la matrícula no podía durar! [i]n partido de obreros y campesinos socialistas acabó con ella!”.

for peasant communities. In the first panel, the *hacendados* are depicted as having a dominant voice that represents their authority. In contrast, the second panel emphasizes the empowerment of the peasants, who, through speech balloons, banners, and the representation of their work tools, are shown asserting their voices and rising up against their oppressors.

At the end of the story, Juana Julia Guzmán reappears to share her reflections and teachings on *El Boche*'s actions and their significance for the peasant struggles. She reiterates the importance of heroes in reconstructing communities' collective memory. As the narrator, Juana Julia declares, "You must have understood, comrade, that we have our heroes. The comrade Hernández demonstrated in practice that the landowners can be defeated"¹⁸⁹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 64, my translation). Her words serve as a prevailing recognition of the enduring legacy of *El Boche* and the inspiration his resistance against the abuses of the *matrícula* provides for future generations in their fight for justice.

This story honors the memory of Manuel Hernández as preserved by peasant communities in Colombia's Caribbean region, who labored and suffered mistreatment on livestock *haciendas*, such as the one owned by Lacharme. Through the mnemonic process of "recognizing," *El Boche* emerges as an exemplary hero of *campesino* struggles. While the graphic narratives in this booklet provide an impression of his physical appearance, behavior, attitudes, and actions, it is his spiritual presence that truly resonates in the collective memory of peasant communities. This aligns with what Casey describes as "recognizing-as," in which recognition extends beyond tangible objects to encompass features that need not be simultaneously perceived (cf. Casey, 2000, p. 134). Hernández's legacy transcends his physicality and endures as a symbol of resistance and inspiration for peasants, thanks to his actions in support of those in need.

El Boche's actions were transmitted across individuals, communities, and generations, becoming integral to the cultural and memorial heritage of peasants. These narratives function not only as heroic legends but also as records of actual events, documenting the historical struggles of *campesinos*. Casey refers to this process as "recognizing." He explains that "To recognize something as a fact is not merely to have the conviction that one is acquainted with its identity or earlier history but to claim to *know* that the item in question has the identity one takes it to have" (2000, p. 135, emphasis by the author). The story of Manuel Hernández, later known as *El Boche*, exemplifies the monomyth. Consequently, the peasant hero serves as a narrative device for recounting the history and memory of marginalized communities.

¹⁸⁹ The original reads, "ya habrás comprendido compañero que nosotros tenemos nuestros héroes. El compañero Hernández demostró en la práctica que a los terratenientes se les puede vencer".

6.1.4.4. *Felicita Campos and the Politics of Historical Resistance*

The fourth and final story, *Felicita Campos: La mujer campesina en la lucha por la Tierra* (The Peasant Woman in the Struggle for Rural Land), advances the thesis that *Historia gráfica* employs the mnemonic mode of recognizing to construct its graphic narratives. This is done through the central portrayal of *Felicita Campos*, a black peasant woman who symbolizes resistance and remembrance in the face of the injustices inflicted by landowners on black communities in the Colombian Atlantic coast. Through the historical character of *Felicita*, a black *cimarrona*, the narrative emphasizes her leadership, organizational skills, and heroic qualities, enabling peasants to recognize her pivotal role in the past struggle for justice and land rights.

By adapting the framework of the monomyth proposed by Joseph Campbell (1949/2004) to reflect the lived experiences of *Felicita* as a black peasant woman, the story reimagines the archetype of the “hero’s journey” as a “heroine’s journey,” offering an intrepid and new redefinition of heroism from peasants’ perspectives. This reinterpretation not only traces the classic “journey of the hero” but also challenges its traditionally patriarchal structure. It positions *Felicita Campos* as a mnemonic figure for the inhabitants of the *Palenque* region of San Onofre, ensuring that peasants not only remember her but also recognize her as a sign of collective memory and as a role model for their ongoing historical struggles.

This narrative foregrounds the role of peasant women, exemplified by *Felicita*, in the political struggle to reclaim rural land for Black peasant communities. The story is set during the founding of Cartagena in 1533 and traces the arrival of Spanish conquistadors on the Atlantic coast, along with the forced labor system they established. The conquistadors brought enslaved Africans to work in mines and to colonize uncultivated land in Colombia. Many of these enslaved individuals, later known as *Cimarrones*, escaped and established *Palenquero* towns. This development is depicted both in the narrative and in the graphic history of *Lomagrande* (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 10, panel 2). The *Cimarrones*, referred to as *Maroons* in English, transformed uncultivated lands into productive farmland through collective organization and effort. Their achievements, however, attracted the interest of a small elite of landowners and corrupt politicians on the Atlantic coast, who conspired to appropriate productive lands from Black communities. The narrative is situated in the *Palenquero* region of San Onofre and underscores *Felicita Campos*’ persistent struggle for land and justice on behalf of her community.

While place and time are important narrative elements, the focus of *Felicita Campos*’ graphic narratives is primarily on historical characters. Such individuals often emerge from the

grassroots of the *Cimarrones*' peasant struggles and may remain unrecognized at the national level. However, for communities on the Atlantic coast, including *San Onofre*, these figures are regarded as historical icons embedded in collective memory. As William Howard Guynn observes, “[t]he historical [character] is presumed to share the attributes and the symbolic or moral values by which [her] group is [recognized and] defined” (Guynn, 2006, p. 108).

The narrative of *Felicita Campos* introduces a diverse array of characters, both protagonists and antagonists, grounded in the collective memory of the *Cimarrones* rather than originating from the author's imagination. This characteristic is consistent not only in *Historia gráfica* but also in *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa*. The events and figures in these works function as representations or symbols of historical characters who played significant roles in their communities. In *Felicita Campos*, the characters represent distinct social groups, including peasants, Indigenous peoples, landowners, and politicians. Through these figures, the graphic narratives illuminate the traits, motivations, and conflicts of these groups, with particular emphasis on the struggle to acquire and possess uncultivated land.

In the story of *Felicita*, its graphic narratives establish contrast between these figures—both graphic and verbal—to help readers distinguish them, follow their development, and understand their roles in the plot. As Rigney explains, “personal attributes of the individual [characters] may be defined, not on their own terms, but in relation to, or in their significant difference from, the other figures in the narrative” (1991, p. 153). In other words, the graphic narratives in *Felicita Campos* use contrasting attributes, both visually and textually, to help readers distinguish and keep track of the characters presented. This narrative strategy will be further illustrated in the analysis below.

In Figure 6-16, readers are introduced to two contrasting characters: the conquistador Pedro de Heredia and the slave Domingo Bioho. In the first panel, the omniscient narrator's face fills the upper-left corner, visually underscoring his role in recounting the story. The narrator states, “**1533** Pedro de Heredia arrives, and founds Cartagena, ¡Immediately the fight began!”¹⁹⁰ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 68, panel 1; emphasis by the author; my translation). The panel situates the narrative historically through the highlighted year while visually centering Heredia, whose name appears in the speech balloon. His prominent placement directs attention to his role, while the background depicts the mistreatment of enslaved people by Spanish

¹⁹⁰ The original reads, “**1533** llega Pedro de Heredia, y funda a Cartagena ¡En seguida se inició la lucha!”.

conquistadors. In contrast, the second panel shifts focus to Domingo Bioho. The narratorial caption at the bottom reads, “[t]he Black Cimarrones fled and formed their villages called palenques: the most important one was called San Basilio”¹⁹¹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 68, panel 2; my translation). Unlike Heredia, Bioho is first identified visually, with his name appearing later as seen in the image. Positioned almost at the center of the panel, Bioho addresses the other *Cimarrones*, saying, “Comrades: since we managed to escape, we have to organize ourselves to avoid being captured and lead our lives as we deserve” His leadership is affirmed when another character responds, “We agree, Domingo Bioho”¹⁹² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 68, panel 2; my translation). This reversed order of name recognition emphasizes Bioho’s actions and voice before his identity, contrasting with Heredia’s depiction.



Figure 6-16: Panels highlighting Spanish invader Pedro de Heredia and *Cimarrón* leader Domingo Bioho (Chalarka, 1985, p. 68).

Another significant difference in Figure 6-16 is how the characters’ names are recognized through the distinction between extradiegetic and diegetic elements in the verbal track—what is said by the narrator versus what is said by the characters. In the first panel, the narrator introduces Pedro de Heredia in an extradiegetic mode: although presented in a speech balloon, the narration is not accessible to the characters but functions as a caption directed to the reader. The narrator’s voice thus remains external to the depicted action—the historical arrival of Heredia—positioned as a retrospective account. By contrast, the second panel features diegetic dialogue, in which speech occurs within the narrative world. When a character names Domingo Biohó, the utterance forms part of the unfolding action and is understood as audible to other characters within the scene.

¹⁹¹ The original reads, “[l]os negros Cimarrones huyeron y formaron sus pueblos llamados palenques: el más importante se llamó San Basilio”.

¹⁹² The interaction in Spanish unfolds as follows. Domingo says: “[c]ompañeros: ya que logramos escapar [,] tenemos que organizarnos para evitar que nos capturen y podamos llevar nuestra vida como merecemos”. Another *cimarrón* says, “estamos de acuerdo, Domingo Bioho”.

This distinction between extradiegetic narration and diegetic dialogue reinforces the different narrative roles of Heredia and Bioho in the panels. While Heredia—named by the narrator in an extradiegetic way from a distant, omniscient perspective—is framed as a historical figure whose actions are recounted in the present, Domingo’s words unfold in a diegetic fashion and fuse with his actions, positioning him as a sign of present resistance. Although Domingos’ words and actions occurred in the past, the panel presents them as if they were happening now. This treatment makes Bioho’s role more grounded and active, emphasizing his verbal-pictorial portrayal as a leader directly engaged in organizing his community and resisting Spanish oppression. The dialogues and interactions within the speech balloons bestow Bioho with agency and a voice in the lower panel, in contrast to Heredia’s depiction as a distant, almost abstract figure of colonial domination, as shown in the upper paragraph.



Figure 6-17: Identification of Ignacio’s character by means of an arrow inside the panel (Chalarka, 1985, p. 76, panel 3).

In *Felicita Campos*, as in other illustrated booklets of *Historia gráfica*, characters are identified by their names placed beside their images. This technique is prominent in this story, given the large and varied cast. For instance, Figure 6-17 identifies Ignacio, Felicita’s son, with an arrow. The association between each character and their name is established through a small arrow, enabling readers to quickly identify historical figures, understand their actions, and track their development. Linking each character’s image to their graphic representation serves as a central narrative device in *Felicita Campos*. The method is used for several characters, including Polinaria Mendoza, Police Lieutenant Maturana, Salustiano Gonzales, and Ernestina

Silgado. As Guynn notes, assigning a name to an individual or group gives readers a clear reference point for following each character's progress (cf. 2006, p. 107).

While these narratives use arrows and labels to facilitate the identification and recognition of characters, the focus ultimately shifts to their individual and collective actions, which define the whole story. These actions drive a series of historical events that remain embedded in the collective memory of these communities. In the context of historical visual narratives, such as films, Leger Grindon highlights how personal and collective actions intertwine. The individual protagonist, through their historical actions, becomes the locus through which audiences grasp the motivations and aspirations of the collective (cf. 1994, p. 8). William Guynn expands on this idea, explaining that when any type of narrative, including a graphic one, “foregrounds a character as part of a group,” that particular character embodies “the aspirations of the collectivity” (2006, p. 108). This is what eventually unites individual and communal experiences within any story.

In this fourth illustrated booklet of *Historia gráfica*, Felicita Campos, the protagonist, and the corrupt landowner Rafael Enrique Prieto are consistently portrayed as opposing figures. Felicita Campos, a historical character symbolizing the peasants' struggle for land rights, stands out prominently. As documented in *Historia Doble*, Felicita played a pivotal role in creating and organizing peasant leagues and organizations dedicated to the struggle for land (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, p. 156B). Besides, she “led the resistance against Rafael Prieto [...] in the Pantano and Aguas Negras regions. Her efforts included enduring 30 imprisonments and traveling to Bogotá in 1929 to personally protest to President Miguel Abadía Méndez” (1986/2002, 159A; my translation).

This illustrated booklet positions Felicita Campos as a symbol of resistance against large landowners who attempt to appropriate the *palenques*—uncultivated lands historically settled by Black communities in northern Colombia—through deceptive practices. The integration of visual and verbal elements underscores her leadership and heroic stature. Her actions are ultimately framed as a driving force behind the peasant mobilizations of the early 1970s, expressed through marches and protests.

Before introducing Felicita Campos, the narrator provides historical context starting in 1533 with the arrival of Pedro de Heredia and the founding of Cartagena. As seen previously, Heredia is portrayed as a cruel character who brought enslaved Black people to this Colombian region. This timeline aligns with the 1530s setting of *Lomagrande*, though the focus shifts between oppressed groups—enslaved Black communities in Felicita's story and the indigenous *Zenú* communities in *Lomagrande*. The story in *Felicitas* also recounts how *Cimarrones*,

escaping Spanish control, established *palenques* and resisted continuous Spanish attempts to seize their lands, particularly in the *San Onofre* region.

From the mid-17th to the late 19th century, the graphic narratives in this booklet depict the establishment of *Palenquero* villages in the *San Onofre* region, including *Aguas Negras*, *Aguacate*, *Pantano*, and *Caracolí*. By the early 20th century, particularly in 1902, following the Thousand Days' War, large landowners began seizing peasant lands that had been devastated by the conflict instigated by liberal and conservative political leaders (cf. Chalarka, 1985, p. 69). This historical period is covered rapidly in the graphic narratives, with key events from each century often depicted in just one or two panels.



Figure 6-18: Panels outlining various tactics used by Prieto to take over the *Cimarrones*' land (Chalarka, 1985, p. 70).

As shown in the first panel of Figure 6-18, Rafael Enrique Prieto arrived in the *San Onofre* region in 1923. The imagery of this panel introduces Prieto as a large landowner who symbolizes the fraudulent and often violent tactics used by powerful Colombian land grabbers—such as cattle ranchers, landowners, and *hacienda* owners—to seize peasant lands. Similar strategies of coercion and exploitation are depicted in the graphic narratives of earlier stories in *Historia gráfica*, with characters like landowner Santos Cabrales and French rancher Alejandro Lacharme, who employed similar methods to expropriate rural lands previously worked by peasants.

Figure 6-18 illustrates four strategies employed by Prieto to seize *Cimarrones*' lands in *San Onofre*. These strategies include fraudulent land titles, threats against peasants, and measures to

deny them access to potable water. In the first panel, Prieto is shown using police forces to intimidate peasants. He is depicted holding what appear to be fraudulent land titles, while two peasants confront him. Prieto stands almost at the center of the image, flanked on the right by a group of five policemen, whose imposing presence underscores the threat. While the peasants

are shown in profile, Prieto and the policemen seemingly face the viewer directly, which emphasizes their menacing demeanor. The details of their facial expressions and body language also heighten the sense of intimidation. Furthermore, Prieto's starkly white face and clothing accentuate his defiant posture. In one particularly striking gesture, he points toward the policemen, warning peasants: "[These] lands are mine! You will leave them by hook or by crook"¹⁹³ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 70, panel 1; my translation).

The depiction of the policemen in the first panel enhances their threatening presence. Dressed in dark, nearly black uniforms with a militaristic and fascist aesthetic, their attire and weapons underscore their menacing nature. Their facial expressions are especially striking—not because they are fully visible, but because the visors of their caps obscure their foreheads and eyebrows, partially shadowing their eyes and amplifying their intimidating appearance. One officer, identified as Maturana, wears an eyepatch, evoking the image of a pirate and adding to the sinister characterization. These visual details serve to "objectify" characters, a common comic-book technique for distinguishing protagonists from antagonists. As McCloud explains, such details emphasize the "otherness" of comics figures (1994, p. 44). In this case, the meticulous attention to elements like the police uniforms, Prieto's attire, and their frontal postures signals their role as antagonists.

The second panel of Figure 6-18 illustrates another strategy used by Prieto to seize peasant lands: fomenting conflict between *Palenquero* peasants and indigenous groups from the town of *Tuchin* who worked for him. This tactic is conveyed more through dialogue and narration than through visual elements. The caption, voiced by the narrator, explains, "[t]he peasants resisted, and Prieto brought Indians from Tuchin to work and fight [against] us"¹⁹⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 70, panel 2; my translation). Additionally, Prieto's conversation with his foreman highlights his deliberate effort to divide peasant and indigenous communities. Accordingly, the verbal track in this case shows Prieto's manipulation of the local population.

This panel also introduces Salustiano Gonzáles, a character identified as Prieto's foreman and another victim of his manipulation. Salustiano's humble attire starkly contrasts with Prieto's elegant clothing. Such contrast visually reinforces the power imbalance between the two characters. Prieto's threatening pointed finger further emphasizes his domineering, menacing demeanor, which stands in sharp contrast to Salustiano's submissive posture.

¹⁹³ The original reads, "[i] estas tierras son mías! [i] Me las desocupan por las buenas o por las malas".

¹⁹⁴ The original reads, "[l]os campesinos resistimos y Prieto trajo indios de Tuchin para trabajar y que pelearan [en contra de] nosotros".

Together, these elements depict Prieto as both manipulative and commanding, using division and intimidation to maintain control.

To incite the *Tuchin* indigenous communities to fight against peasants, Salustiano declares, “I will bring 200 *advanced Indians!”¹⁹⁵ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 70, panel 2; my translation). The asterisk next to the term “*avanzados*” (advanced) serves as a footnote in the panel. In the final section of Figure 6-18, the asterisk is explained: “*Advanced: payment in advance in money or goods to secure labor commitment”¹⁹⁶ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 70, my translation).

Panel 3 of Figure 6-18 highlights violence inflicted by the police on defenseless peasants through several visual elements. First, the contrast between the uniformed police and the unclothed *Cimarrones* emphasizes these peasants’ vulnerability. Second, the panel depicts acts of brutality that include the destruction and burning of huts belonging to the *Palenquero* communities. Third, the representation of the characters’ bodies enhances the sense of motion within this isolated panel. While McCloud notes that “depicting motion” in comics typically relies on arranging multiple images in sequence across consecutive panels (cf. 1994, p. 110, panels 4-7), this third panel conveys dynamic movement through the positioning of the characters. The policemen are shown charging toward the center, while the fleeing peasants move outward, creating the impression that they are attempting to escape the frames of the panel itself.

The final panel illustrates Prieto’s denial of water access to the peasants, reflecting a broader issue on Colombia’s coast: landowners and corporations divert water resources for their own benefit, leaving communities without access. The panel also depicts Prieto punishing those who tried to collect water, underscoring the harsh reality of water denial and its devastating consequences. Gonzalo Guillén’s documentary *El río que se robaron - El exterminio de la nación Wayúu* (The River that was Stolen – The Extermination of the Wayúu Nation) highlights a similar case, where the Colombian government diverted the *Ranchería* River to support industrial operations in the *Cerrejón* coal mine owned by the Swiss company Glencore. This diversion caused a water crisis that led to famine and malnutrition, killing over 7,000 Wayúu children.¹⁹⁷

This story highlights Felicita’s leadership and heroic traits. Her prominence in the narrative stems not only from the events in which she actively defends her community against

¹⁹⁵ The original reads, “;Traeré 200 indios *avanzados!”.

¹⁹⁶ The original reads, “*Avanzados: pago por anticipado en dinero o especies para comprometer la fuerza de trabajo”.

¹⁹⁷ For more, see Guillén (2023).

Prieto's exploitation, but also from the arrangement of panels and visual elements within them that emphasize her role throughout the graphic narratives. In Figure 6-19, the most striking element is Felicita Campos' portrait featured in the second panel on the left. This photograph, which also appears in *Historia gráfica: Retorno a la Tierra* (cf. Fals Borda, 1986/2002, p. 159B), captures viewers' attention as a portrait juxtaposed with comic illustrations. While Felicita's face and expression in the portrait command attention, her actions come alive in the surrounding panels, where her body is depicted. This interplay between the static portrait and the dynamic illustrations presents Felicita as a fearless, rebellious figure who confronts abuse with strength and determination. Her voice also embodies recollections of resistance within her community.

Felicita's words and eloquence are central to these graphic narratives. These qualities are conveyed through speech balloons that highlight her resistance to Prieto's oppressive actions against the *Palenquero* peasant communities. For instance, in the first panel of Figure 6-19, Prieto is shown enforcing a branding law requiring that peasants' cattle be marked with his own iron. This creates the false impression that the livestock belonged to him rather than the peasants. In response, Felicita's voice emerges boldly to challenge this unjust law as she exclaims, "The people are not as brutish as they think. ¡I do not either catch straw with my ears!"¹⁹⁸ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 71, panel 1; my translation). Her words directly challenge Prieto's authority, embodying her resistance while simultaneously exposing the illegitimacy of the landowner's claims.

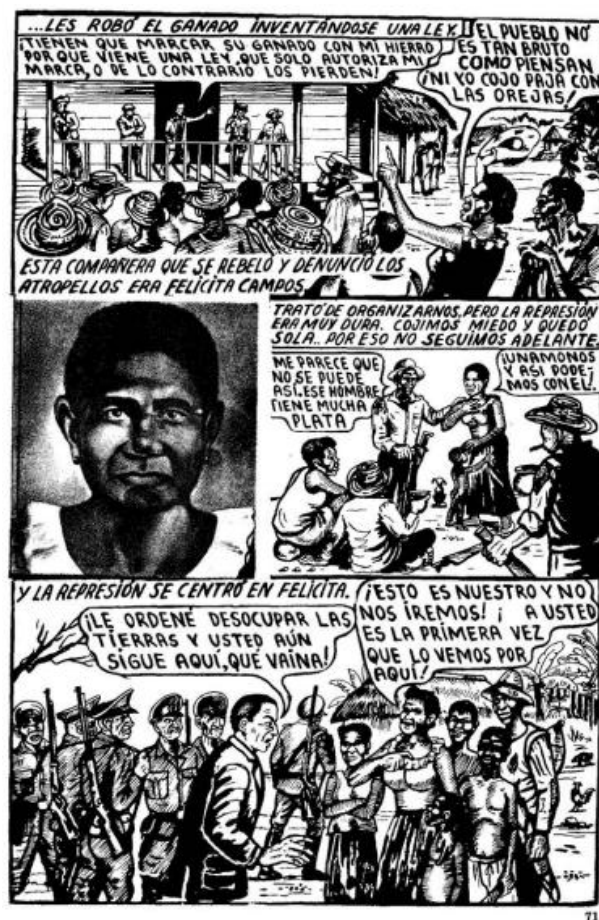


Figure 6-19: Page displaying a portrait of Felicita Campos framed by comic panels (Chalarka, 1985, p. 71).

Felicita's resistance against the latifundista is conveyed not only through her words but also through the visual representation and location of the speech balloon framing Felicita's

¹⁹⁸ The original reads, "el pueblo no es tan bruto como piensan ¡Ni yo cojo paja con las orejas!".

words. As seen in the first panel of Figure 6-19, the frame of this balloon is positioned at the same level as the speech balloon containing Prieto's words. This parallel placement suggests an interpretation that both voices—the latifundista's and the black peasant woman's—are given equal importance within the graphic narratives.

The third and fourth panels of Figure 6-19 highlight Felicita's pivotal role in resisting Prieto's injustices and the challenges she faced. In the third panel, she is depicted rallying the men of the *Palenques* with the call, "Let's unite so we can take him on!"¹⁹⁹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 71, panel 3; my translation). Felicita's depiction and words emphasize her efforts to organize her community. However, the narratorial caption reveals that fear of repression ultimately left her isolated, as the people she sought to defend did not join her. In the fourth panel, Prieto appears alongside policemen, symbolizing the constant state-backed oppression he experienced. In contrast, Felicita is shown at the forefront, representing her leadership in the struggle. These four panels on the page position Felicita as both a symbol of defiance against the *status quo* and a primary target of oppression.

In these graphic narratives, Felicita is portrayed not only as a leader but also as endowed with heroic qualities—an uncommon depiction in the comics medium. Traditionally, the role of heroes and superheroes in comics has been "solely occupied by white, hypermasculine figures, while women and ethnic/racial minorities [have been] either excluded or relegated to playing villains or, at best, sidekicks" (Espinoza, 2014, p. 88). In contrast, Felicita's story elevates her to the status of a heroine.

A section of this story resembles the structure of the hero's journey, as shown in *El Boche*. However, it is important to note that Joseph Campbell's narrative framework does not typically assign female characters a leading role. Instead, women are often relegated to stereotypical roles, such as the goddess, the damsel in distress, the mother, or the virgin—a familiar trope in adventure stories. While Felicita's story could be analyzed through the lens of the hero's journey, using this framework presents challenges. Felicita's identity as a woman, and particularly as a Black peasant woman, complicates traditional notions of heroism, calling into question the applicability of Campbell's structure to her narrative.

The concept explored in this story is not that of a male hero but of a real-life heroine who embodies the ideals and struggles of these communities. A close reading of Felicita Campos's story reveals a significant departure from Campbell's traditional hero's journey framework. By presenting a Black peasant woman as a heroine, Felicita's graphic narratives

¹⁹⁹ The original reads, "¡Unámonos y así podemos con él!"

challenge and disrupt this patriarchal structure. As Sandra J. Lindow observes, “folktales with female protagonists [...] reveal that [...] women [do] not hear the call to adventure and blithely leave their homes to seek their fortunes, but [are] driven out by extreme drudgery, deprivation, neglect, and emotional and physical abuse” (2014, p. 3). In Felicita’s case, the abuse and marginalization depicted in these graphic narratives extend beyond her personal experiences to encompass the suffering of her entire *Palenquero* community.

Western media often portrays female heroes as young, beautiful, and supernaturally powerful, creating unrealistic standards that diverge from the experiences of ordinary women. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope describe these ideals as “myths of virginity, romantic love, and maternal self-sacrifice” (1981, p. 18). This raises a critical question posed by Sandra J. Lindow: “[w]here [are] the stories about imperfect women [...] who transcend the feminine passivity and powerlessness inherent to a patriarchal society?” (2014, p. 4). It is within this gap that graphic narratives about real, multifaceted women demand greater attention and representation.

The story of Felicita Campos stands out precisely because it centers on an imperfect woman portrayed as a heroine in stark contrast to Western ideals. As a marginalized Black peasant woman, Felicita challenges the patriarchal Colombian society dominated by powerful male landowners, ranchers, and corrupt politicians. Her fight to change the oppressive *status quo* extends beyond the wastelands of the Atlantic coast to reflect systemic struggles faced by peasant communities throughout Colombia.

Returning to the framework of the “heroine’s journey,” this structure appears not throughout Felicita’s entire story but within a specific scene spanning two pages. While it retains the three main phases of the traditional “hero’s journey”—departure, initiation, and return—it is reorganized in Felicita’s graphic history. Her journey unfolds with the initiation, then the departure, and concludes with the heroine’s return. This reordering of the heroine’s journey challenges conventional patriarchal frameworks in stories about male heroes shaped by Western ideals.

In the initiation phase of her journey, Felicita does not receive a call to adventure as *El Boche* does. Her initiation phase consists of a series of arduous trials rooted in historical and ongoing injustices. Her ancestors were enslaved, dehumanized, and treated worse than animals by the Spanish conquistadors, a reality graphically depicted in the opening pages of her story. Over time, the enslavement of these populations evolved into exploitation on the *haciendas* of landowners and cattle ranchers. The lands that the *Cimarrones* had cultivated and claimed were eventually stolen by figures like Prieto. As Sandra J. Lindow notes, “[t]he course of the hero

journey is, by definition, not easy; suffering is inevitable” (Lindow, 2014, p. 8). For Felicita, this suffering begins long before her birth. It stems from her identity as a Black woman whose communities have been marginalized by a society dominated by wealthy and abusive patriarchal elites.

Figure 6-20 illustrates additional challenges encountered by Felicita. In the first three panels, she confronts the police dispatched by Prieto to evict her from her land. The sequence



Figure 6-20: Page portraying the initiation and departure phases in the journey of the heroine Felicita (Chalarka, 1985, p. 72).

and transported to San Onofre prison. The third panel exposes the use of stocks to immobilize detainees’ feet. These restraints symbolize efforts to suppress peasant resistance and impede Felicita’s movement. Nevertheless, her resolve remains firm. In the third panel, she proclaims, “We will fight for our rights until the end!”²⁰⁰ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 72, panel 3; my translation).

Panels four and five of Figure 6-20 portray Felicita’s departure. As conceptualized by Campbell, the departure involves venturing into the unknown—in this case, Felicita’s journey

features a shift in visual perspective. Previously, the policemen accompanying Prieto were depicted frontally to emphasize their menacing presence. In the first panel of this sequence, however, the policemen appear in profile, and their gestures indicate fear, with two visibly intimidated. In contrast, Felicita and her companions are depicted frontally, signifying their defiance. This change in perspective highlights the community’s courage in resisting Prieto and his police, despite prior threats.

The second and third panels depict ordeals reminiscent of those in *El Boche*. Peasants who resist land dispossession are imprisoned and tortured. In the second panel, Felicita and her companion, Ernestina Silgado, are arrested by the police, their hands bound,

²⁰⁰ The original reads, “¡Lucharemos por nuestros derechos hasta el final!”.

to *Bogotá*, Colombia's capital and the seat of the presidency and congress. The transcriptional caption in the fifth panel states, “[i]n 1929 she decides to go to *Bogotá* to claim her rights and those of her companions”²⁰¹ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 72, panel 5; my translation). The fourth panel maps her route, beginning in San Onofre, passing through Cartagena, and proceeding toward the country's center. The depiction of a long, winding road visually emphasizes this journey.

Despite considerable obstacles, including scarce resources, Felicita reached Congress and the presidency, where she advocated for her rights and those of the San Onofre peasants, as illustrated in panels five and six. This achievement constituted her ultimate trial and established her as a heroine among the *Cimarrones* of the Atlantic coast. Her actions reveal the necessity of transforming power relations in Colombia. At present, land possession is governed by wealth, power, and violence, a reality also depicted in the other three graphic narratives of *Historia gráfica*.

Unlike the story of *El Boche*, where the protagonist defeats a single antagonist like Lacharme, Felicita's challenge involves not only facing the landowner Prieto but also convincing the president of the Colombian Republic to legally recognize her lands. This final trial, occurring during the departure phase, represents her effort to confront and change the “Monster of the *status quo*” (Pearson & Pope, 1981, p. 5, my emphasis) that has dominated rural Colombia. According to Sandra J. Lindow, the *status quo* refers to “that aspect of society that has become stagnated and dysfunctional” (Lindow, 2014, p. 4). This pervasive failure of the strongest exploiting the powerless is precisely what has prevailed in rural Colombia and what leads Felicita to address such deeply rooted historical issues in the Palenque of San Onofre.

In the final panel of Figure 6-20, the narratorial caption states that Felicita “managed to get the government to recognize her right to the **land**”²⁰² (Chalarka, 1985, p. 72, panel 6; emphasis by the author; my translation). This recognition marks a significant shift in the prevailing *status quo*, challenging a long history of disregard for peasant rights that had persisted for centuries—even after Colombia became an independent republic in the 19th century. Felicita's achievement stands as a landmark victory against the dominant policies of the time. Her success symbolizes a rare triumph for marginalized communities in their fight for justice and land ownership.

²⁰¹ The original reads, “[e]n 1929 se decide ir hasta Bogotá a reclamar sus derechos y los de sus compañeros”.

²⁰² The original reads, “[Felicita] consiguió que el gobierno le reconociera el derecho sobre la **tierra**”.

Felicita’s triumphant return to the San Onofre region, depicted in the first panel of Figure 6-21, marks her recognition as a heroine by her community. After securing the title deeds to her land from the capital city, her success is celebrated collectively by peasants. This moment symbolizes a reversal of power dynamics: the once-dominant policemen, who initially appeared threatening and confrontational, are now portrayed fleeing in fear. One of them shouts, “[I]et’s go! They discovered Don Rafael Prieto’s scam!”²⁰³ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 73, panel 1; my translation). This visual progression underscores the collapse of the oppressive forces and the empowerment of the *Cimarrones*.



Figure 6-21: Panels depicting Felicita’s return as a heroine, Prieto’s schemes with corrupt politicians, and the *Tuchin* indigenous people joining her cause (Chalarka, 1985, p. 73).

The peasants are depicted united in their victory, welcoming Felicita as their heroine. One of them remarks, “[w]e all believed that beating a landowner was impossible”²⁰⁴ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 73, panel 1; my translation). These words emphasize the historic significance of Felicita’s triumph. The heroine’s journey framework highlights her pivotal role as a symbol of resistance and justice. It also positions her as an important historical character in the collective memory of the *Palenquero* communities of the Atlantic coast. Her story stands as a testimony to the strength of unity and the enduring fight for land rights and dignity.

The second and third panels show some alliances made after Felicita’s return to San Onofre with her title deeds. The second panel of Figure 6-21 highlights a stark contrast between Felicita’s victory and the realities at the local level. Despite her success in securing government recognition of land rights, local landowners and corrupt politicians on the Atlantic coast conspired to undermine these gains. Their alliances ensured that the rights of the peasants of *San Onofre* and the surrounding region were ignored, perpetuating the deception and theft of

²⁰³ The original reads, “[v]ámonos! [i] Descubrieron el chanchullo de don Rafael Prieto!”.

²⁰⁴ The original reads, “[t]odos nosotros creímos que ganarle a un terrateniente era imposible”.

rural lands—a problem that persists to this day. In the third panel, the indigenous people of *Tuchín* become aware of Prieto’s fraudulent actions and rally in support of Felicita. One of them declares, “[w]e do not have to put up with so many outrages. Felicita is right: the landowners are bandits!”²⁰⁵ (Chalarka, 1985, p. 73, panel 3; my translation). The panel further depicts the indigenous community devising a plan to poison Prieto, which signifies their growing defiance and collective resolve to resist and end exploitation.

The depiction of Felicita’s deathbed highlights her elevation to the status of a heroine. Surrounded by the community that loved and admired her, her memory lives on as a symbol of resilience and hope for the peasants of San Onofre. This portrayal contrasts with the death of Rafael Enrique Prieto, who, as shown in Figure 6-22, died in isolation at a hospital in Cartagena in 1932 after being poisoned by the *Tuchín* Indians. The graphic representation of Prieto’s death reflects his moral decay, with his emaciated body surrounded by ominous imagery, including bats and vultures. This imagery symbolizes the final consequences of his exploitation and cruelty. The two panels depicting the deathbeds of Felicita and Prieto symbolize how each character is collectively remembered by peasants.



Figure 6-22: Panels showing the death beds of Rafael Enrique Prieto at the top (Chalarka, 1985, p. 74) and Felicita Campos at the bottom (1985, p. 75).

²⁰⁵ The original reads, “[n]o tenemos [por qué] aguantar tantos atropellos, Felicita tiene razón: ¡Los terratenientes son unos bandidos!”.

Felicita's leadership can be likened to that of figures such as Juana Julia Guzmán, thanks to her remarkable ability to inspire and mobilize her community. A distinctive feature of this story, as reflected in the panels analyzed, is the extensive use of text within the graphic narratives. Given that the primary audience for these booklets included many illiterate readers, the written words—through their abundance, arrangement, and integration—take on a symbolic role beyond mere readability. The verbal elements, including narratorial captions and speech balloons, serve not only to convey historical and contextual information but also to represent Felicita's rhetorical and oratorical prowess.

6.1.5. Regional Narrators as Composite Characters

The four stories in *Historia gráfica* each feature a visually distinct narrator, reflecting the diverse histories and cultures of Colombia's Atlantic coast. Although all narrators were illustrated by Uliánov Chalarka, their unique appearances and behaviors underscore the complexity of the communities they represent. These distinctions highlight the narrators' unique cultural identities, shaped by collective communities, local traditions, and oral histories.

Although each narrator has a distinct identity, only Juana Julia Guzmán is named within the graphic narratives, appearing as a recurring character in the first story. The paratexts and narratives do not identify the other narrators. However, Joanne Rappaport's research identifies their real-life counterparts and community roles. The narrator of *Lomagrande* is Wilberto Rivero, an ANUC leader from *Martinica*; *Tinajones* is narrated by Víctor Licona, a 1960s activist from *San Bernardo del Viento*; Juana Julia Guzmán narrates *El Boche*; and *Felicita Campos'* story is recounted by Ignacio "El Mello" Silgado, an Afro-Colombian peasant from *San Onofre* (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 140). Together, these narrators provide authentic voices that ground the graphic narratives in the lived experiences, testimonies, and recollections of their communities.

The narrator in the graphic history of *Lomagrande* is depicted as a young man, whereas the narrators in the other three stories are elderly. This generational contrast emphasizes the importance of intergenerational dialogue in reconstructing and preserving the region's historical memory. By presenting perspectives from both younger and older generations, the narratives illustrate that collective memory evolves through shared experiences and storytelling. Rappaport notes that Juana Julia Guzmán, Víctor Licona, and Ignacio Silgado "were eyewitnesses to the historical events they narrate; [Wilberto] Rivero was chosen because of his reputation as a young leader of ANUC" (Rappaport, 2020, pp. 140–141). Thus, the elderly

narrators contribute lived experience and historical depth, while the younger narrator signifies the continuity of memory.

The narrators' verbal and pictorial representations highlight their essential role in preserving and recounting collective histories, while also motivating peasants to become active political agents capable of transforming their realities. These narrators embody both ancestral rural wisdom and scholarly insight, effectively bridging traditional and academic knowledge. As discussed in the Research and Documentation section, *Historia gráfica*, like *Historia Doble*, is structured into two channels: Channel A, which captures the testimonies, experiences, and memories of peasants, and Channel B, which provides descriptions, explanations, and interpretations from researchers. Both channels are reflected in the narrators' omniscient perspective, enhancing their authority to recount the past. Their comprehensive knowledge of community memories and history reinforces their reliability. This also underscores their central role in linking individual and collective experiences within a broader socio-political and historical context.

The narrators function as “composite characters,” central to “testimonial literature,” as they convey experiences that “arise from the collectivity” (Rappaport, 2020, p. 141). Furthermore, because these narrators are modeled on important historical characters for these communities, they “appear to be in control of the story they are narrating, just as they would be when recounting their experiences orally to a peasant assembly” (2020, p. 142).

The four narrators embody the historical memory and collective knowledge of their respective communities across the Atlantic coast. In doing so, they serve as “grassroot corrector[s] of official history,” using their deep understanding of community histories to present narratives rooted in the “recognition of their traditions and history” (Fals Borda, 1988, p. 61). Their role bridges individual and collective experiences, ensuring these accounts function as authentic and empowering records of resilience and identity. As Rappaport notes, the narrators in *Historia gráfica* are “convincing, while persuading readers to rethink the relationships governing the world they inhabited and to imagine their own agency in transforming it” (2020, p. 144).

6.1.6. Verbal and Visual Depictions of Rural Land Struggles

The central theme of the four graphic narratives is the rural struggle for land, emphasizing peasants' resistance against those attempting to usurp it. Narrators recount these stories through objects and characters from the past, employing cultural and material elements to evoke

memory. These narratives extend beyond historical recounting; they aim to facilitate understanding of the past, encourage reflection on the present, and inspire future action. The stories employ a mnemonic mode of “recognizing,” in which key aspects of the past are identified and activated in the present. They highlight peasant movements, resistance to landowners and corrupt politicians, and the leadership of figures such as Manuel Hernández and Felicita Campos.

Accounts of peasant resistance on the Atlantic coast draw extensively on “collective memory, individual recollections and oral tradition, as well as documents and objects found in family trunks and coffers” (Fals Borda, 1988, p. 58). These *archivos de baúl*, translated by Rappaport as “kitchen archives,” include mementos, drawings, photographs, maps, and other artifacts from the past. They form the foundation for narratives that integrate empirical evidence with popular wisdom (cf. Rappaport, 2020, p. 157). These graphic histories foreground enduring peasant struggles, preserving resistance in historical memory while serving both as reflections on the past and as tools for reclaiming collective identity.

The narrative complexity of *Historia gráfica* arises from the integration of two information channels: Channel A, based on peasants’ memories and oral testimonies, and Channel B, grounded in historical research, interviews, and written documents. The combination of these channels enables the narrators to reconstruct peasant struggles, preserve their legacy, and inspire future generations to continue their efforts.

The four graphic histories exemplify how this interplay is conveyed both visually and verbally. Pictorial elements mainly depict the memories and testimonies of peasant communities. Speech balloons represent dialogues that reflect past interactions between marginalized populations and dominant groups seizing their lands. Narratorial captions provide academic and investigative knowledge, providing historical context through specific details such as dates, places, and events. This integration of visual and textual elements is essential for presenting and understanding the complexities of the Atlantic coast’s past.

The verbal and pictorial depictions of past peasant struggles in *Historia gráfica* also function as field notes. James Clifford explains that fieldnotes represent “the enunciation of an ethnographic persona speaking cultural truths,” achieved through “a subtle fusion of native and ethnographic subjectivities in a common interpretative project” (2019 [1990], p. 62). Thus, these graphic and verbal portrayals are not intended as precise, factual accounts but as collective reconstructions of the past. These accounts offer readers figurative and historical visualizations resulting from the collaborative efforts of peasants and researchers.

6.2. Reminiscing in *Sin mascar palabra*

The graphic narratives in *Sin mascar palabra* employ the mnemonic mode of “reminiscing,” which utilizes place-based methods to elicit and narrate memory. These comics incorporate maps and spatial mnemonic tools to demonstrate how reminiscing is enacted, influencing both the visual representation of memory and the ways in which narrators—community and family members—relate to previously inhabited spaces. Revisiting these locations imbues them with new significance and uncovers intergenerational connections and family dynamics. Ultimately, reminiscing and place-based methods shape the depiction of community memories, highlighting collective reflection and illustrating how specific locations influence both individual and collective memory across generations.

Memory reconstruction is inherently a social and verbal process, with reminiscing occupying a central role. As Casey notes, individuals recall “certain things together” (2000, p. 104), underscoring the collaborative nature of memory. This social dimension indicates that memory reconstruction involves not only the individual but also others who share similar experiences. Participants in the same events contribute complementary recollections, collectively forming a shared memory. This process aligns with Heidegger’s concept of *Mitsein*, or “being-with-others” (Casey, 2000, p. 105), demonstrating that active engagement with others, rather than mere presence, fills gaps and enriches recollection. As Casey asserts, “by reminiscing with others, we may construct a more complete tableau [of our memories and experiences] than we could ever effect [in remembering] alone” (2000, p. 114). Thus, reminiscing relies on collaborative interaction to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

The verbal dimension of reminiscing is equally significant. Casey highlights its discursive and dialogical character, noting that reminiscing “arises as discourse [of the past] in the company of others” (2000, p. 105). Communication facilitates the organization and articulation of memories and past experiences, rendering them coherent and meaningful for both individuals and groups. Storytelling enhances the significance of memory, particularly when constructed collaboratively from multiple perspectives. As Steph Lawler observes, “[t]he multiplicity of narratives springs [...] from a multiplicity of perspectives” (2008, p. 37). Through shared dialogue and storytelling, context is added, recollections are clarified, and personal memories become more accessible.

Reminiscing is also characterized by its performative and proactive qualities, which emerge through collaboration rather than in isolation. Participants in reminiscing assume an active, dynamic role in the process of remembering. As Casey notes, “we get in touch with the past actively, thanks to concerted [communal] efforts,” through activities such as “talking about it, musing on it” (2000, p. 105), or engaging in group endeavors. Simple actions, such as walking or participating in activities within meaningful locations, contribute to the reconstruction of memory. These practices connect individuals to their past in experiential and collective ways, thereby deepening and enriching the process of remembering.

While time remains significant in reminiscing, serving to recall and narrate experiences from specific past moments, this mode places greater emphasis on the spatial dimension. Memories are frequently activated, reflected upon, discussed, and narrated through actions situated in meaningful spaces. Casey explains that reminiscing “is both diachronic and voluntary: it takes time and effort [...] and is *ipso facto* an activity or performance” (2000, p. 105, emphasis by the author), and it unfolds in locations that are essential to memory.

6.2.1. Place-Based Ways to Elicit and Narrate Memory

In *Sin mascar palabra*, collective remembrance is central. Group discussions, reflections, and activities such as touring and revisiting community spaces exemplify the reminiscing mode. When integrated with place-based methods, reminiscing illustrates the CNMH’s strategies for activating collective memory. Place-based approaches “evoke and record the memories of a group that takes into account the close relationship that exists between people, their environment, and memory” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 66). In this context, reminiscing involves reconstructing memory by anchoring it to the physical spaces that have shaped communities affected by conflict in Colombia.

The introduction of *Sin mascar palabra* situates the narrative in *Tulapas*, a region in northwestern Colombia’s Gulf of Urabá. Peasants settled in this area during the 1950s, seeking refuge from violence and land monopolization by wealthy stockbreeders from *Córdoba*. The process of land dispossession in Colombia began in the late nineteenth century. Although the Tulapas community eventually secured land rights, the 1990s saw paramilitaries and businessmen violently seize these lands, compelling peasants to abandon their homes and rural properties (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 6). As with other rural communities in Colombia, displacement was widespread. Many individuals were assassinated, others disappeared, and their whereabouts remain unknown.

The graphic narratives in *Sin mascar palabra* foreground the theme of land dispossession. Spatial strategies are employed to recount the memories of the *Tulapas* peasant community and to activate memory processes. These strategies are conveyed to readers through spatial indicators, which are examined in the following section.

6.2.1.1. Spatial Indicators

The cover and paratexts, such as frontispieces and the introduction, highlight spaces once occupied by the original inhabitants of *Tulapas*. Time is important in these narratives, but they focus more on space. References to the 1950s, when *Tulapas* was settled, and the 1990s, a period of paramilitary violence and displacement, provide context. But the introduction centers on setting, making space central to the narratives' development. It repeatedly uses geographical terms—regions, towns, lands—and actions tied to occupying and moving through space. This approach underscores the relationship between memory and place.

The introduction, though brief, focuses on the geographic areas where the *Tulapas* community lived. This includes *Turbo*, *Necoclí*, and *San Pedro de Urabá*, where the events occurred. It highlights actions tied to the use of space: the community's efforts to settle the territory; the government's formal granting of land rights; and the establishment of cattle ranches and large *haciendas* that disrupted peasant livelihoods. Finally, it notes the violent dispossession by paramilitaries, emphasizing the community's troubled relationship with these spaces.

References to geographical spaces in *Sin mascar palabra* serve as spatial indicators. They provide readers with initial context and setting for the stories. The cover, frontispieces, and introduction all use these indicators to show that space is central in narrating memory. Members of the *Tulapas* community are deeply connected to the places they inhabit. As Casey explains, “[t]he very embodiment of remembering [...] is to have not just a point of view but a *place* in which we are situated. It is to occupy a portion of space from out of which we both undergo given experiences and remember them” (2000, p. 182, emphasis by the author). Space becomes the foundation for experiencing and recalling the past.

One way to render a community's memories spatially is through “mapping.” This approach to historical memory “explores the ways in which individual and local memories are anchored in places,” while also recognizing that such “places are at once made of memories” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 66). This interplay between narrative and space introduces the concept of “narrative space.” According to Sabine Buchholz and Jahn

Manfred, narrative space refers to “the environment in which the story-internal characters move about and live” (2008, p. 552). In *Sin mascar palabra*, the narrative space is the region of *Tulapas*, which represents the broader environment in which the story unfolds and where the community’s memories are situated.

Readers become aware of the use of space as they delve into the graphic narratives. Memory activation begins with mapping, as demonstrated when the characters use a walking route map to visit specific locations where the *Tulapas* community once lived. These locations are marked by numbers, as shown in Table 6-1, which correspond to the chapters of *Sin mascar palabra*. The numbers not only divide the narrative into chapters but also evoke distinct “stations” along the walking route, each representing a place tied to a specific memory or event. As the characters visit these locations, they narrate the past in relation to what happened there. The walking route map, therefore, functions as a guide to both the characters’ journey and the reader’s understanding of the narrative. In this way, the numbers function as spatial indicators that provide both an order to the narrative and a sense of spatial sequence, much like maps used in walking tours or route-based explorations. The walking route map in *Sin mascar palabra* functions much like those used in real-life walking tours, where each stop is a point of reflection, a place to connect personal histories with the larger collective memory of a community. This method of narration underscores the relationship between place, memory, and the act of remembering, allowing readers to experience the journey alongside the characters.

Chapter	<i>Sin mascar palabra</i>
Chapter 1	1.
Chapter 2	2.
Chapter 3	3.
Chapter 4	4.
Chapter 5	Epilogue

Table 6-1: Division of chapters in *Sin mascar palabra*

The use of space in *Sin mascar palabra* does not refer solely to the narrative space where characters move and events occur. It is also an important tool for activating and narrating memories. The space in the narrative, as defined above, “is an essential part of the mental act of narrative world (re)construction, since the imagination can only picture objects that present spatial extension” (Ryan, Foote, & Azaryahu, 2016, p. 16).

Sin mascar palabra demonstrates the central role of space in activating memory and narrating the past. Approaches such as “mental maps, environmental maps, or walking maps” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 66) illustrate how memories—particularly

traumatic ones—are anchored in specific locations and preserved within collective memory. In this sense, places function not only as physical markers of past events but also as witnesses to them.

6.2.1.2. The Map

Following the introduction, a drawn map of Colombia (see Figure 6-23) illustrates the area where the events of *Sin mascar palabra* unfold. This map provides a general geographical orientation, situating readers within the *Tulapas* region. Maps, frequently employed in both fictional and non-fictional narratives, are often understood as “a representation of space as seen from a fixed, elevated point of view that affords the observer a totalizing, simultaneous perception of the relations between objects” (Ryan et al., 2016, p. 9).

The map in *Sin mascar palabra* is not a precise topographical representation but an interpretive, panel-based depiction of geographical space. It guides readers through an aerial view of the landscape, highlighting

selected features without fully reproducing the country’s exact physical details. The map in Figure 6-23 is a simplified illustration, divided into panels that align with the graphic narrative style of *Sin mascar palabra*.

This panel-based depiction of the map serves not only to “convey information”—in this case, showing geographical portrayals of the *Tulapas* region where local communities once lived, and which was later impacted by paramilitary violence. It also seeks “to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1994, p. 9). By gradually presenting the Colombian map, panel by panel, readers are drawn

into the narrative space, immersing them in the setting where individual and collective memories of past events unfold.

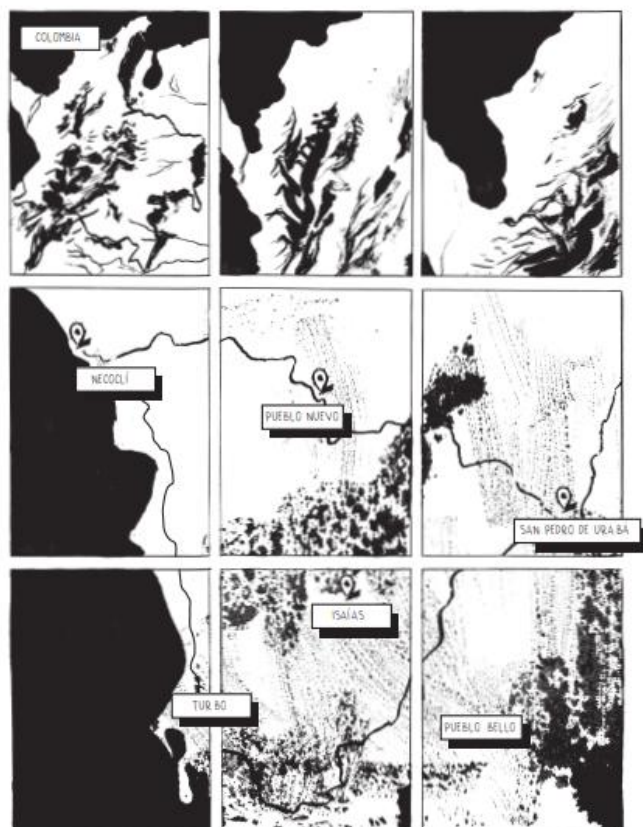


Figure 6-23: Colombian map represented in comic panels in *Sin mascar palabra* (CNMH, 2018b, p. 7).

The depiction of the Colombian map across comics panels in the figure gradually draws readers into the narrative space of the story, creating the effect of the region moving closer to their view. This effect is achieved through a panel sequence: the first panel presents the full map of Colombia, while the second and third panels zoom in, narrowing the focus to the specific region where the story unfolds. This visual strategy, which gradually enlarges the area of interest, allows smaller towns such as *Necoclí*, *Pueblo Nuevo*, *Isaías*, and *Turbo*, among others, to come into view. Through this zooming technique, readers are guided closer to the setting to enhance their spatial orientation within the graphic narratives.

Panels four through nine each depict one of the towns in the *Tulapas* region: *Necoclí*, *Pueblo Nuevo*, *San Pedro de Urabá*, *Turbo*, *Isaías*, and *Pueblo Bello* (see Figure 6-23). As Ryan et al. note, “the use of place names borrowed from real-world geography situates the story in a specific spatial setting” (2016, p. 19). While the first three panels create a sense of proximity, establishing the broader setting within Colombia, these subsequent panels focus on specific towns, pinpointing the exact locations where violent events occurred.

Panels four through nine then further divide the map of Colombia into smaller, bordered sections. This visual arrangement resonates with what Casey describes as “[a] given place or set of places acts as a grid onto which images of items to be remembered are placed in a certain order” (2000, p. 183). Thus, in the Figure, the divided and organized map of Colombia represents not only the locations that communities will remember but also the events that occurred there. This approach underscores the importance of using space to activate and narrate memories.

In the figure, the depiction of Colombia alongside the small towns of *Tulapas* in comics panels suggests an arrangement that conveys both spatial separation and interconnectedness. On the one hand, this segmented map can symbolize the marginalization of certain regions within Colombia, both geographically and socio-politically. While major cities enjoy access to better infrastructure, job opportunities, healthcare, and education, remote rural areas often lack these resources and have been largely neglected by the state. This neglect has left rural areas vulnerable to the territorial control of paramilitary and guerrilla groups.

On the other hand, dividing the map into panels reflects the idea that each community in the region holds a perspective, with distinct stories and experiences shaped by real events. Collectively, these individual and collective accounts form a more complete, nuanced narrative of the region’s history, creating a more cohesive storyworld. Like puzzle pieces, these panels collectively reveal a fuller picture of the region’s history.

6.2.1.3. The Walking Route Map

The map of Colombia discussed in the previous section helps orient readers to key areas within a broader geographical context relevant to the graphic narratives in *Sin mascar palabra*. However, from a narrative perspective, the characters in these comics are not necessarily aware of the Colombian map. Alternatively, hand-made maps created by local communities serve a different purpose: they activate memory and narrate experiences connected to the places these communities once inhabited. Characters representing individuals of the *Tulapas* community have created a kind of memory-based “walking route map,” depicted in the introductory pages of the graphic narratives of *Sin mascar palabra*.

A walking route map, in this context, is a community-created diagram that highlights

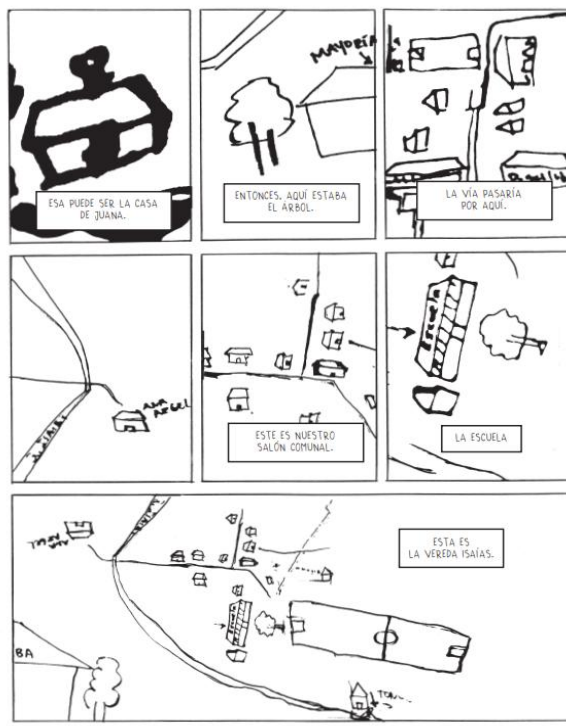


Figure 6-24: Walking route map portraying a tool to activate memories within the *Tulapas* community (CNMH, 2018b, p. 9).

sites of cultural and historical significance to its members. As Laura Catalina Andrade Quintero explains, these maps trace specific locations to convey collective stories (cf. Andrade Quintero, 2020, p. 66). Such a map serves as a visual record of the community’s memory, reflecting the spatial organization of its territories and significant places. Figure 6-24 shows a community-created walking route map. The images in the Figure depict drawings made by characters representing the *Tulapas* community. The difference in artistic style is significant. It invites readers to distinguish between the expertly created images by the comics artist within the graphic narratives of *Sin mascar palabra* and the

drawings contributed by the characters themselves for the walking route map.

Each location on the walking route map is named and situated within a panel that acts as a container. The page itself is a vessel for multiple places. As Casey explains, “[p]lace serves to *situate* one’s memorial life, to give it a “name and a local habitation”” (2000, p. 184, emphasis by the author). Each labeled location interacts with others, helping to anchor and shape the characters’ memories. The names of each place are provided through narratorial captions that serve not only as labels for the walking tour but also as characters’ reflections and

thoughts as they sketch various zones that once made up the community of *Tulapas*. The walking route itself is most clearly displayed in the seventh panel of Figure 6-24.

Figure 6-25 displays the complete walking route map. While its details may seem unclear, the map serves its purpose as a simple, functional tool for community members to revisit past key locations and discuss events that occurred there. The map also reflects the diverse styles and perspectives of *Tulapas* members, resembling a collage of complementary ideas. The images on the map, drawn from the peasants' memories of shared spaces and familiar landmarks, help reconstruct the community's geographical and social landscape.

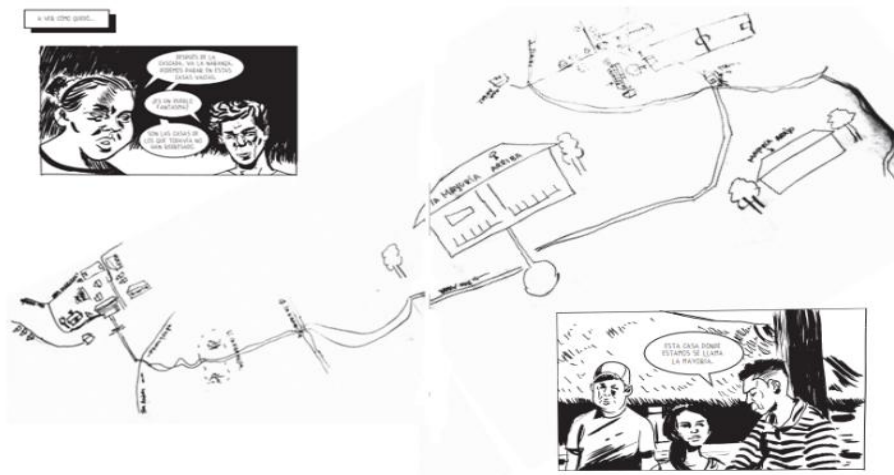


Figure 6-25: Walking route map of *Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b, pp. 12–13).

The images in the collaboratively created walking route map serve not only as evidence from the victims' perspective but also as a means of empowering them through agency. These maps, developed by the group, include what Marianne Hirsch describes as “evidence-like images,” which can be considered “documentary” because they capture both the impression and the lived experience of “having-been-there” from the victims' point of view (cf. Hirsch, 1991-1993, p. 10). Accordingly, the walking route map acts as both a guide to the stories shared by the members of the *Tulapas* community as they narrate their memories and as evidential support for the graphic narratives.

The walking route map empowers victims by giving them agency to narrate their own stories. Parsell, Eggins, and Marston conceptualize human agency “as an individual’s capacity to determine and make meaning from their environment through purposive consciousness and reflective and creative action” (2016, p. 239). As a collective creation, the map allows the *Tulapas* community to collaboratively organize and interpret the histories of their territories, granting them agency, what Hirsch describes as victims' capacity to shape and control their own narratives of the past (cf. 1991-1993, p. 10). By designing a walking tour of their community's sites, victims reclaim and reappropriate spaces that were once taken from them.

Through the walking route map, the past is actively brought into the present, allowing for a meaningful re-engagement with memory. By walking through the locations depicted on the map, retracing these spaces becomes a form of “reminiscing,” allowing participants to “relive the past”. As Casey explains, reminiscing “is not merely to re-present to ourselves certain experienced events [...]. Rather, it is a matter of *actively re-entering* the “no longer living worlds” of that which is irrevocably past” (2000, p. 107, emphasis by the author).

6.2.2. Communal Narrators and The Peasant Family

The previous section discussed how members of the *Tulapas* community collectively created a walking route map of their area. Designed to guide characters, the map’s layout implies that the narratives it supports are meant for public sharing. Bradd Shore and Sara Kauko observe that “[m]ementos and images placed in [...] public areas [...] tend to symbolize those family relationships or salient moments from the family’s past that are deemed appropriate for public consumption” (2018, p. 106). In a similar fashion, the map serves as a framework, organizing *Tulapas* community stories as narrated by different participants.

This section emphasizes that the community’s past is narrated in open spaces, while the walking route map is created collectively in an enclosed environment. Narration in open spaces, closely linked to the journey through the map’s locations, brings narrators to the forefront. Moving through stations on the map evokes the community’s past and shapes its recounting.

As noted earlier, reminiscing often involves shared actions. For example, walking with others along paths and roads to sites where narration unfolds. Michel de Certeau points out, “[t]he act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (1988, p. 97). When the characters in *Sin mascar palabra* leave the space where they made the map and visit marked sites, their testimonies start to emerge. Starting the walk symbolizes the beginning of the community’s history.

Figure 6-26 shows one character saying, “I propose to you then that we start,” and another replying, “We are going to tell our story”²⁰⁶ (CNMH, 2018b, p. 14, my translation). As the characters begin their journey with the walking route map, the past comes alive, as illustrated in the figure. Reminiscing often involves collective action—people recall and narrate the past together. Here, walking is a shared activity. Certeau argues that walking, arguing has an “enunciative function,” shaped by participant relationships, their interactions with places,

²⁰⁶ The interaction in Spanish unfolds as follows. One character says, “[l]es propongo entonces que arranquemos”, while another answers, “[v]amos a contar nuestra historia”.

and a spatial action (1988, pp. 97–98). Walking works as a physical, narrative, and performative act. It links *Tulapas*' spaces to the community's shared history and memories.

Walking as an enunciative act shapes both spatial and social relationships. While Certeau focuses on spatial dynamics, the walking route map's narratives also highlight social and family connections. These bonds emerge as stories are told at meaningful locations. Here, the family acts as both a narrator and a memory keeper. Shore and Kauko define “family memory” as events, routines, members, and places that matter to family life (cf. 2018, p. 87).

Along the route, objects, people, and landmarks tied to peasant families' recollections trigger memories and provide a structure for sharing testimonies.

In *Sin mascar palabra*, multiple narrators help build the story, as shown in Figure 6-27 below. The main narrators are those who first create the walking route map and lead the journey. As they continue, they meet secondary narrators at different sites. These include family members—children, parents, and grandparents—who add new perspectives. This approach shows the value of family memory. Reminiscence arises from family members working together to build a shared history of *Tulapas*.

Reminiscence not only recalls the past but also communicates it through walking and narration. Shore and Kauko distinguish between “instances in which families internally reminisce about their own past and those in which the past is shared with outsiders” (2018, p. 101). In *Sin mascar palabra*, both occur: private family memories are recalled and then shared more broadly. Memory workers appear as characters within the story. Readers also act



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Figure 6-26: Panel indicating that the narration in *Sin mascar palabra* starts with the action of walking (CNMH, 2018b, p. 14).

as outside observers. These audiences engage with testimonies that document the experiences of peasant families facing paramilitary violence in *Tulapas*.

The walking route map works as a mnemonic tool. It helps tell the story of *Tulapas*. It also gives a place to negotiate different family perspectives. Shore and Kauko note that “[o]ne of family memory’s distinguishing characteristics is that it materializes in a space that actively promotes negotiation” (2018, p. 101). This negotiation process and the way testimonies grow together appear in Figure 6-27. Guided by the map, narrators tell and refine their life stories together.



Figure 6-27: Negotiation and complementation of the content of stories among narrators (CNMH, 2018b, pp. 16–17).

At the first station of the walking route map, *La Mayoría Arriba*, one of the map’s creators shares his account. His father adds more detail. Both are shown in the referenced figure’s lower left panel. The first narrator, wearing a cap, explains how he, his family, and other *campesinos* recently returned to *Tulapas*. He states, “[w]e returned about four years ago, after the displacement in 1995. We all grew up here. My dad bought this land...mmm”²⁰⁷ (CNMH, 2018b, p. 16; my translation). In the same panel, his elderly father provides more background: “I can tell you that this was when I was 20, and now I’m 78, so it was about 58

²⁰⁷ The original reads, “nosotros retornamos hace unos cuatro años. Después del desplazamiento en 1995. Es que aquí crecimos todos. Esta tierra la compró mi papá hace...mmm”.

years ago”²⁰⁸ (2018b, p. 16; my translation). This exchange illustrates what Casey calls “co-remembrance,” in which shared memories of lived events become the focus (cf. 2000, p. 114).

The main narrator’s mention of “displacement” shows that these stories are collective traumatic memories rooted in Colombian history. The accounts reveal repeated land dispossession suffered by peasant families over generations. Shore and Kauko note that family memories can be affected by past disruptions or shattered by trauma, whether for the group or for individuals (cf. 2018, p. 104). Here, both the son and his father tell of traumatic land loss and eviction at different stages of life. Their complementary accounts are vital for understanding these intertwined histories.

Through co-remembrance, narrators build and adjust their accounts together. The son is unsure about when his father bought the land. The elder provides the answer. This illustrates what Casey calls “checking out each other’s memories” (2000, p. 114): correcting, adding to, or clarifying testimonies. This collaborative approach to storytelling appears throughout the graphic narratives and reveals *Tulapas*’ shared history. Themes include land dispossession, guerrilla and paramilitary violence, and forced displacement that have affected generations.

6.2.3. Spatial Displacements: Memory and Post-Memory

Sin mascar palabra shows that land is more than just a place. It is a source of livelihood, a center of social ties, and a storehouse of peasant families’ memories. For these communities, land anchors memory and shapes identity across generations. Shore and Kauko focus on the “family household” as the memory center in Western contexts (cf. 2018, p. 106). In these narratives, memory goes beyond the household. It also includes the land and places these families have lived. This shows the land’s central role in *Tulapas*’ memories and identities.

Memories of rural land across different times and generations deepen stories of displacement, trauma, and resilience in these graphic narratives. Rural lands, landmarks, and paths on the map act as archives for peasant families’ memories. They help reconstruct history at different points in time.

In these graphic narratives, the walking route map of the *Tulapas* peasant community mirrors the ramification nature of family memories, with paths representing different histories and connections across generations, as shown in Figure 6-28. Here, places once occupied by earlier generations are re-appropriated in the present. The walking route map serves the

²⁰⁸ The original reads, “con decirle que eso fue cuando yo tenía 20 y ahora tengo 78. Entonces, fue hace como 58 años”.

community as a tool for re-appropriating and re-signifying the places it represents. While walking through places already depicted on their map, community members recount what they observe in the present and narrate the past of those same locations, connecting the stories to their relatives' roles in the community's history.



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Figure 6-28: Re-appropriation of the space through visiting places located in the walking route map (CNMH, 2018b, p. 20)

In Figure 6-28, the first panel shows the characters arriving at *Isaiás*' village, where one states, "and here is our town." Another adds, "it was our parents who began this dream"²⁰⁹ (CNMH, 2018b, p. 20, panels 1 and 2; my translation). This interplay highlights the connection between past and present, as well as between memory and post-memory, conveyed through both verbal and visual elements of the graphic narrative.

The narrators in these comics complement each other's stories. These characters construct collectively family narratives embedded in public history that emphasize the interplay between memory and post-memory within the story. Marianne Hirsch defines post-memory as

²⁰⁹ The interaction in Spanish goes as follows: one character says, "y aquí está nuestro pueblo." After that, one female character continues, "fueron nuestros padres los que comenzaron con este sueño".

“the relationship of children of survivors of [...] collective trauma to the [past] experiences of their parents.” She further explains that these experiences become so traumatic that they “constitute memories of their own right” and materialize “only as narratives and images with which [children] grew up” (Hirsch, 2001, p. 9). Memories of forced displacement are examples of traumatic memories that are passed down from generation to generation.



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Figure 6-29: Shadows dominate panels to portray the beginning of recollections about forced displacement in *Tulapas* (CNMH, 2018b, p. 26).

The narration of forced displacement in the *Tulapas* community begins at a moment when shadows dominate three panels, as shown in Figure 6-29. This visual strategy conveys a sense of looming threat as illegal groups arrive in the village of *Isaías*. In the second panel of the figure, one of the main narrators notes, “When *Isaías* began to be *Isaías*, there were guerrilla groups around here. But they did not prevent the farmer from developing his activities”²¹⁰ (CNMH, 2018b, p. 26, panel 2; my translation). The use of shadows heightens the suspense and

²¹⁰ The original reads, “cuando *Isaías* comenzó a ser *Isaías*, por aquí había grupos guerrilleros. Pero no impedían que el campesino desarrollara sus actividades”.

evokes a sense of danger. In panels one, two, and three, the drawing style features an abundance of shadows, particularly in panel two, where shadows partially obscure the character's face and extend into the background. Through this visual technique, the graphic narratives signal to readers that testimonies related to violent events are about to unfold.

After the hazard indication established by the excess shading of the panels in the figure above, recollections about forced displacement start to emerge. They are depicted using a drawing style called “gesture drawing.” This technique employs rapid, spontaneous strokes around the characters’ contours to convey sudden movements and body dynamics. Gesture drawing focuses on “the basic mechanics that allow [the] figure to manifest [through movement]” (Hampton, 2010, p. 3). In these graphic narratives, gesture drawing is particularly effective in illustrating group dynamics and collective motion. Consequently, the use of gesture drawing depicts the forced displacement experienced by millions of peasant families in rural Colombia, as shown in Figure 6-30.



Figure 6-30: Gesture drawing as abrupt movement in *Sin mascar palabra* to represent forced displacement (CNMH, 2018b, pp. 28–29).

Gesture drawing is employed to depict the abrupt movements associated with the forced displacement endured by the peasant community in the *Tulapas* region. Abrupt strokes become increasingly prevalent as paramilitary groups arrive. This drawing style, characterized by exaggerated and dynamic lines, conveys not only sudden movement but also a sense of aggression. Figure 6-30 illustrates this. In panel one, the female narrator states that the paramilitary groups arrived in June 1995 (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 28). This panel is framed. Let us remember that panels with clear frames serve to visually emphasize specific moments from

the past. They help capture both what was said and what was perceived at a particular time. In this case, the frame highlights the pivotal moment of the paramilitaries' arrival in *Tulapas* in 1995, while the next panels of the Figure show the violence used to displace the population portrayed through gesture drawing that dominates most of the panels in both pages of Figure 6-30.

The right-hand page of the figure shows gestural drawing at its highest level. Here, the abrupt lines depict the forced displacement of characters, representing the peasant community of *Tulapas*. In panels one and two on the right-hand page, the lines capture not only bodily movement but also a sense of organized action. The characters are depicted in a line, emphasizing an exodus of individuals suffering forced displacement by paramilitary groups. An image of violence that has been recurrent in the Colombian countryside.

Forced displacement and other forms of violence experienced by peasants are reinforced through victims' statements, perpetrators' accounts, newspaper clippings, and other documents. These materials serve both as narrative devices and as documentary evidence within the graphic narratives, which underscore the non-fictional nature of the events depicted in *Sin mascar palabra*. At the start of the second part, the statement of the victim named Dionisio Manuel Torreglosa Tirado, made before the Land Restitution Unit, is presented. Torreglosa explains that life in the *Tulapas* community was peaceful during the presence of guerrilla groups but became increasingly violent with the arrival of paramilitary forces. He notes that this shift marked the beginning of the mass exodus of peasant inhabitants from the region (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 33).

Land dispossession in rural Colombia has involved various perpetrators, including guerrilla and paramilitary groups, the Colombian state, its military and police, politicians, and even some community members. These narratives show perpetrators' actions as told by survivors. Such testimonies are reinforced with legal documents and other documentary material. For example, Chapter 2 narrates Salvatore Mancuso's violent actions. According to InSight Crime, Mancuso is a former paramilitary leader who worked with the Castaño brothers in the 1990s, initially under the Colombian government's support to combat guerrillas like the FARC-EP. After demobilizing in 2004, Mancuso was extradited to the United States in 2008, returned to Colombia, and joined the JEP in 2023 to explain his responsibilities in land dispossession and clarify his ties to renowned politicians, military, and businessmen. In 2024,

President Gustavo Petro appointed Mancuso as a peace manager to facilitate peace processes under the “*la Paz Total*” (Total Peace) initiative.²¹¹

The inclusion of Salvatore Mancuso’s account, presented in both verbal and pictorial forms, enhances the story’s realism and reinforces the characters’ testimonies about the theft of



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Figure 6-31: Version given by Salvatore Mancuso and translated into verbal-pictorial forms of comics (CNMH, 2018b, p. 34).

peasant lands and their forced displacement.

An example appears in Figure 6-31. While panel one depicts the paramilitary leader giving his statement on November 25, 2011, the following two panels graphically illustrate his account. Chapter 2 of *Sin mascar palabra* details the paramilitary actions of the Castaño and Elmer Cárdenas blocks, which sought to seize control of the *Tulapas* region through forced displacement and land dispossession (cf. CNMH, 2018b, p. 37). As previously noted, the gesture drawing style is used to intensify the portrayal of character movement and to emphasize the violence and threat inflicted by the paramilitaries.

A noticeable shift occurs in the representation of the verbal track. Figure 6-

31 shows how the frames of narratorial captions and speech balloons are distinctly altered to convey Salvatore Mancuso’s statements. Typically, the borders representing speech and thought in comics are multifaceted to express and differentiate various “types of **voices**, tones, and **emotional** qualities” (Pedri, 2022, p. 10, emphasis by the author). Although frames of speech balloons and thought appear consistently in a standard style with a “continuous and even line” (Forceville et al., 2010, p. 58) in these narratives, the verbal representation to display Mancuso’s version is different. The frames of both speech balloons and narratorial captions depicting his version feature jagged, serrated contours, as illustrated in Figure 6-31. This stylistic choice visually distinguishes his voice and thought from those of other characters in the graphic narratives, thereby emphasizing a unique and unsettling atmosphere.

²¹¹ For more information about Salvatore Mancuso, see InSight Crime (2024).

Salvatore Mancuso's account of the paramilitary incursion in *Tulapas* is represented using serrated speech balloons to visually differentiate his statements. He says, "I heard Carlos Castaño plan the incursion in Piso Mocho, La Pita, and Tulapas sector and assign Rodrigo Doble Cero the mission"²¹² (CNMH, 2018b, p. 34, panel 1; my translation). Similarly, narratorial captions accompanying depictions of the past use serrated frames, such as in panel 2 of Figure 6-31, which states, "the FARC and the EPL were expelled"²¹³ (2018b, p. 34, panel 2; my translation). However, this expulsion also led to the displacement and disappearance of many peasant families wrongly accused of supporting guerrilla groups. The use of serrated frames in Mancuso's version contrasts with the standard frames surrounding the testimonies of characters representing peasants. This is a way to distinguish between the perspectives of victims and victimizers.

Newspaper articles, along with other written and graphic documents incorporated into these graphic narratives, underscore the documentary and factual nature of these comics. The images in Figure 6-32 below include excerpts from investigative clippings that reveal how paramilitaries infiltrated Colombian institutions—such as the Attorney General's Office and the Congress of the Republic—to carry out crimes. These include the murder of thousands of people, the assassination of political opponents, and the dispossession of peasants from vast tracts of land, among other atrocities. During this period, President Gustavo Petro, then serving as Senator of the Republic, denounced nearly half of the congressmen for their ties to paramilitary groups during the two administrations of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010). Petro was also the first to introduce the term "parapolitics" in Colombia, describing the nexus between paramilitary criminals and members of Congress, as well as other high-ranking officials within the Colombian state²¹⁴ Additionally, the clippings illustrate how powerful landowners benefited from the legalization of stolen land on Colombia's Atlantic coast and the disappearance of peasants seeking to reclaim their property.

The visual material includes images of both perpetrators and victims, along with maps and statistics that provide a comprehensive and accurate depiction of the paramilitary, social, and political dynamics that have impacted millions of peasants in Colombia. The documents shown in Figure 6-32 are translated into the language of comics and sourced from reliable references, including reports by the *Unidad Administrativa de Gestión de Restitución de Tierras*

²¹² The original reads, "yo escuché a Carlos Castaño planear la incursión en Piso Mocho, La Pita y el Sector de Tulapas y asignarle la misión a Rodrigo Doble Cero".

²¹³ The original reads, "se expulsaron a las FARC y al EPL".

²¹⁴ Several videos show the debates the then Senator of the Republic, Gustavo Petro, held to denounce paramilitarism in various regions of the country. See, for example, Petro (2017, 2018).

Despojadas (the Administrative Unit for the Management of Land Restitution). This unit, affiliated with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, was established under Law 1448, commonly known as the Victims and Land Restitution Law. Its primary mission is to restore land to those who have been dispossessed.²¹⁵



Figure 6-32: Newspaper articles and other written and visual documents enrich the graphic narratives of *Sin mascar palabra*, adding depth and context to the storytelling (CNMH, 2018b, p. 38; pp. 51-53).

²¹⁵ To know more about the *Unidad Administrativa de Gestión de Restitución de Tierras Despojadas*, see chapters II, III, and IV of the law 1440 of 2011, Ministerio del Interior - República de Colombia (2012).

6.3. Reminding in *La Palizúa*

The graphic narratives in *La Palizúa* illustrate the mnemonic mode of ‘reminding’ that mirrors key memory strategies, especially that of time-based, employed by the CNMH to evoke recollections in victims of the conflict. These aspects primarily involve the activation of memory, the presentation of the narrator-witness, and the verbal-pictorial forms used to convey and narrate individual and collective memories, essential for reconstructing historical memory in Colombia. As previously mentioned, the mode of reminding aims to mentally transport the person recalling the past to specific moments, allowing them to narrate their personal and communal history. This process generates a “[r]eminding thinking of the past” in the mind of the rememberer, which can refer to a specific “past event or state of affairs” that the person has “witnessed” or learned about “from various sources” (Casey, 2000, p. 94). The specific historical event in the graphic narratives of *La Palizúa* is preliminarily contextualized through its paratexts, which are explained in the historical framing in section 5.1.2.2.

The introduction, an important paratext in the initial pages of *La Palizúa*, provides geographic and socio-historical context for the stories and introduces the violent incident that occurred in the small community. This community includes the municipalities of *Chibolo*, *Sabanas de San Ángel*, and *Plato* in Colombia’s Magdalena department. The paratext situates readers in the 1980s, when various groups of peasants settled in a small, uncultivated area of Magdalena. Due to the abundance of trees, bushes, and vegetation, the settlers named their community *La Palizúa*. As mentioned earlier, the introduction sets the geographical and temporal context for readers, initially through written text.

Aspects of colonization are introduced preliminarily, along with references to violent moments experienced by the community. The introduction highlights that in the 1990s, paramilitary groups led by Jorge 40²¹⁶ invaded many territories in *La Palizúa*. As a result, entire communities were forcibly displaced in 1997 (cf. CNMH, 2018a, pp. 6–7). This preliminary information contextualizes the violent past of the community by highlighting significant moments and the years in which they occurred. It suggests that one way to narrate the past is to use time as a tool for remembering.

According to the CNMH, the use of time as a remembering tool is related to time-based strategies. These strategies, including timelines and visual biographies, help individuals from a community “identify a sequence of events that mark their lives and the social biography of a

²¹⁶ According to Corporación Jurídica Yira Castro, Rodrigo Tovar Pupo, alias ‘Jorge 40’, is a criminal who, with other paramilitaries, seized peasant lands at the request of stockbreeders and large landowners of the Magdalena region during the 1990s. Cf. (2016b, p. 8).

specific place (e.g., a town), or period (e.g., the upsurge of violence) from the point of view of participants” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 75). Next, this study will examine the methods through which time-oriented memory strategies are elicited and articulated within *La Palizúa*’s graphic narratives, with particular attention to identifying their formal characteristics and narrative functions.

6.3.1. Time-Based Ways to Elicit and Narrate Memory

In the first pages of these graphic narratives, we can draw detailed conclusions about the strategies used to activate and narrate memory. These narratives show that the primary strategy for activating memory is based on time, a method also used in CNMH memory workshops. This approach relies on the individual's subjective experience of time when narrating their past. According to the CNMH, “[t]he specificity of these methods is that they evoke narratives and chronologies that organize the [telling] of the experiences of individuals and groups within a particular understanding of time and sequence” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 76).

The mental organization of image-memories—frozen in time and stored in the mind—parallels the sequential structure of comic panels. This concept is discussed in the section titled “Panel Juxtaposition and Sequence: Graphic Life Narratives.” This section argues that memory functions like a time-based archive. The mind selects important past moments and arranges them into sequences to narrate life episodes coherently. Graphic narratives reflect this, as comics panels are arranged sequentially on the pages.

La Palizúa case study shows how the time-based method works with ‘reminding.’ This mode aims to place the rememberer in specific past moments. Casey states, “[t]o be reminded of an action is to be put in mind of a doing or thinking that occurs at some point in the past” (2000, p. 97). Exploring *La Palizúa*’s graphic narratives helps us to identify key aspects of this time-based approach and its link to the mnemonic mode of reminding. Understanding this connection clarifies the time-based process of memory activation and narration. It is a method used to reconstruct Colombia’s historical memory for the benefit of conflict victims.

6.3.1.1. Temporal Indicators

The mnemonic mode of reminding aims to recall specific past moments with “a quite determinate structure” to avoid “oblivion” (Casey, 2000, p. 90). In *La Palizúa*, this organized, time-based remembering is clear in the paratextual elements of the introduction. The

introduction lays out a chronological order to help contextualize the reader. These periods are ingrained in the minds of the peasant community members, which influences them to anchor memories in a structured, coherent sequence.

The introduction highlights four significant periods to contextualize and to preliminarily guide readers before they engage with the graphic narratives. The first is the 1980s, when the colonization of uncultivated land began, eventually forming the community known as *La Palizúa*. The second period is the 1990s, when paramilitaries led by Jorge 40 violently occupied these territories. The third period is more specific: August 1997, when the paramilitaries displaced peasants, leading to the disintegration of *La Palizúa* community. The final period mentioned in the introduction is from 2013 to 2018, during which the stories in the graphic narratives were compiled. These stories were created from collective memory meetings held during this time (cf. CNMH, 2018a, p. 6).

The time periods, years, and specific dates in the introduction serve three purposes. First, these temporal indicators orient readers before they enter the graphic narratives, placing them in key periods and helping them follow the stories. Second, they give a preliminary sense of significant and traumatic events in the peasant community, showing when they happened, which will be depicted both verbally and pictorially. Finally, by presenting time periods chronologically, readers can connect and anticipate how oral histories will unfold. The introduction offers essential context for understanding the topic. By emphasizing temporal indicators, the introduction also anticipates time-based strategies to elicit memories. These strategies “organize the tellings of the experiences of individuals and groups within a particular understanding of time and sequence” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 75).

After the written introduction, the visual narrative unfolds, marking the start of Chapter 1: 1981–1984. Like *Sin mascar palabra*, *La Palizúa* does not include a table of contents. This absence may be seen as a limitation, since such paratext typically serves as an initial roadmap, offering readers a preliminary sense of structure, as discussed earlier. However, without it, readers are prompted to discover the organization and plot progressively as they move through the graphic narrative.

In this way, the lack of a table of contents in *La Palizúa* mirrors the nature of individual memory, which does not always follow a linear progression from past to present to future. Instead, memory often consists of fragmented moments that lack a fixed order. These fragments acquire meaning only when they are shaped into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end.

La Palizúa's graphic narratives have six chapters, arranged chronologically. This organization is not presented in a table of contents, so readers must discover the chapter

structure as they read. Each chapter is titled by a specific period or span of time, along with the relevant years. The chapters appear in chronological order, as shown in Table 6-2.

Chapter	<i>La Palizúa</i>
1	1981 – 1984
2	1984 – 1996
3	1997
4	1997 – 2007
5	2007 – 2018
6	2018

Table 6-2: Division of chapters in *La Palizúa*

In this story, the individuals or groups themselves create the narrative structure from their experiences. According to the CNMH, “[t]he selection criteria [of times or places] are determined by the individual or the group, and take into consideration both significant events in the individual’s lived experiences as well as those that mark and make an impression on their group or community or region” (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 76).

The structure and organization of *La Palizúa* align with the mnemonic mode of reminding. According to Casey, this type of structure indicates “what we should remember [...] as well as how we might remember more effectively” (2000, pp. 90–91). The chronological sequence presented in Table 6–2 traces key moments in the history of *La Palizúa*, beginning with the peasant community’s colonization of the region and the settlement’s establishment in the 1980s. It then follows the arrival of paramilitary groups and the resulting displacement of the population throughout the 1990s and 2000s, culminating in the peasants’ ongoing struggle to reclaim their land, spanning from the early 2000s through 2018.

The following discussion will explore how the graphic narratives of *La Palizúa* employ a time-based approach, illustrating how a single memory can activate and reinforce an individual’s recollection to narrate the past.

6.3.1.2. Nature and Rural Landscapes: Reminders of the Past

Understanding the mechanisms through which memory is evoked presents a significant analytical challenge. In *La Palizúa*, the initial panels lack a clearly defined narrator or an identifiable focalizing character to anchor the images and accompanying text, thereby complicating the process of determining how memory is activated to reconstruct past events.

Consequently, a close reading of these early visual sequences becomes essential for interpreting the graphic narrative. Such an analysis must attend not only to what is represented but also to the modes of representation, as this focus can illuminate the mnemonic strategies at work and the ways in which the past is narrated from the perspective of the victims.

These graphic narratives open with a page dominated by dense vegetation, as illustrated in Figure 6-33. The scene shows only an array of lush plants and leafy trees, with a bright white sky above that contrasts sharply with the deep black silhouettes of the plants below. These illustrations are designed to offer a first-person perspective, immersing the reader in an untouched yet foreboding landscape.

The image with vegetation includes the title “Chapter 1: 1981 - 1984” at the top. In comics terminology, a page like this—where artwork extends across the entire surface without borders—is known as a “page bleed.” As Pedri explains, a bleed is “a comics page in which all the artwork extends to all edges of the printed page” (2022, p. 11). In the introductory pages of *La Palizúa*, the uncontained images of nature exemplify this bleed style that stresses the unbounded, immersive quality of the setting.

These feature images of nature, presented in a page bleed, not only mark the story’s beginning but also symbolize a crucial moment: the activation of an individual’s memory. At the start of Chapter 1, the graphic narratives introduce the concept of *baldíos*—vast, uncultivated lands that, though within national borders, lack private ownership. These lands, located far from urban centers, are typically untouched and without defined boundaries. Historically, as discussed in Section 2.1 of this dissertation, Colombian law granted ownership of colonized rural lands (*baldíos*) to the peasants who cultivated them. This provision generated longstanding conflicts with large landowners and hacienda owners, who contested these entitlements.

The design choice of using a page bleed to depict open landscapes on the first pages serves a visual and symbolic purpose. By extending the images of nature beyond the page’s borders, these comics convey the vastness and unconfined nature of *baldíos* in rural Colombia. In the context of *La Palizúa*’s graphic narratives, this limitless portrayal of land also hints at historical tensions: while the *baldíos* lack specific ownership and boundaries, they are central to the lives of rural communities and the conflicts over land ownership.



Figure 6-33: Image of Chapter 1 in *La Palizúa* (CNMH, 2018a, p. 9).

The images of vegetation on the bleed pages in *La Palizúa* symbolize Colombia's uncultivated lands and serve a symbolic function by evoking memories of the past from peasants who have been colonizers in the country. These images encompass a specific "reminding" process within memory, as outlined by Casey, who identifies three essential components of reminding: the "reminder," which signals something about the past; the "remindand," an event, a location, or a thing being remembered; and the "remindee," the individual recalling memory (cf. 2000, p. 96). In this case, nature itself acts as the "reminder," an evocative element that captures the reader's attention and establishes rural landscapes as a central theme, or leitmotif, of the narrative. The initial images on these pages highlight the countryside and rural territories not only as picturesque landscapes but also as powerful symbols of a past filled with resilience and memory.

The introductory bleed pages of *La Palizúa* set the scene of the past and visually depict the complex, elusive nature of memory. The "remindee," whose identity is initially ambiguous, experiences memories that are difficult to access, symbolized by dense vegetation representing hidden recollections. This imagery invites readers into the story by immersing them in the characters' perspectives, visually connecting them to the collective memory of the peasant community from the outset.

6.3.1.3. Visual Immersion

In Figure 6-34 below, three rectangular horizontal panels span the page. The first two panels, from top to bottom, offer panoramic views of wild, unspoiled landscapes. In contrast, the third panel at the bottom introduces three characters, representing peasants, positioned among the dense bushes. The scene suggests that these characters are part of the natural setting depicted in the first two panels, implying they are located somewhere in this landscape. The central character in the bottom panel offers clues that the first two panels represent his perspective—what he sees in front of him. Though he appears to be looking straight at the reader, he is, in fact, looking beyond, gazing directly at the natural landscape shown in the top two panels. This alignment creates a visual connection between the character's viewpoint and the landscape before him.

By connecting the images of nature in the first two panels with the three horizontal panels on the page, it becomes clear that the scenery represents the central character's visual perspective in the third panel. This narrative technique links the character's gaze to the reader's. While the first two panels depict the natural landscape, the third panel reveals that the central

character, wearing a hat, is observing it. This interpretation is reinforced by the dialogue between the central character and the one to his left. After inspecting the landscape, the central



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Figure 6-34: Panels overlapping the perspective of a character and that of readers (CNMH, 2018a, p. 10, panels 1 - 3).

character states, “There it is, mate.” The other character responds, “Are you sure? It’s full of sticks,” to which the central figure replies, “Sure. We have to clear the forest and saw the wood”²¹⁷ (CNMH, 2018a, p. 10, my translation). These three panels provide visual immersion, placing the reader in the perspective of the central character in the lower panel. This immersive approach, previously discussed in the context of paratexts and frontispieces, is applied here in a similar way. It establishes a step-by-step connection throughout the graphic narrative of *La Palizúa*, beginning in the paratexts and continuing as the story unfolds.

Through this technique, the reader is encouraged to view the world through the character’s eyes, thereby experiencing the story from his perspective.

The introductory pages and panels of *La Palizúa* depict the peasants’ colonization of rural lands and the building of their community. However, the focus gradually shifts from natural landscapes to the characters’ faces, emphasizing their emotions and expressions. This shift is achieved through a combination of close-up and medium-shot panels, moving from images of rural landscapes to intimate views of characters’ faces and upper bodies. This progression highlights the human dimension of the story while foregrounding characters’ emotional experiences, as explained below.

²¹⁷ The interaction in Spanish unfolds as follows: The peasant in the center says, “Aquí es compañero.” Another responds, “¿Seguro? Está lleno de palos.” Again, the character in the center replies, “Seguro. Es de abrir monte y aserrar la madera”.

6.3.1.4. Before and After a Significant Memory

A close-up of a character’s eyes (see Figure 6-35) signals the visualization of her perspective, suggesting that the scenes depicted in the initial panels represent her internal memories. This close-up serves as a cue to the reader that the imagery so far presented is part of an individual memory, likely belonging to a female character. Her eyes symbolize a window into her past, functioning as a narrative device to mark a clear “before” and “after” in her life. Through this focus on her gaze, the story transitions into her personal history, using the eyes as both a symbolic and narrative bridge.



Figure 6-35: Close-up of the narrator’s eyes (CNMH, 2018a, p. 18, panel 1).

The close-up on the character’s eyes in the figure illuminates the introductory images depicting wastelands, land colonization, and the formation of *La Palizúa* community. Her eyes serve as indicators of the past and reveal that the earlier images shown in the introductory pages of *La Palizúa*’s graphic narratives represent memories held in the character’s mind, which carry personal significance for her.

Edward Casey notes that memories and thoughts can act as “reminders” of both “perceptual” and “cognitive” nature. They are “perceptual” experiences because they originate from events that were perceived and lived through directly by an individual and then were stored in her mind. They are also “cognitive,” meaning that the person who remembers—the remindee—is aware of these past events as real occurrences in her mind, consciously recognizing them as actual experiences (cf. Casey, 2000, p. 96). Thus, the close-up of the character’s eyes in Figure 6-35 connects her internal memories with external images, thereby deepening her personal history.

The zoom to the eyes together with their graphic representation adds expressiveness to the story that will be told. The large, expressive black pupils, set against the character’s white face, create a visual contrast that adds emotional depth to the panel. The blackness of the pupils suggests emotional significance in her memories that endure over time. This depiction is reminiscent of portraits taken of Holocaust victims many years after this horrific event. In

discussing such portraits, Camila Loew notes that “[t]he eyes of the witness [...] acquire a regularity in all the portraits” (Loew, 2007, p. 29). Such patterns are attributed to the intense expressiveness evident in their eyes. Loew adds that “the dark, dilated pupils that correspond to the ‘darkness’ or obscurity of their memories are accentuated by the lighting which, in turn, is manipulated to make the sitter seem teary-eyed” (Loew, 2007, p. 29, emphasis by the author).

The narratorial caption accompanying the eyes inside the panel represents the character’s thoughts. This verbal part reads: “[b]etween 1981 and 1982, when we arrived in this area, we were children and we lived here all the time that *La Palizúa* existed”²¹⁸ (CNMH, 2018a, p. 18, panel 1; my translation). The character in question is inferred to be a woman, as the text mentions she was a girl when she arrived in the area between 1981 and 1982, along with another girl. Her words are presented without a speech balloon, indicating they are not spoken aloud but represent her internal, reflective voice, allowing for retrospective self-reflection. This is evident in Figure 6-35, where the narrator recalls 1981 and 1982, aligning with the time frame of Chapter 1.

The panel focusing on the character’s eyes is crucial in marking a “before” and “after” in her life that signal significant recollections. Such memories align with images of the territory’s colonization and community-building, representing the narrator’s autobiographical memory. Early in these graphic narratives, scenes from her private and family life are depicted, showing her as a child with her family and capturing moments linked to the founding of her community. These scenes include her father and others preparing the land and establishing their community. The introductory panels illustrate the socio-cultural development of *La Palizúa*, particularly between 1981 and 1984. This blend of personal and communal memory underscores how individual memories are embedded in larger social and cultural contexts. Robyn Fivush supports this view, suggesting that autobiographical memories are both “process and product” of collective, social, and cultural constructs shaped by specific historical moments (cf. 2013, p. 13).

6.3.2. A Single Narrator: A Woman

Gradually, a sequence of panels reveals the narrator’s face. This visual progression suggests that the narrator—also a victim of paramilitary displacement in *La Palizúa*—acquires a more defined and recognizable identity with which readers can engage. The face, as a central marker

²¹⁸ The original reads, “[e]ntre 1981 y 1982, cuando llegamos a esta zona, nosotras éramos unas niñas y vivimos aquí todo el tiempo que *La Palizúa* existió.”

of the body, plays a crucial role in processes of identification. However, beyond serving as a means of recognition, the face is also considered “the natural subject of perception” and a key medium for producing “any sensitive account of remembering” (Casey, 2000, p. 148). In other words, meaningful communicative encounters occur through the physical presence of the body, particularly the face, enabling the sharing of memories.

The narrator’s presence signals to readers that a communicative act is about to take place. Her visibility unfolds sequentially. It starts with a close-up of her eyes, followed by a medium shot of her head and torso, and culminates in a close-up of her hands, as depicted in Figure 6-36. However, the narrator is not depicted as an isolated figure situated within a clearly defined spatial context. This is suggested by the lower third panel, where the presence of pigs evokes a rural setting and situates the narrative within the lived experience of the countryside.

The narrator’s localization within a rural context is crucial to the graphic narratives that recount the community’s traumatic past. As Francis Guerin and Roger Hallas argue, the body plays a vital role in “acts of bearing witness to traumatic historical events” (2007, p. 13). The panels in Figure 6–36 depict past events as occurring in an intimate setting meaningful to both the narrator and the wider rural community of *La Palizúa*.

The visualization of the narrator’s body that has endured the physical and mental “devastation” of a violent past is reconstructed through panels. In this way, the gradual reconstruction of the narrator’s body becomes “a principal and necessary component of witnessing practices” (Guerin & Hallas, 2007, p. 13). This suggests that witnessing requires the embodied presence of the witness in the present moment. As Guerin and Hallas explain, “the act of bearing witness demands a certain *habeas corpus*. The testimony of the survivor-witness is dependent on her embodied presence at the moment of enunciation”



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Figure 6-36: Gradual visualization of the narrator (CNMH, 2018a, p. 18).

(2007, p. 14, emphasis by the author). This presence is further emphasized by locating the narrator within a spatial context.

The narrator's testimony, portrayed in *La Palizúa*, is enhanced by both visual and verbal elements shown in Figure 6-37. This time, her words are represented in speech balloons rather

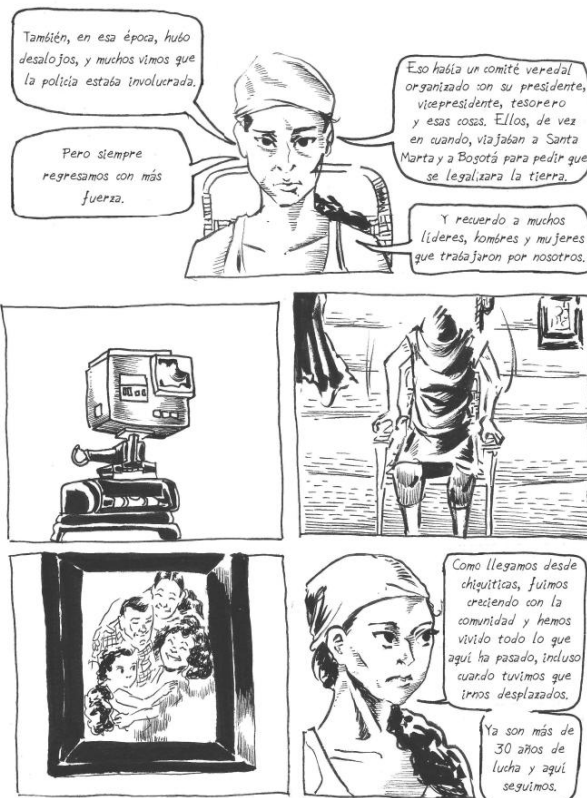


Figure 6-37: The witness-narrator providing her oral testimony (CNMH, 2018a, p. 19).

than narratorial captions, as in the previous example. Such a portrayal emphasizes the oral nature of the narrator's testimony and reveals more about her identity. This shift invites an exploration not only of what the narrator says but also of how she expresses it.

In the first big panel of this figure, a medium close-up of the narrator's head and shoulders suggests she is speaking directly to the reader, despite no other characters being present. By meeting the reader's gaze, the woman establishes a direct connection in which she assumes the role of a witnessing subject who recounts her memories, while the reader is positioned as both observer and listener.

A character's direct gaze at the reader creates a sense of face-to-face interaction, enabling victims to share their testimonies with the reader. Nawal Musleh-Motut, discussing the role of deceased victims depicted as character-narrators in *Footnotes in Gaza* (Sacco, 2010) explains that in graphic narratives of documentary comics, "victims [...] become real and [re]present survivor-witnesses who not only regain their subjectivity and humanity, but also [...] demand the attention of their audience—people who they would never meet [in real life] and who might otherwise never hear their stories" (Musleh-Motut, 2019, p. 74). Thus, this type of victim's representation engages readers in the stories and warrants that they have been heard.

In *La Palizúa*, the narrator reasserts her presence, subjectivity, and humanity by reclaiming her voice to share her memories. The numerous speech balloons shown in the figure encapsulate her words and cluster around her head, visually emphasizing her testimony. She recounts the prevalence of illegal evictions in her community and the involvement of police officers in these actions. She also explains that local committees and social leaders sought to

assist residents in legalizing their land in *Santa Marta* and *Bogotá* (cf. CNMH, 2018a, p. 19). The density of speech balloons produces an effect akin to a soliloquy, granting readers access to her thoughts, fears, and memories. As a narrative device, the soliloquy reveals a character’s inner world (cf. Hogan, 2014, p. 58) while simultaneously engaging the audience’s attention and curiosity (cf. 2014, p. 60).

The narrator in *La Palizúa* symbolizes her community by embodying both individual and collective identity through her visualized body and testimony. Her portrayal—through facial expressions, speech balloons, and solitary depiction—blends personal narrative with collective memory, presenting oral history as a soliloquy.

6.3.3. Analepsis to Narrate Individual and Collective Memories

The time-based method used in *La Palizúa* to elicit and narrate memory shapes the narrator’s testimony, as she frequently references moments tied to her family and community. Her narration alternates between past and present and blends individual and collective experiences. This subjective approach disrupts chronological order, employing analepsis to revisit specific episodes and connect them to the present. Ken Ireland explains that analepsis “signals the retrospective evocation of an event, and may be internal (within the main narrative), external (pre-narrative), [and] mixed or overlapping (prior to but continuing into the main narrative)” (Ireland, 2008, p. 591, parentheses by the author). Clearly, in *La Palizúa*’s graphic narratives, an overlapping analepsis is used.

The narrator’s memories, especially at the beginning of the story, often feature her family, with her father and younger sister playing key roles. Figure 6-38, composed of four rectangular panels, captures significant moments, such as when the father shows his daughters the progress of housing construction in the rural community of *La Palizúa*. These panels highlight the connection between individual, family, and communal memories. Together, they depict a significant moment for the narrator, where her father takes her and her sister to see the progress



¹⁶ Figure 6-38: Panels showing the interplay among individual, family, and communal memories (CNMH, 2018a, p. 16).

in *La Palizúa*. He tells his daughters, “[a]ll of us men are waiting to bring our families, even if there is no school yet”²¹⁹ (CNMH, 2018a, p. 16, panel 4; my translation). The four panels of the figure underscore the central role of family not only in the narrator’s personal memories but also in the aspirations of the men in the community, who long to provide their families with homes in *La Palizúa*. These images are part of the reminding mnemonic mode. It shows changes in time as the narrator remembers events, letting her relive and share her own memories.

La Palizúa employs analepsis to depict temporal jumps in the story. For example, in the four panels in Figure 6-38, the woman appears as a child alongside her sister and father. In other memories, the same character is portrayed at different stages of her life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. This homodiegetic form of analepsis, as Ken Ireland explains, “creates a jump in time along sequences of events involving the same character and within the same plotline” (Ireland, 2008, p. 591), but across different temporal moments in the graphic narratives. Hence, verbal-pictorial elements guide the reader in identifying whether a panel refers to the past or present.



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Figure 6-39: Relation between present and past through verbal-pictorial forms (CNMH, 2018a, p. 22).

Chapter 2: 1984 – 1996 illustrates the interplay between present and past, with the narrator, depicted as an adult in the present, recounting events from her community’s past. The four panels in Figure 6-39 use verbal-pictorial elements, such as frames, speech balloons, and narratorial captions, to depict the relationship between past and present.

Present scenes are frameless and focus on the solitary narrator, while past scenes have defined margins and emphasize community by including multiple characters. Speech balloons represent the narrator’s present testimony as direct speech, while narratorial captions serve as a voice-over for past

²¹⁹ The original reads, “[t]odos los hombres estamos esperando para traer a nuestras familias así no haya colegio todavía”.

events that are inaccessible to the characters depicted. These verbal-pictorial forms together narrate past events, such as the parceling and trading of rural land by the community. Readers must interpret both visual and textual cues to understand the interplay between the narrator’s personal and communal histories across time.

Chapter 3: 1997 depicts the traumatic paramilitary incursion into the community of *La Palizúa* and the forced displacement of its population. At the beginning of this chapter, the narrator describes how the paramilitaries summoned the community on the morning of August 15, 1997, to issue threats and demand their removal from the land (CNMH, 2018a, p. 33, panel 3). The impact of this event on the community is conveyed through both visual and verbal representations, particularly in the detailed portraits of characters’ faces.

Figure 6-40 highlights an outstanding contrast in the depiction of the paramilitaries and the peasant victims of the eviction. The paramilitaries’ faces are rendered in a highly realistic style, with well-defined contours and defiant expressions, as seen in the upper panel of the figure, which depicts two paramilitaries. This realism aligns with Scott McCloud’s observation that “when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face [...], you see it as a face of **another**” (1994, p. 36, panel 3, emphasis by the author). The figure appears to emphasize this sense of *otherness*—portraying the paramilitaries as strangers, invaders, and aggressive dispossessors of the peasants’ land. McCloud further explains that realistically drawn characters are often depicted this way “to **objectify** them, emphasizing their “**otherness**” from the reader” (1994, p. 44, panel 5, emphasis by the author).



Figure 6-40: Contrast between portrayals of paramilitaries’ faces and those of peasants (CNMH, 2018a, p. 34).

In contrast, the peasants’ faces in the last panel of the figure are portrayed with less detail than those of the paramilitaries. While their expressions convey worry and sadness, their facial features are rendered in a more cartoonish style. As McCloud explains, “the more cartoony a face is, [...] the more people it

could be said to **describe**” (1994, p. 31, panel 4, emphasis by the author). This simplified depiction broadens the representation to encompass the entire community. More importantly, it creates the effect of a “mask” (1994, pp. 34, 43), allowing readers to see themselves in the characters and to immerse themselves in the narrated storyworld. In this vein, McCloud notes that “when you enter the world of the **cartoon** [...], you see **yourself**” (1994, p. 34, panel 4, emphasis by the author). Consequently, the cartoon technique in the last panel fosters reader identification with the peasants and reinforces their connection to the story.

Another aspect to highlight in Figure 6-40 is the use of the verbal track, which underscores the paramilitary characters’ dominance and threatening nature. This is conveyed through speech balloons with tails extending from the paramilitaries’ mouths. In the second panel, one menacingly declares, “[y]ou have 15 days to get out of this zone”²²⁰ (CNMH, 2018a, p. 34, panel 2; my translation) while standing amid the shadows of other paramilitary figures—a visual element that heightens the sense of intimidation.

In the third panel, the speech balloon reads, “[t]hose who do not do so will be considered military objectives and will have to abide by the consequences”²²¹ (2018a, p. 34, panel 3; my translation). Although the speaker from the second panel is not visible here, it is implied that he continues to deliver the threat. The focus of this panel shifts to the peasants, whose fearful expressions are shown alongside the speech balloon. Their posture emphasizes their passivity and vulnerability. The peasants’ seated position contrasts with the standing paramilitaries and underscores the power imbalance between the two groups.

The traumatic impact of the community’s destruction becomes increasingly evident in the gradual change of the narrator’s facial features. Initially, the narrator’s face appears clear and composed, despite the harrowing events she recounts. However, as these graphic narratives unfold, her facial features appear to be emaciated. This transformation parallels the devastation of her community. Figure 6-41 illustrates a particular episode in Chapter 5: 2007–2018, in which the peasants of *La Palizúa* attempt to reclaim their land after being dispossessed in 1997.

A few years later, the narrator recounts how, after reclaiming their land, several peasants returned to rebuild their homes. However, powerful and corrupt individuals hired lawyers and deployed criminal groups to destroy these newly constructed houses. This destruction is graphically depicted in the broken panels on the left side of Figure 6-41, which show the demolition of the community’s homes. On the following page, the narrator’s distressed

²²⁰ The original reads, “[t]ienen 15 días para salir de esta zona”.

²²¹ The original reads, “[l]os que no lo hagan serán considerados objetivo militar y se tendrán que atener a las consecuencias”.

expression underscores the emotional harm of witnessing her community’s devastation once again. The fragmented panels not only symbolize the physical destruction of the peasants’ homes but also reflect the fragmentation of the individual and the narrator’s sense of identity, portraying devastation and revictimization.



Figure 6-41: Pages rendering the ongoing destruction of the community of *La Palizúa* and its impact on the narrator’s facial expression (CNMH, 2018a, pp. 58–59).

The scene portrayed in Figure 6-41 illustrates the ongoing re-victimization and frustration faced by victims of the Colombian conflict. The repeated destruction of the community is mirrored in the narrator’s expression of anguish and helplessness. In the case of the community of *La Palizúa*, peasants were not only displaced once but faced renewed attacks when they attempted to reclaim their land—not by armed groups this time, but by powerful and corrupt regional elites determined to dispossess them again. Stories of abuse and survival become interwoven “into the fabric of cultural truth,” influencing not only the shared “cultural stories” (Fivush, 2013, p. 26) of a determined community but also the identities of the individuals who belong to it. The imagery within these panels and the fragmentation of the panels underscore how personal and collective trauma are interconnected.

The graphic narratives of *La Palizúa* merge individual and collective memories through time-based storytelling and the mnemonic mode of reminding to highlight significant past events in an individual and her community. These narratives intertwine private family memories with the broader history of the community to portray its growth, destruction by paramilitary forces, and subsequent struggles with corrupt sociopolitical elites. Told from the narrator’s perspective, the story alternates between past and present, creating coherence through

what I called ‘graphic analepsis.’ Here, retrospective panels depict the narrator’s childhood and adolescence, while forward-looking panels reveal her reflections on the impact of past violence on herself, her family, and her community, highlighting her resilience.

The graphic narratives in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* illustrate different mnemonic modes—recognizing, reminiscing, and reminding—that align with the historical memory work conducted by scholars engaged in participatory action research and by the CNMH. In *Historia gráfica*, the mode of recognizing is foregrounded through four illustrated booklets that focus on cultural objects and expressions tied to the past of communities along Colombia’s Atlantic coast. These cultural traditions, deeply connected to the struggles of peasant communities, serve as essential tools for representing and narrating their collective memories.

Sin mascar palabra focuses on memory as a shared, communal process, showing how drawing, walking, and intergenerational storytelling help the *Tulapas* community reconstruct violent histories together. In contrast, *La Palizúa* emphasizes individual memory, using shifts between past and present to show how the narrator recalls traumatic events alone. Unlike communal practices, her memories emerge internally, highlighting the challenges of recounting trauma without support and the need for safe ways for victims to share their stories.

The next chapter presents the dissertation’s key conclusions, synthesizing insights from the analysis of the covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives of the three documentary comics studied. It highlights the study’s contributions, discusses broader implications, notes certain limitations, and suggests directions for future research on victim-centered comics as a means of RECONSTRUCTING historical memory in Colombia.

7. Conclusions

The Colombian conflict should be viewed not only as an armed confrontation but also as a deeply rooted and violent historical phenomenon. This conflict has had a major impact on rural communities, individuals, and families. A human-centered, culturally informed approach is vital to fully understand it, prioritizing both individual and collective memory. The official narrative in Colombia often overlooks causes like marginalization, inequality, and poverty. It frames victims' histories as isolated, rather than offering deeper insight or solutions. Alternative narratives in different media are crucial for presenting victims' testimonies within a broader historical perspective.

This dissertation demonstrated that documentary comics function as an alternative storytelling medium. These comics capture memories and testimonies from those affected by extreme violence. They complement formal investigations by presenting personal stories within broader historical contexts. Through the combination of words and images, they evoke historical memory. Research by groups such as the CNMH, *Fundación del Sinú*, and *la Rosca de investigación*—particularly through participatory action research—has been instrumental. These efforts contributed to investigating and reconstructing Colombia's memory, resulting in significant findings and comprehensive narratives in documentary comics.

The findings confirmed that *Historia gráfica de la lucha por la tierra en la costa atlántica*, *Sin mascar palabra: por los caminos de Tulapas*, and *La Palizúa: ustedes no saben cómo ha sido esta lucha* are major sources documenting rural communities' memories. Moreover, this dissertation argues for a holistic study of comics through a memory studies approach, emphasizing that covers, paratextual components, and graphic narratives each play an integral role in portraying the past from victims' perspectives, with the intervention of scholars and comics artists. Together, these elements form a rich verbal-pictorial medium that innovatively organizes, represents, narrates, and documents individual and collective memories, thereby contributing significantly to the reconstruction of the country's historical memory.

Several conclusions were drawn regarding each component. The covers of *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa* serve multiple roles. They are persuasive visual tools. They encapsulate themes, locations, historical figures, and key moments from the graphic narratives. These covers also show the value of comics as cultural artifacts. They communicate societal and individual recollections related to historical memory in Colombia. Findings about covers fell into three aspects. First, covers use artistic composition and symbolism for historical

memory. Second, covers communicate historical memory. Third, institutional frameworks affect how historical memory appears in covers.

Colors and artistic composition on the covers symbolize approaches to historical memory. This dissertation found that these covers use diverse art styles to convey meanings relevant to Colombia's rural past. For example, *Historia gráfica* uses red, black, and white, as well as sepia, to refer to Colombia's colonial history and indigenous roots. Red signifies large landowners, while black and white refer to peasants. Sepia emphasizes the documentary nature of the work. The layout is top-down, with words above and rural images below. This composition contrasts official historical narratives, often written, with oral traditions expressed through pictures and words in comics.

The covers of *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* use vibrant digital colors to suggest a more recent historical context. These multicolored schemes evoke the traumas and experiences of the characters shown. However, the compositional styles are different. *Sin mascar palabra* centers a *bohío* to symbolize home and family. It places family at the heart of community memory, with other elements circling around. Walking with others is also recommended, showing that this collective activity helps activate memory. *La Palizúa* uses a left-to-right arrangement. This symbolizes the progression of memory over time. It prompts readers to connect the covers with the comic's content. The covers also show characters. Characters partly hidden by the landscape highlight their historical invisibility. The layout of other elements mirrors Western reading habits. It evokes the continuity of memory through time.

This dissertation emphasized that each cover integrates verbal and pictorial elements to engage readers and introduce themes of memory, testimony, and lived experiences within Colombia's socio-political conflict. Unlike novel covers, which may include artwork or words unrelated to the content and are shaped by publishers, comic covers purposefully match visuals to their stories.

Visual cover designs introduce the narratives by offering insights into rural life, social struggles, and methods for reconstructing historical memory. The combination of imagery and text on these covers evokes emotion and curiosity, thereby fostering reader engagement. Landscapes, characters, and visual motifs illustrate the complexity of historical experiences. Typography and color choices underscore the significance of historical remembrance. By foregrounding previously silenced voices, these covers play a crucial role in initiating discussions about the preservation of collective memory in the face of historical silencing.

Another conclusion is that these covers show the influence of various historical memory projects. *Historia gráfica* aligns with Fals Borda's Participatory Action Research (PAR). *Sin*

mascar palabra and *La Palizúa* connect to practices from the CNMH. The cover designs show methods researchers and rural communities use to work together to document, share, and narrate memories. The arrangement of elements and the use of images about rural life matter. They serve as the first visual link to show heritage and identity to readers.

This analysis demonstrated that paratexts constitute essential components of graphic narratives rather than optional additions. Paratexts frame and expand these works, thereby enhancing accessibility and comprehension for a wider audience. Although paratexts play a significant role, they are frequently overshadowed by the primary content located in the graphic narrative section. The findings suggest that paratexts are not merely decorative; their graphic features offer valuable preliminary insights into the comics. Paratexts are integral to establishing each work's cultural identity. They make the histories of previously marginalized peasant communities both visible and accessible for scholarly examination as verbal-pictorial artifacts.

Paratexts connect background information with the graphic stories inside. In comics, their role goes beyond marking a comic's place in culture. They help bring out and present memories, especially for marginalized groups, in ways that more people can access. Accordingly, paratexts in comics show how history and memory can be “readable through form” (Chute, 2016, p. 27).

Paratexts not only frame graphic narratives but also provide essential context and guidance. They assist readers in navigating and interpreting stories that represent both individual and collective memories. By shaping initial expectations and offering historical, cultural, or personal insights, paratexts function as interpretive verbal and pictorial lenses. These elements guide audiences toward a deeper understanding of the themes within graphic narratives and their broader cultural and social significance.

Verbal paratexts, including introductions, dedications, tables of contents, and bibliographies, play a crucial role in connecting comics to broader discourses on identity, memory, and historical events. These paratexts succinctly explain and guide the reconstruction of historical memory within each work. In the comics analyzed, personal and collective memories are intertwined with historical context. The paratexts provide essential explanations that influence how readers engage with and respond to graphic narratives. Introductions, in particular, establish the real-world context of the comics and clarify the methodologies used to reconstruct historical memory. This information functions as a tool for reading and interpretation.

The table of contents serves as a significant paratext, guiding readers through the structure of the text. This is particularly evident in *Historia gráfica*, a collection of illustrated booklets originally presented as standalone works. In contrast, *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* omit a table of contents, which appears to be a deliberate strategy to immerse readers in the act of remembering. This process is not linear or organized but unfolds in multidirectional and fragmented ways, requiring readers to navigate and interpret gaps. The absence of a table of contents in these comics highlights their distinctive approach to memory. Similarly, bibliographies function as more than references; they provide evidence of the historical materials used in constructing the graphic narratives, reinforcing their role as tools of historical documentation.

In summary, verbal paratexts clarify, enrich, and complement the primary content of graphic narratives. These paratexts also foster deeper engagement with the complexities of historical memory. Furthermore, additional elements, especially graphic ones, intensify this dynamic.

The research demonstrates that graphic paratexts, such as frontispieces and internal sub-covers, function as visual cliffhangers. These elements introduce readers to rural Colombian life and generate anticipation for the main narrative. Fragmented imagery in frontispieces prompts speculation regarding the unfolding story, while detailed internal sub-covers encourage readers to connect these visuals with the broader content of the comics. Such paratexts offer glimpses of the narrative without disclosing its entirety, thereby creating suspense and shaping expectations. Frontispieces and sub-covers also anchor readers in specific settings, characters, and cultural motifs derived from the main covers, reinforcing the connection between real scenarios and those depicted in comics. Collectively, these findings indicate that graphic and verbal paratexts integrate history, memory, and imagination, thereby deepening engagement with narratives of rural communities, their suffering, testimonies, and memories in graphic works.

The analysis of paratexts in the three comics reinforces the view that these elements complement the information presented on the covers and extend beyond mere textual preludes. The data indicate that paratexts fulfill a “teaser function” (Schmid, 2021, p. 84), stimulating readers’ curiosity and establishing the tone for graphic narratives that depict the memories of marginalized communities. Although often brief, paratexts act as frames containing curiosity-inducing verbal-pictorial information that enhances anticipation and engagement with the main narratives. The varied approaches to presenting paratexts in these comics add a significant dimension, highlighting the styles and perspectives of those engaged in historical memory

work. In line with Gérard Genette's concept of paratexts as signs of culture (cf. Genette, 1997b, p. 21), verbal-pictorial paratexts in these comics transcend their physical and visual attributes, emphasizing and expanding the cultural significance of comics as representations of historical memory.

This dissertation offered several key insights into the graphic narratives of comics, with a particular focus on their relationship to memory. The analysis establishes clear parallels between the language of comics—such as panels, frames, speech balloons, and narratorial captions—and the concept of memory at three levels: individual, collective, and historical. It clarifies that individual memory at the physical level produces static, fragmented, incomplete, and gap-filled images, which closely resemble the discontinuous and segmented visual structure of comics. In contrast, film or photography creates detailed, continuous images. This perspective helps us better understand how comics, through their unique structural elements, reflect and narrativize the fragmented, nonlinear processes characteristic of memory.

Building on the connection between comics and individual memory, the graphic narratives also resonate profoundly at the collective level. Just as individual memory is fragmented and non-linear, collective memory—shaped by remembering processes, shared experiences, cultural narratives, historical events, and oral history—is equally inconclusive and multifaceted. Comics effectively represent this dynamic by combining visual and textual elements to depict diverse perspectives and communal experiences. Through the interplay of panels, captions, and illustrations, comics can reconstruct ways to activate memory and shared histories while acknowledging the gaps, silences, and inconsistencies inherent in collective memory. By doing so, they provide a platform to narrativize marginalized or suppressed histories, offering a space for dialogue and reflection on the broader societal implications of memory and identity.

This is where the analysis of graphic narratives became vital, as they revealed the processes of memory reconstruction among marginalized communities and illustrated how individual and collective memories contribute and connect to rebuilding historical memory. By capturing these narratives, comics offer an inclusive and multifaceted perspective on Colombia's past. They link the cooperative work between memory researchers and peasant communities, give meaning to fragmented recollections, and provide voices and faces to those often left out of traditional historical accounts. This complementary approach allows for a deeper understanding of Colombia's violent history. Such an approach also fosters a broader dialogue on history and collective memories from below, especially in rural settings, that have shaped the past and the present in the country.

This dissertation offered several key conclusions regarding the graphic narratives of these comics. Foremost, it established a multilayered framework that incorporates multimodal elements to analyze how historical memory in Colombia is reconstructed through graphic and verbal narration. The study provides a blueprint for examining the narrative representation of both individual and collective memories. While the act of remembering is universal, this process manifests in distinct modes such as recognizing, reminiscing, and reminding. To explore these modes in the graphic narratives, three critical aspects were considered: methods for eliciting and narrating marginalized memories, the verbal and pictorial representation of narrators, and the depiction of memories as narrators convey them.

The analysis of graphic narratives in this study revealed three distinct methods for activating and narrating memory. In *Historia gráfica*, a unique case composed of four graphic narratives, the strategies for activating memory can be summarized as “cultural and material ways to elicit and narrate memory.” These methods draw on the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, which employs material objects, cultural traditions, and oral histories to explore the past of rural villages on Colombia’s Atlantic coast. In these narratives, elements such as newspaper clippings, photographs of significant places and historical figures, and community-created maps are visually represented. These objects, often preserved in trunks by the communities themselves, are brought to life within the graphic narratives. They function as cultural tools that document and sustain the oral histories and collective memories of these communities. Oral traditions related to peasant struggles emerge as essential foundations for interpreting and understanding the stories depicted in the comics.

In contrast, *Sin mascar palabra* and *La Palizúa* illustrate distinct approaches to memory activation, linked respectively to space and time. In *Sin mascar palabra*, maps provide both geographical orientation and mnemonic cues. Although the graphic panels depicting key locations in *Tulapas* remain static, readers actively connect them, generating a sense of movement and narrative continuity. *La Palizúa*, on the other hand, foregrounds subjective time, centering on the narrator’s internal experiences. Visual elements—particularly the depiction of the narrator’s eyes—mark shifts in memory and emphasize changes in the story’s temporal structure.

The narrators in these graphic narratives are not isolated storytellers recounting their experiences for personal purposes. Instead, they serve as representatives of rural communities shaped by a violent past. Their memories, deeply rooted in their cultural context, must often be activated collaboratively. In *Historia gráfica*, for instance, the narrators’ accounts became more detailed and precise through community participation, incorporating images from the

communities and scholarly research. Similarly, in *Sin mascar palabra*, intergenerational storytelling complemented the narrators' accounts, activating collective memory through shared actions such as walking along a mapped route of significant locations. This process illustrates how memories from one generation could enrich those of another. Conversely, in *La Palizúa*, the narrator's solitary reflection before a camera underscored the challenges of recounting painful pasts in isolation. Here, analepsis—flashbacks—emerged as a key narrative device, requiring readers to piece together the story by interpreting visual changes in the narrator's appearance.

The study highlighted how the interplay of graphic and verbal elements throughout pages shapes readers' engagement with memory and history. What came to light here was the arrangement of the panels on each work's pages and how they relate to the way the past is depicted. In *Historia gráfica*, the use of two or three panels per page encourages quick reading, with each panel visually anchoring broad historical periods—from the Spanish conquest to 1970s peasant movements—through specific dates. This work attempts to cover different periods and significant events on the Atlantic coast community. Hence, each panel on the page refers to a unique event in the history of peasant struggles. This is done by placing the year or period in the past and by using descriptions in narratorial captions.

Sin mascar palabra and *La Palizúa* adopt more conventional comic grid layouts to construct sequential narratives that closely reflect spatial and temporal processes of memory retrieval. *Sin mascar palabra* uses a greater number of smaller panels, emphasizing spatial transitions between different settings and moments. This reflects how memory often shifts across places linked to lived experiences. Meanwhile, *La Palizúa* combines large and small panels to guide readers through changes over time, requiring careful attention to visual cues—such as changes in background details, character positions, and perspectives—to differentiate between past and present events. This narrative structure mirrors the non-linear nature of individual memory processes, in which recollections are mentally reconstructed rather than simply retrieved. Through these visual strategies, both comics invite readers to engage actively with the reconstruction of memory, blending space, time, and personal and collective testimonies into historical narratives.

While this study offers insights into the representation of historical memory work in documentary comics at three levels—covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives—several avenues for future research remain. A key limitation of the present research is the relatively small number of case studies, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. To build upon the results presented in this dissertation, future studies should incorporate larger and more

diverse samples of comics. Continued analysis of recent comics produced by the CNMH is recommended to validate and expand upon the mnemonic strategies identified in *Historia gráfica*, *Sin mascar palabra*, and *La Palizúa*. Additional strategies for eliciting and narrating memories of Colombia's violent past through comics may also be identified.

Additionally, the comics recently produced by the Truth Commission should be included in future studies. Following the Truth Commission's reports, 12 comics were created based on the findings. Although the Truth Commission calls these works graphic novels, a term with which this dissertation differs considerably, as it is a more commercial than academic label, it is worth studying the way in which a parallel is made between the findings in the commission's final reports and the way in which the testimonies of the victims of the conflict in Colombia are graphically narrativized. Here, it would be worthwhile to focus on the so-called "truth encounters" the commission held with victims of the violence, as well as with participating organizations, institutions, and researchers. What mnemonic modes were used, if any, or how the memories of the victims of the conflict were recovered, should be investigated.

Conducting similar studies with other comics could strengthen, validate, or challenge the generalizability of the findings presented in this dissertation. Future analyses should examine comics at the three levels outlined here: covers, paratexts, and graphic narratives. With the rise of new technologies, additional elements such as links and QR codes are increasingly incorporated as paratexts—or peritexts—within published works. These often lead to materials not included in the comics themselves but closely related to them, such as videos, other comics, detailed reports, or interviews, which provide additional perspectives and enrich the narratives presented in the comics.

As this study did not examine comics for children or young people, future research should investigate how schoolteachers use these works to design lessons on the Colombian conflict. It would be valuable to explore the teaching methodologies employed when comics are used to study historical memory, as well as how they influence students' engagement with the subject. Additionally, research could examine how comics enhance students' motivation to learn about Colombia's historical memory and how they foster participation in peace initiatives.

Future research should incorporate the perspectives of memory researchers, comic artists, and conflict victims to better understand how Colombian comics represent memory. Examining how these groups interpret the interplay between text, images, and lived experience can reveal biases and gaps in these representations, deepening insight into comics as tools for reconstructing historical memory.

8. References

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