

Listening at Uncanny Places

Forced Displacement and Torture as Silencing Processes

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Intense pain is world-destroying.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 1985¹



Figure 1: From Mampuján to Las Brisas, Montes de María, Colombia

Photo: Hermann Ruiz, 2010

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—INTRODUCTION

It was once a house, one among the few standing in this little town in the middle of the Colombian Caribbean Mountains. Half buried under mud and wild vegetation, the ruins of this town seemed to me reminders of a place that meant something for someone a few years ago. It was once a house like any other, a normal house. After the last massacre, the great majority of the survivors left the town and, as time passed and nobody was there to care about the place, the town turned into uncanny ghostly ruins.

Nonetheless, the walls were speaking to me. They were like mute shouting, like a speaking silence of a past that in the presence of those ruins becomes contemporary, actual. In front of those walls I realised how violence operates to silence and to give voice. In this article, forced displacement in a rural municipality of Colombia is described as a process of silencing. Forced displacement can be understood in this way when its structural similarities are compared with torture techniques. In forced displacement, as in torture, suffering and pain are forced upon the victims to erase their voice, their self, their world, while at the same time the voice of the torturer and their regime, their world is imposed. This comparison serves as a conceptual bridge, rather than an absolute equation of the two, but I argue that what is at stake in forced displacement is a collective capacity to live, perpetuate and recreate a meaningful world. An understanding of forced displacement as an act of world-silencing presents a challenge for legalistic, formal and 'pragmatic' ideas of justice. I propose, therefore, that doing justice in the context of forced displacement requires a project of an ethics for listening. This project involves understanding voice as an actualisation of a 'life-world'. Listening implies, then, to remain open to learn from and be changed by them.

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I was standing amid the ruins of Mampuján, in the ghost town featured in this article, in a world that refuses to entirely disappear. From there one starts to walk up the hills to get to Las Brisas, a *vereda* (rural locality) in the Colombian Caribbean inland. In Mampuján you can see a few empty houses without roofs, immersed in thick and tall grass, their lonely walls marked with the scars of bullets. The track

from Mampuján to Las Brisas opens with a deep and wet mud. The path itself is talking to us; it is a swamp you have to cross to go to the place of memory.

That day the families of victims were walking to meet in Las Brisas for the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of a massacre. In 2000, a paramilitary army came to Las Brisas and called out twelve farmers, one by one, by their names. The army killed the farmers in front of their relatives and friends, old and young, men and women. Paramilitaries chose an almond tree for the massacre site because it was a landmark for many community activities. Ten years later the survivors decided to commemorate the massacre at that same tree. Between 1999 and 2001 alone, paramilitary forces committed 138 massacres in Los Montes de María, the geographical region where Las Brisas and Mampuján are located. Two thousand people were murdered in those years and 120,000 fled.² Overall, according to the UNHCR, approximately four million people have been displaced in Colombia in just the last three decades, and the number is increasing.³ Many people in Las Brisas and Mampuján have abandoned their crops, animals and houses. Most now live in the closest cities and towns, working low-wage jobs there or for new industrial plantations.

I was involved in the commemoration, conducting research into transitional justice in Colombia. I walked with the families of the victims and several members of national and international social organisations and some institutions from the Colombian state. The friendly mood was accompanied with solemnity and serenity. The walk was not an easy one, at least not for a city boy like me (and most of the guests). We had to cross several high hills through muddy tracks. We walked for hours while I noticed teak crops covering the hills: a wood tree that, according to the people there, is grown to sell in international markets. Meanwhile, I talked with some members of the families.

People told me that small farmers had to sell or abandon their lands during the last ten years either under the continuing pressure of threats of violence or because, as they pointed out, it is now too expensive to produce and transport their harvest; industrial crops have raised prices in the region. There is a shortage of land on which to grow food and those who still live in the region have to buy food produced in other parts of the country or even expensive imported products.

After the ceremony of commemoration, we were invited to the house of one of the families that has decided to return despite the persistent threats. Almost one hundred people ate sancocho there. Sancocho is a kind of soup made with yucca, potato, corn, mandioca, yam, pork, beef and chicken—all produce from the family farm—cooked slowly on a wood fire in a communal pot. In Los Montes de María small crops like those in a sancocho were (and still are) celebrated. *Campesinos* (peasants) in Las Brisas and Mampuján held the ‘Yam Festival’ following a neighbouring town that celebrated the famous ‘Mango Festival’. These festivals were established to honour the *campesino* lifestyle where cultural assets and technical skills were shown and tested. People from Las Brisas lobbied regional governments and asked landlords to provide sponsorship. There was not a significant response from the local government, but landlords offered awards and gifts for the different categories in the contest. The categories included best food, best music, biggest yam and so on, with donated prizes such as seeds and animals, and all sorts of tools valued for peasant work. In the words of a political scientist working with the survivors from Las Brisas and other districts in Los Montes de María, this organisational capacity was (and still is, despite the threats and fear) quite dynamic:

There are places that strike you for some things. When I started to know more about San Cayetano [a rural district in Los Montes de María] that [the intense social organisation dynamics in the region] struck me ... *There are many organisations. Frequently you see new organisations. Of course, very few of them achieve their objectives, all directive boards changes constantly, nothing is formal, they struggle with each other all time ... but for sure there is a sense of sociability.*⁴ (Emphasis added)

In a letter published on a website edited by notable journalists, academics and human rights advocates, one of the survivor *campesinas* wrote:

With the massacre a whole social fabric was lost. The leadership was lost. One of those leaders lost in the massacre lobbied [the local government] to get the first school in the region, in Aguas Blancas, and then after in Las Brisas ... So he did get the official approval for the local council to build the road to Mampuján; he also got the health mission to come every month and got agriculture technical assistance from the regional government. He got the priest to hold masses, baptisms and even weddings. Likewise,

another of these leaders was a youngster who in his spare time tamed horses, donkeys and mules that the neighbours used for transporting heavy loads. And the leadership of cultural exchanges like the 'King of the Yams' was also lost.⁵

The Yam Festival represented the common life *campesinos* share, an economic system based on solidarity. The *campesino* life at Las Brisas was not romantic and heavenly. But, to make a life in this rural region an explicit and implicit set of understandings were necessary. These understandings, although under constant change, helped people make sense of the 'world' or, in fact, made up a 'world', the world of the *campesino* in Los Montes de Maria.

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To better comprehend the meaning of 'world' as used in this article, it is useful to look at Charles Taylor's ideas on 'moral order', 'background understanding', 'social imaginary' and 'life-world'. For Taylor, a moral order is the image of order societies make up of themselves. It is not necessarily the actual order. Instead, it is either a transcendental model through which to judge events of everyday life, or an immanent order to strive for here and now. Both in turn condition or frame our actions everyday. This socially constructed image of society, where actual actions are determined by what we believe we are and do, is what Taylor calls, from a Heideggerian tradition, background understanding. In Taylor's words:

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and 'accepted'; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice ... That's the very nature of what contemporary philosophers have described as the 'background'.⁶

Following Taylor, 'world' is a dynamic dialogue located in time and space between what a society (or any collective however we want to define it) sets for itself as its 'ought to be' and the actions that picture makes desirable and possible. This semi-

coherent and changing set of understandings is comprehensible as world. In the realm of the 'ought to be', people frame their understanding of others' behaviour (ethics) and of what the future and the past look like. I name this dialogue 'dreams' in the more popular sense of the term: goals in actual life that are followed in everyday desires and certainly in everyday actions by those who believe in them.

The argument followed in this article, then, steps aside from such long-term narratives of change as so masterfully described by Taylor. Instead of describing causalities from distant aggregated analysis, the concepts used here are chosen to make sense from a closer perspective of the particularities at stake in forced displacement. Arturo Escobar reminds us that it is necessary to call for:

greater sensitivity in capturing the intersubjective process of shared experience, the ways in which the world is always in the making, by focusing on the domain of everyday, immediate practical activity and on *the embodied and place-based lifeworld of practical and social life*.⁷
(Emphasis added)

In this sense I am wilfully and purposely hearing the embodied and place-based lifeworld of practical and social life in the terms I have just defined for world, as both a dream of a dignifying *campesino* life and the social relationships it makes possible.

This world becomes actual in everyday life through shared historically developed and place-grounded economic practices, like growing yams. These practices are fundamentally social, since they require diverse kinds of interactions and exchanges between people and their ecological surrounding. Political geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham in her critique of capitalocentrist conceptualisations of the economy clarifies that the 'economy [is] a site of decision, of ethical practices [and] all economic practices [are] inherently social and always connected in their concrete particularities to the 'commerce of being together'.⁸

To make these economic practices possible, people need to create, perpetuate and recreate a shared set of understandings (norms and values; that is, ethics) that make up the *campesino* world. As we shall see, these values are necessary for the reproduction of livelihoods. They are part of the economic practices themselves and also significant to the human experience in at least two senses: first, as the necessary social network that facilitates survival and to some degree wellbeing, and, second,

because they are constitutional elements of how we collectively make sense of the world. Place-based economic practices carry on in their everyday performance the actual recreation of a familiar world, a world that more or less makes sense. It, then, allows people to judge what is ethical and what is not. In this particular sense, the world of the *campesino* can be defined as a meaningful voice, since this world creates the conditions for meaningful social life.

During the Yam Festival, the contest for the biggest yam became particularly important. The same man won the contest for so many years people started to call him ‘The King of Yams’. For people in Las Brisas, he represented the ideal of the proud *campesino* lifestyle: ‘a worker man, passionate with his crop, good guy, generous’, someone in the region told me. To grow the biggest yams, he used to choose the best place in his piece of land to plant them: the best wind, the best water, the best earth. Yams need a lot of attention and care, and people say his wife used to complain he loved his yams more than he loved her.

The King of Yams was murdered in 2000 along with eleven other *campesinos*, in the massacre by paramilitaries we were commemorating that day. After the massacre, the King of Yams’ son fled to Bogotá, the capital city, leaving his wife and daughters. They in turn had to move to Cartagena, one of the biggest cities in the Caribbean Coast. The King of Yams’ daughter also fled. However, she decided to demand truth, justice and reparation through the Colombian Transitional Justice process (specifically through the juridical procedures provided by the 975 Act, or ‘Peace and Justice Law’). She decided—at least until the date of the commemoration—she would never work again on her father’s land. The terror of the massacre, the fear, the suffering and pain it produced, resulted in a silencing of the world of the *campesino*, of the *campesino* way of life.⁹ In the next section of this article, I trace the structural similarities between torture and forced displacement to show how these processes of silencing are at the same time processes of voicing the world of the torturer’s regime, of the torturer’s world.

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At the site of those abandoned houses, a place that was once someone’s home, I felt ‘uncanny’, ‘that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar’, in Sigmund Freud’s words.¹⁰ The houses were of a type of

basic architecture abundant in the Colombian lowlands: simple high-ceilinged square houses that a hard-working family can afford to build or buy. For the poorest, these houses are signs of wealth and prosperity, perhaps a kind of achievement that any farm worker dreams of. Now those very ruined and abandoned walls with bullet holes in them seemed to me markers of the negation of the *campesino's* familiar hopes and dreams, of the *campesino's* voice, of the *campesino* world. Standing there in front of those walls was to witness how the dream they shared became a realised threat, how it was silenced, and how those walls survive paradoxically as a reminder of both the dream and of the threat. A transformation of the familiar into something threatening happened in this context: a dignifying way of life represented by the King of Yams, the familiar dream for the *campesinos* of the region, was turned in a terrifying memory. The uncanny as a concept introduces the structural similarities between violent displacement and torture and so is useful for understanding forced displacement as a silencing process.

Yolanda Gampel has studied the concept of the uncanny in her analysis of child survivors of Nazi concentration camps. According to her theoretical description of the self in violent social contexts, individuals live under two polar backgrounds: the 'background of safety' and the 'background of the uncanny'.¹¹ Citing Joseph Sandler, she defines the background of safety as 'a feeling so much a part of us that we take it for granted as a background to our everyday experience'.¹² It is precisely this background that here I call a world. The King of Yams represented precisely what a *campesino* life should look like, a reference point to measure how close we are to getting it right, or not, in our quotidian lives. As a reference point, the King of Yams secured a stable guide, a more or less clear way to make sense of the everyday world. The background of the uncanny, on the other hand, comes to the surface when the perception of the world as making sense is lost, when terror distorts what we assume is certain. In Gampel's words:

the pain and terror of war and social violence often overwhelm and sometimes destroy our apparatus for perception and its representations because their terrible spectacles often paralyse our capacity for symbolization.¹³

It is in the paralysis of our psychic zones of certainty (our capacity for meaningful symbolisation), which turns what was once familiar into threats, that I see the roots

of the silencing process of terror that operates in both torture and forced displacement.

In furthering the discussion of uncanny places, our landscape now shifts from the Caribbean Mountains of Colombia to the torture rooms studied by Elaine Scarry. In Scarry's analysis of torture in contexts as diverse as Brazil, Greece and the Philippines, among others, she found that torture is also a process of silencing, or, in her words, of the 'prisoner's world dissolution'. According to Scarry, in torture contexts the purpose of several torture techniques and even torture rooms is to twist that which is familiar into horrible pain. As she points out, a room in a normal situation is one of the simplest forms of shelter and security, it resembles a benign potential for human life to grow and to be cared for. And there, in a place that resembles shelter and security, everything is transformed into a potential source of pain: walls, doors, chairs, tables, or any object located within it incites fear after torture. Many torture techniques quoted by Scarry are even named after well-known objects or institutions: 'the submarine', 'the telephone', 'the plane', 'the bridge', or 'the dance', 'the birthday party', 'the tea party' and so on.¹⁴

Two institutions in particular are shifted into pain-production machines: medicine and legal trials. The science developed to care for one's health is now a source of the very precise knowledge required to cause pain to the body and, more often than not, even surgical tools are used in torture techniques. On the other hand, as a simulation of an interrogation, torture resembles the quest for the truth and justice that trials are designed for, even while bombarding the prisoner with unanswerable questions that attempt only to demonstrate the absolute power of the torturer and the regime they represent.

According to Scarry, the interdependence of these two institutions in torture contexts gives torture its most powerful performance. In the torture's interrogatory processes (a resemblance of a trial) the torturer's questions are always followed by the wrong answers, since the answer is not what actually matters for the torturer. As Scarry reminds us, the slogans of South Vietnamese torturers synthesise what this technique is about: 'If you are not a Vietcong, we will beat you until you admit you are; and if you admit you are, we will beat you until you no longer dare to be one.'¹⁵ In this situation, torture represents the very negation of justice through its

mock trials where the torturer displays her attempt to gain absolute power over the victim.

But is in the use of the body as a source of pain (resembling medical procedures) that torture reaches its full-fledged performance. The body 'encloses and protects the individual within; [it puts] boundaries around the self, preventing undifferentiated contact with the world'.¹⁶ In torture our most intimate and familiar environment, our body, is turned into a source of suffering and pain. Our body is no longer within the reach of our autonomy. The self is thus radically split into body and mind, where the body becomes a stranger to the mind under the torturer's orders.

Our sense of justice and common sense and our bodies themselves, then, are turned into something unfamiliar and threatening under torture. Our bodies, our sense of rightness and care, our most intimate thoughts and beliefs, are shifted from the background of safety to the background of the uncanny. Along this shift, language, a master key of any social bond, loses its capacity to give an account of reality. In Scarry's words, 'intense pain is ... language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject.'¹⁷

The link between the world and language here becomes evident in two complementary senses: in a first move, it is possible to experience the world as familiar when we know the names of the things around us, but in return language provides the conditions for those things and their relationships to be understandable and meaningful. This interlocking link between the world and language is what I call 'voice', since language and the world together enable a historically and geographically referenced (though ever-changing) way to experience a meaningful everyday life. Seen from this point of view, torture and forced displacement share a similar structure and aim: through pain and fear, they both attempt to block subjects' ability to share and recreate more or less clear and stable understandings of how the world works; they both attempt to silence particular voices.¹⁸

These processes of silencing, however, do not result in the absolute absence of voice. For Scarry, in the case of torture there is an almost territorial war between the

world of the torturer and the world of the victim where the final aim is to install the torturer's voice in the victim, so replacing the latter's voice:

The torturer's questions—asked, shouted, insisted upon, pleaded for—objectify the fact that he has a world ... Part of what make his world so huge is its continual juxtaposition with the small and shredded world objectified in the prisoner's answers, answers that articulate and comment on the disintegration of all objects to which he might have been bonded in loyalty or love or good sense or long familiarity.¹⁹

George Orwell depicted a very convincing picture of this process. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell described how the pain and fear inflicted on Winston Smith, a dissident of the regime, by his torturer O'Brien, led Winston to betray his beloved. The purpose of Winston's torture was not exactly to make him give information to the regime. Rather, its purpose was to break Smith's sense of self-value after making him betray his lover and in so doing destroy his world as a meaningful reference. In this way, O'Brien was blurring the meaningful difference Winston wanted to maintain between himself and the regime. In the final stages of torture, when O'Brien was asking very evident questions and inflicting pain on Winston for not answering them 'correctly', O'Brien describes what torture is about:

No! Not merely to extract your confession, nor to punish you. Shall I tell you why we have brought you here? To cure you! To make you sane! Will you understand, Winston, that no one whom we bring to this place ever leaves our hands uncured? We are not interested in those stupid crimes that you have committed. The Party is not interested in the overt act; the thought is all we care about. We do not merely destroy our enemies; we change them. Do you understand what I mean by that?²⁰

After Winston comes out of the torture room and reintegrates into his everyday life, we see him absorbed in his inner mind in paternalistic dialogues with O'Brien. In torture, then, the violent act has a specific aim: to destroy the individuals' sense of the world and functionally integrate them as an object at the service of the torturer's regime; in other words, to make the individual speak with the voice of the regime.

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The massacre in Las Brisas was perpetrated in 2000, but the structural elements were only truly beginning to emerge half a decade later. When I was walking with the families of the people murdered in the massacre to the place where the tenth year commemoration was to be held, I asked them why the predominant crop in the region was teak. During the walk I was told that a few years after the massacre people from other regions had come to buy large amounts of land, growing teak on it to sell to international companies. They began to grow teak everywhere. During the last five or six years, people had begun to sell their lands; some because they had unaffordable loans, others because they were directly menaced or they were scared by the tacit paramilitary control all over the region, others still simply because everything was more expensive and agriculture was no long a means for survival. The meaningful world in which the King of Yams lived was a particular and explicit shared set of more or less stable understandings: a 'commerce of being together'.²¹ His murder sealed a definitive tendency in the way the next decade would transform the *campesino* economy. Now their social reality is mainly led by their interactions with the economic activities they have to perform in the city and at the new plantations.

Only very few families have returned to Las Brisas. A middle-age man originally from Las Brisas who fled after the massacres decided to return to his father's land a year before the commemoration. He and his family hosted at their farm all the guests attending the commemoration. When the man was asked in an interview for a local radio and TV station what his project in the region was about (given he faced all the potential risks of staying), he answered that he did not want to remain that poor and dirty *campesino* from the past. What he wanted, instead, was to become an agro-industrial entrepreneur. In a way, then, the dream of a proud *campesino* had shifted to a dream of becoming an agro-industrial entrepreneur.

There is no doubt the transformation of the region's economic landscape was a consequence of the massacres.²² And the shift in this man's language is of course a very legitimate way to survive and accommodate this new world brought about after massacres, displacement and dispossession, urbanisation, massive property concentration, industrial agricultural exploitation, proletarianisation of the peasant workforce and the breakdown of traditional social ties. Articulating an entrepreneurial discourse may be seen as a positive outcome after the horror: the

brave capacity of these people to keep living despite the restless violence. However, it must also be acknowledged that a new world, a new voice, a new sense was violently imposed by the paramilitaries and normalised afterwards in the world of agro-industries and the violent insertion of the region into the anonymous global market.

The Colombian state has tried to deal with gross mass violence during the last decade using policy tools from the legal field of transitional justice. In 2005, Álvaro Uribe's government sanctioned the 'Justice and Peace Act' after a peace negotiation with the most organised paramilitary armies. Under this law, members of illegal armed groups were allowed to pay less stringent penalties (or none) in exchange for surrendering their weapons, dismantling their military structures and confessing to their crimes. After many amendments to correct the Act's perpetrator's bias and the sanctioning of complementing laws during Juan Santo's government (specially the 'Land Restitution Act'), this legislation established the foundations for a transitional justice process in Colombia. In concordance with current global developments in peace building, contemporary transitional justice is based on the idea that, in cases of need for extraordinary justice, restorative justice should prevail over ordinary criminal justice. The idea of restoration focuses justice on the victim rather than on the perpetrator and its main aim is to re-establish the condition of fairness that existed before the crime.²³ Transitional justice in Colombia has been developed under this idea and a complex and ambitious attempt to restore *campesinos'* land is currently being designed and applied.²⁴

However, engaging in a politics of justice requires going further than formal land restoration, as necessary and strategic in the path to enduring justice as that is. I want to propose here, at least superficially, that in addition to land restoration, doing justice to the *campesino* world requires what I want to call an ethics of listening. As I define it here, listening involves being able to understand voice as the actualisation of a world, of a lifestyle, both as a contemporary choice and as bearer of heritage, tradition and belief. In this sense, listening is about being able to let a world (the world of 'prosperity' and 'entrepreneurship') be interpellated by the knowledge, experience and ethics of a *campesino* lifestyle that deserves to be listened to in just terms. The call here is for a meaningful encounter that opens the current ideological status quo to the potential for change under conditions of justice.

Transitional justice legislation in Colombia has opened the potential for such an exchange but it is still very far from achieving the actions demanded by this kind of sensibility. It is trapped by the constraints of inoperative bureaucracy and the continuing paramilitary control over the local and national political and economic landscape. First, paramilitary armies that still operate after the peace negotiation with the Uribe government continue to exert control over large regions of Colombia, especially along the Caribbean coast and inland. They have been constantly threatening *campesinos* who have campaigned for the restitution of their lands, and their threats have been actualised in many selective murders of *campesinos*' leaders. Institutions leading the process have declared themselves incapable to deal with the active paramilitaries who control important regions and institutions at both the local and the national level.²⁵

Second, transitional justice lacks political creativity. It is still inspired by a teleological notion of progress that is closed to meaningful engagements with non-capitalist economies. As we have seen, economic transformations are far from inclusive, democratic and fair processes. In Colombia, as in many other contexts, economic transformations are characterised by processes that silence existing life-worlds through forced displacement. Economic and political transformations that don't recognise this loss silence other narratives that make sense of every day life and then close the political spectrum to the possibility of learning from diverse life-worlds. Juan Manuel Santos, the current President of Colombia, states this in quite perspicuous terms: if in the past government Alvaro Uribe promoted and executed war policies under the rubric of 'democratic security', now is the time (as a necessary and logical step forward) to move forward to 'democratic prosperity'.²⁶ 'Prosperity' in the case of Las Brisas means, as shown in this article, 'entrepreneurship'; it means engaging with the global agro-industry sector and its new sociability. It thus means leaving behind the world of the *campesino*.

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I approached the wife of the King of the Yams to walk with her for a while on the way back to our transport down to the paved road from the house where the attendants to the commemoration had lunch and a bit of rest. After such a long day of intense social and emotional labour, her face naturally seemed tired. She had been

busy and it would have been inappropriate to talk to her during this delicate time with no interest in mind other than my research. But now, after the intense work was done, I dared to push her strength a bit further and ask her a few questions. She preferred not to talk to me about any of the details of her husband's murder or about how she and her children felt after the massacre. Her silence meant to me more than the usual challenges of academic research on violence. These can include how to deal with a pain that is not yours, how to evoke someone else's past without actualising the pain of traumatic memories, how to abstract theoretical conclusions about so deeply personal experiences. The King of Yams' wife's silence did indeed challenge my own distant position as a researcher and also radically challenged my own personal interest in matters such as her suffering. But, beyond this, rather than suggesting a recalibration of my research methodology—for instance, a resolve to approach her in such a way she would feel comfortable and trusting enough to talk openly—her silence meant to me something different from an invitation to follow a hidden story, to unveil her secrets, so to speak. It struck me that her silence, instead, triggered a continuing set of questions (that still haunts me) related to my own engagement in this whole research and political agenda; into silence as a sign of injustice.

This reflexive shift compelled me to engage more openly with my own story, with my own research agenda. How can you do justice to those whose voices have been silenced? How do you dwell in a place that is uncanny? What does an ethics of listening look like? In a way, this question demands a rethinking of the epistemological and political location of listening and silence. Habermasian communicative action theory has played a determining role in locating voice and speaking at the centre of democratic theory making and practice.²⁷ It is evident in the study of new social movements, which stress the fact that parliamentary representation limited the scope of participation and hence the voices of those who are not represented should find (and have found) new paths to enhance democratic dialogue.²⁸ From a different perspective, cultural and postcolonial studies also highlighted how those under colonial regimes suffered the loss of a genuine voice, and complicated the centrality of voice by theorising about the complexity of speaking of the subaltern subject.²⁹ Similarly, some feminist scholarship has focused largely on how the voices of women have been silenced in the public arena, which in

turn demands rethinking the conditions of speaking in contemporary democratic philosophy and politics.³⁰ And it is with great political strength that the idea of voice became key to the political theory behind the South African Post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its therapeutic talking cure, which aims to heal the wounds of the past in order to enter in a new democratic future where all voices are included. But it is precisely around TRC and analogous processes that studies of memory and trauma began to challenge the political centrality of voice. These challenges complicated the location of voice as the only active agent in communicative exchanges and hence the epistemological and political relevance of letting silence be inserted into reflections on violence, politics and subjectivity.³¹ Silence in some contexts was not purely the outcome of terror, but also the active resistance of some victims, especially women, to participation in the TRC's hearings; they refused to make their intimate, immediate and singular experience of suffering a political tool, which in turn became a rhetoric gesture in its own right.³² Feminist rhetoric studies went beyond the challenge silence put on the centrality of voice and started to develop a conceptualisation of active listening as being as necessary for democratic communication as voice itself.³³

The insights of this feminist rhetoric school are certainly a key for me to explore the kind of listening demanded from me by the massacre, the silencing of the world of the *campesino* and the specific silence of the King of the Yam's wife. They propose a listening process that to some extent I felt I was myself going through. In summarising some of the core elements of the kind of listening process the feminist rhetoric school suggests, it is possible to highlight their shared idea that because of the prevalence of voice in Western philosophy and politics, listening must be relocated from being understood as a subordinate of voice to being understood as its constitutive counterpart. Such relocation requires conceiving of listening as equally active as speaking, which, in turn, demands from us a cultivation of certain dispositions to recalibrate our capacity for listening. One of these dispositions is openness, the capacity of letting oneself dwell in the world of the other, an attempt to make sense of her words in their own particular historical, political, cultural and economic location. A necessary consequence of being open is that one expose oneself to be affected by the world of the other, a disposition that in consequence exposes us to uncertain outcomes. This uncertainty is populated by possibilities that

otherwise wouldn't be visible or audible. In this way, dwelling in the other's world and letting one self be exposed to new possibilities is a transformative experience.

I find this theoretical proposal pertinent for the kind of listening I am following. Although the feminist rhetoric school's focus is mainly on the interaction between voice and listening, some scholars have extended this exploration to contexts where the counterpart of listening is not voice but silence. Studying Aspasia, the renowned intellectual companion of Pericles whose words were nonetheless never registered, Melissa Ianetta suggests that listening to silence (or absence of speech) is an invitation to reflection, an indeed creative process of story-making which must be loyal to the context silence inhabits, but also to the intensity of silence and its resonance in the one who listens. Ianetta's work evokes what this silencing process triggered in me. My experience in Los Montes de Maria compelled me to undertake not just a scholarly descriptive task, where my focus would be on scrutinising the other's suffering, but also my own reflexive journey. It compelled me to write not only the story of the massacre, but also the story of my dwelling in this silence and how it changed the way I made sense of what I saw and heard, a change that now inhabits my writing.

—CONCLUSION

The project sketched in this article, then, states that listening is a process that requires us first to recognise that the silencing of terror happens at the level of world-views where the voice and silence of the victims and survivors are located. In consequence, it demands that we dwell in their world so we may be able to have a glimpse of the depth of their loss and the significance of their silence. This depends on our capacity to be open to the possibility of thinking and writing from a reflection on the way such silence becomes meaningful.

This reflective approach provided me with the tools to relate to the massacre in Las Brisas in a way that revealed the intimate relationship between (a) the meaning of the world and voice and (b) the conceptual similarities of forced displacement and torture. Once this relationship is considered, the conditions under which terror transforms that intimate and familiar relationship into an uncanny threat take on a larger sense: pain, fear and suffering in these cases restrain and reshape the victim's world meaning-creation ability. In this process, the voice of the torturer, which in a

second stage reveals itself as the voice of the post-paramilitary agro-entrepreneur, is forced upon the victim.

In the aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust, and specially after the popularisation of the post-apartheid South African TRC model, doing justice to the victims of mass violence requires a political stance that supports an ethics of listening to the victim's voice. I propose to further the way courts and TRCs relate to testimony, the most immediate actualisation of voice. From the perspective of the listening project advanced in this article, it becomes evident that doing justice to the victims of forced displacement requires both providing the conditions that enable victims to maintain, create and recreate a meaningful world, and being able to meaningfully dwell in their world to the extent that this experience changes those listening—which is the same as saying that those who listen, learn. Such work can't be done through legislation alone. It needs a specific sensibility, one that enables those involved (victims and those in search for a more just world) to change in fair terms. Seeking change through meaningfully listening at the world of those who have been silenced is a project for an active ethics against terror.

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—NOTES

¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1985p. 29.

² Verdad Abierta, 'Un pulso a las verdades en los Montes de María', <http://www.verdadabierta.com/gran_especial/montes_de_maria/montes_de_maria.html>.

³ UNHCR, 'Un Nuevo informe de ACNUR destaca que el desplazamiento forzado es el mayor en los últimos 18 años', UNHCR, 19 June 2013 <<http://www.acnur.org/t3/noticias/noticia/un-nuevo-informe-de-acnur-destaca-que-el-desplazamiento-forzado-es-el-mayor-de-los-ultimos-18-anos/>>.

⁴ Interview by the author, 27 September 2010. The interviewee prefers to remain anonymous.

⁵ See Anonymous, 'Mi Verdad Sobre Mampuján', *Verdad Abierta*, 22 July 2010, <<http://www.verdadabierta.com/victimas-seccion/reconstruyendo/2582-mi-verdad-sobre-mampujan>>.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, London, 2007, pp. 172–3. In his exegesis of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Hubert Dreyfus points out:

For Heidegger primordial understanding is know-how. 'When we are talking ontically we sometimes use the expression 'understanding something' with the signification of 'being able to manage something', 'being a match for it', 'being competent to do something.' I know how to go about what I am doing, I am able to do what is appropriate in each situation. And just as affectedness reveals things as threatening, or interesting, and possibilities as indifferent, attractive, etc.; understanding reveals some actions as doable, as making sense, and others as not, or, better, it does not reveal these other possibilities as possibilities at all. (Herbert. L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, London, 1991, pp. 184–5.)

This definition provides a less stringent and essentialist definition of 'background understanding', 'world' and 'community'. This article, then, engages with the reworking of these concepts from rethinking Heidegger's philosophy. Landmark texts in this debate are the oeuvres of Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben and Alan Badiou, among others.

⁷ Arturo Escobar, 'Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization', *Political Geography*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2001, pp. 139–74.

⁸ J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2006. Gibson-Graham draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's reconceptualisation of 'community' to build her

definition of 'community economies' from a feminist, poststructuralist and anti-essentialist approach. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000.

⁹ Garcia and Chaparro define this process in Los Montes de Maria as 'descampenizacion', by which they mean the active violent forces against the *campesino* lifestyle, this last one defined as a 'subjectivity that has aspired to have an autonomous life through managing the land independently', Juan F. García and Lina Chaparro, *La Reparación Integral de las Víctimas en 2011*, CitPAX, Observatorio Internacional DDR—Ley de Justicia y Paz, Bogotá, 2012, p. 32. Their account is a very detailed study of the characteristics of the dynamics of violence that led to the contemporary transformation of the human geography of the region. They trace patterns of forced displacement and resettling from colonial times. Rather than offering a strict sociohistorical account of the forced displacement in Los Montes de María, in this article I'm interested in the affect my personal experience triggered in the presence of the ruins of Mampuján and how I made sense of that experience. This article is about the conceptual tools I put together to establish a dialogue with that world and the possibility, then, of an ethics for listening.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985.

¹¹ Yolanda Gampel, 'The Prevalence of the Uncanny in Social Violence', in Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

¹² Joseph Sandler, *From Safety to Superego: Selected Papers of Joseph Sandler*, Karnac, London, 1987, p. 2, quoted in Gampel, p. 55.

¹³ Gampel, p. 55.

¹⁴ Scarry, pp. 41–3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁸ Here is necessary to highlight that 'the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community' (Dreyfus, p. 90), or a 'world', is what allows any member of a particular community to find a place in the world, to have a position towards it. This position is clearly opposed to what I saw as the effect of silence, the main aim of which is to erase such an autonomous position in order to replace it with another imposed one. Since this imposition is a silencing process, I call the autonomous standing towards the world a particular 'voice'. The coherence of the community that is bound by common beliefs and so forth, is an immensely relevant debate. Community conceptualised as a constrained exclusive group may carry the seeds of non-negotiable and potentially violent antagonisms. For a more nuanced exploration of this dimension of community see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008. For an exploration on how a concept of community can host diversity, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000.

¹⁹ Scarry, p. 36.

²⁰ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Penguin, London, 2008, p. 256.

²¹ Nancy, p. 74. Quoted in Gibson-Graham, p. 55.

²² For accounts of this and similar transformations of the economic landscape in other regions of Colombia, see Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *La Masacre de El Salado: Esa Guerra no es Nuestra, Bogotá: Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación*, Bogotá, 2009; Juan Felipe García And Lina Chaparro. 'La Reparación Integral a las Víctimas en 2011', CitPAX, Observatorio Internacional DDR, Ley de Justicia y Paz, 2012; Juanita León, 'Las Tierras de la Posguerra: Los Nuevos Dueños de los Montes de María', in *La Silla Vacía*, 21 November 2009 <<http://www.lasillavacia.com/historia/5346>>; Alfredo Molano Bravo, 'Carimagua Inc.', 21 February 2008 in *El Espectador* <<http://www.elespectador.com/opinion/columnistasdelimpreso/alfredo-molano-bravo/columnacarimagua-inc>>; and Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008.

²³ Literature on transitional justice is certainly prolific. Unfortunately, most of it is trapped in debates about the effectiveness of policy making. For a more conceptual and structured description of transitional justice as an idea, see Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.

²⁴ See <<http://www.restituciondetierras.gov.co>>.

²⁵ Semana. 'Restitución de Tierras: ¡Ojo a Las Víctimas!', *Semana*, 14 July 2012, <<http://www.semana.com//nacion/articulo/restitucion-tierras-ojo-victimas/261180-3>>.

²⁶ In Colombia, governments have to design a 4-year plan of action called a 'Plan de Desarrollo' (development plan). Santos titled his Plan de Desarrollo 'democratic prosperity' (following Uribe's 'democratic security'). The plan was structured by five 'growth' trains, as they were called in the official document, but President Santos referred to them in public speeches as 'prosperity trains'. National Planning Department, *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2010–2014. Prosperidad para todos*, National Planning Department, Bogotá, 2010. See also Sistema Informativo del Gobierno, *Hemos Puesto en Marcha el tren de la Prosperidad, afirmó el Presidente Santos*, Sistema Informativo del Gobierno, Bogotá, 2010.

²⁷ The obvious reference here is Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1984.

²⁸ One of the foundational texts on this scholarship is Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, New York, Paris, 1981.

²⁹ See for example the ground breaking article by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, : University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1988; or the powerful book by Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 2004.

³⁰ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Thinking Gender, Routledge, New York, 1990.

³¹ Significant works on this field include Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, JHU Press, Baltimore, 2000; Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph, 'Re-Placing Pasts, Forgetting Presents: Narrative, Place, and Memory in the Time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, pp. 198–212; Allen Feldman, 'Memory Theatres, Virtual Witnessing, and the Trauma-Aesthetic', *Biography*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2004, pp. 163–202. doi:10.1353/bio.2004.0030; Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar, *The Invisible Corner: Essays on Violence and Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, VDM Verlag, Berlin, 2009.

³² See the very insightful article by Katherine Mack, 'Hearing Women's Silence in Transitional South Africa: Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*', in Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe (eds), *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2011. On the philosophical and political complexities of testimony, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York, 1999.

³³ Here, and in the following paragraph, I am specifically referring to Susan Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict, and Citizenship*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1996; Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, Routledge, London, New York, 1990; Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe (eds), *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2011; Krista Ratcliffe, 'Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a "Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct"', *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1 December 1999, pp. 195–224. doi:10.2307/359039. For a very pertinent critique of the potentially disempowering uses of a theory of listening, see Justine Lloyd, 'The Listening Cure', *Continuum*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2009, pp. 477–87. doi:10.1080/10304310903003288.

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