

Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars: Notes for a Decolonization of Listening

María del Rosario Acosta López | ORCID: 0000-0002-8731-2124

Professor, Department of Hispanic Studies, University of California,
Riverside, Riverside, CA, USA

mariadelrosario.acostalopez@ucr.edu

Abstract

This paper proposes to reflect self-critically on an ongoing research project entitled “Grammars of listening,” which started as a philosophical approach to the question of listening at the site of trauma and the challenges this kind of listening poses to our conceptions of memory and history, and has recently shifted to asking about the possible limitations to such a reflection when confronted with a decolonial perspective on temporality. I start by presenting a conceptual background for my inquiry, and asking what kind of listening is required when trauma is considered as a colonizing form of violence – that is, when its effects are not only understood as an assault on life but on the conditions of production of sense that make life legible. Following the kind of challenges that such an understanding of trauma poses to the responsibility to listen to its testimony, the paper moves on to propose that only a decolonial approach to listening can truly do justice to the task of rendering testimonies of traumatic violence audible. By decolonizing the frameworks that organize and determine colonial and colonizing distributions of sense, I propose that grammars of *lo inaudito* understood as decolonial grammars contribute to resisting and disorganizing the criteria for legibility and audibility that colonizing forms of violence not only institute but constantly actualize in their attempt to perpetuate their silencing power.¹

1 The first version of this essay was presented as opening keynote at the I Congreso Internacional de Estudios Latino Americanos y del Caribe, organized by REC Latino América y el Caribe, at Universidad del Norte and Universidad del Atlántico in November of 2019 in Barranquilla, Colombia, and has been published in Spanish in *Eidos* 34 (2020). For this updated and edited version in English, I thank Julian Rios-Acuña for his excellent translation, and Benjamin Brewer for his patient and careful copy-editing.

Keywords

trauma – audibility – listening – colonizing forms of violence

• • •

saber lo que pasa
lo que se puede saber
mientras se ve pasar
lo que puede pasar
pero no ha pasado
pero va a pasar
eso se va a saber
pero no es lo que pasa
lo que hay que saber
es lo que nunca pasa.

DANIEL WINOGRAD²

• •

What does it mean to claim that the world is “in crisis,” or to speak of the role of philosophy in a “time of crises”? I would like to start this paper by putting in question the very title that gathers us in this special issue, and to ask whether, instead of a time of “world-crises,” we should rather push the question in a different direction, perhaps, and ask about the world in a “crisis of time.” Following the work that decolonial feminist philosophers have been developing over the last few decades, I would like to stress the need to start asking, first, what notion of the *present*, of time and temporality, is at stake in suggesting *a* time – *this* time? Which? Where? – as a time *of* crises.³ Noting that

2 to know what happens / what can be known / while one sees it happening / what can happen / but hasn’t happened / but it will happen / it will be known / but it is not what happens / that must be known / it is what never happens. (Unpublished).

3 I am thinking particularly here of the work by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and her emphasis on a completely different perspective on temporality and history coming from the entanglement between traditions that do not fit, and resist being reduced to, traditional Western and colonial conceptions of time (cf. *Un mundo chi’xi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2018). See also the recent work by Yuderkis Espinosa Miñoso, “El futuro ya fue: Una crítica a la idea del progreso en las narrativas de liberación sexo-genérica

the question of a “present crisis” hastily presupposes that, perhaps not long ago, there was a time not in crisis, I would like to start by asking which notion of history leads us to stress and read “our” time in terms of crises. Who is this “we” presupposed in this “current view” of the world? And what other worlds have made possible, supported and sustained this idea? What other worlds of sense, and what other notions of temporality, have been excluded from, while also escaping and resisting, the language of “crisis”? Might these other worlds invite us to think differently about the connections among time, “our” present, and what weaves and keeps the world “together,” in spite of, beyond, or even parallel to what some of us perceive today as a *world in crisis*.

This perspective has recently challenged my work in fundamental ways, and I would like this paper to be, in that sense, an exercise in self-critique.⁴ In a recent project, entitled “Grammars of Listening,” I’ve been dealing with questions of memory and history in connection to what I describe as a philosophical perspective on violence and trauma – more precisely, on what I analyze as “traumatic forms of violence.”⁵ The project, which started mostly as a reflection on the question of listening at the site of trauma and the challenges this kind of listening poses to our conceptions of memory and history,⁶ has recently shifted to asking about the possible limitations that a confrontation with a decolonial perspective on temporality reveals in such a reflection. This has also led me to reconsider critically the very notion of trauma and its relation – both implications and differences – to colonial forms of violence, and more specifically, to the violence of coloniality.⁷

y queer identitarias del Abya Yala,” in *Andar erótico descolonial*, ed. M. Ferrera-Balanquet (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Signo, 2015), 21–38, and, in conversation with Espinosa, Rocío Zambrana’s approach (cf. “Dystopie et contre-mémoire décoloniale et afro-pessimiste: Réflexions autour de Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso et Saidiya Hartman,” in *Utopie et dystopie dans l’imagination politique*, eds. O. Frausto and A. Montes Montoya (Paris: L’Harmattan, forthcoming).

4 I thank Daniela Vallega-Neu and the editorial board of *Research in Phenomenology* for inviting me to reflect on this question for this special issue.

5 The book is forthcoming in Spanish (cf. Acosta López, 2023) and a version in English is in preparation to be published by Fordham University Press. For a recent brief description of the current state of the project, see the presentation for The Royal Institute of Philosophy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwxg43tZVVM&t=1708s>).

6 Cf. María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de la escucha: aproximaciones filosóficas a la construcción de memoria histórica,” *Ideas y Valores* LXVIII: 5 (2019): 59–79.

7 Following here specifically the analysis of “coloniality” posed by Aníbal Quijano (“Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1:3 (2000): 533–580) and continued by authors like María Lugones, (cf. “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22:1 (2007): 186–209), and Alejandro Vallega, (cf. *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* (Bloomington: Indiana University

By writing this paper as a somewhat autobiographical exercise, I would like, first, to make explicit the difficulties we often face in academic philosophy in carrying out a fundamental turn regarding our place of enunciation, very connected indeed to the questions I posed at the beginning of this paper and the relation – and disconnection – between an inquiry into a time of world-crises and a perspective that stresses the importance of asking instead about ‘crises of time.’ Second, I want to push my thinking further in its conversation with a decolonial perspective on temporality and the effects of that conversation on the question of listening, both in the context of trauma as colonizing and of colonial forms of violence as (possibly) traumatic. In recognizing the limits of my initial project in light of what I call, in the section two of this paper, “strategies for the decolonization of listening,” I would like to explore the critical value of seeking, identifying, and producing alternative grammars of listening in light of their decolonizing potential.⁸ As I begin to develop at the end of this paper, for a truly radical form of listening to be even possible, one needs first to ask what form of memory and what kind of history are at stake in the act of listening itself, as well as what forms of resistance and invention might render audible times – another time, but also historical time – that remain yet to be heard.

This essay is thus organized into two main sections. In the first, I will start by presenting in very broad strokes the trajectory that brought me to the question concerning the relation between listening, history, and memory. This trajectory begins with the experience of being philosophically challenged by my work on historical and liberatory memory, which led me to formulate the project of “grammars of listening” as a philosophical approach to the question of memory after trauma. Presenting this trajectory will allow me to inquire

Press, 2014)). Of particular importance, in the case of the latter, see his analysis – via Quijano – of the coloniality of time.

- 8 This exercise in self-criticism would have not been possible without the invitation of many students and former students throughout these years to think critically and beyond my own philosophical references and categories. I specially thank Miguel Gualdrón, Amelia Hruby, Paula Landerreche, Brooklyn Leonhardt, Cindy Marrero-Ramos, Juan Diego Pérez, Gustavo Quintero, Julian Rios-Acuña, Jaime Santamaría, Rachel Silverbloom and all the participants of the seminar dedicated to my work at UC Irvine in April of 2019 organized by Isabella Vergara and Carlos Colmenares. The publication of all the contributions to this seminar can be found in the special issue of the journal *Ideas y Valores*, “Filosofía y Conflicto: Voces Femeninas,” LXVIII:5 (2020): 223–283. My conversations and exchanges of texts with Alejandra Azuero, Ben Brewer, Diego Cagüñas, Alejandro Cortés, Zakkiyah Iman Jackson, Miriam Jerade, Axelle Karera, Alejandro Martín, Rosaura Martínez, Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús, Aicha Messina, Esteban Restrepo, Omar Rivera, Alejandro Vallega and Rocío Zambrana have also been fundamental.

into the possibilities for rethinking the connection between listening and memory – indeed, for rethinking the project as a whole – from a decolonial perspective, or at least with a view towards the decolonization of the critical epistemological and aesthetic devices that allowed me to formulate the question in the first place.

1 Grammars of *lo inaudito*: a Philosophical Approach to the Question of Listening to ‘Traumatic Violence’

The question of listening was raised in my philosophical work in connection with practical experiences in the construction of historical memory, or what, more recently, in coordination with police torture survivors in Chicago, has been described as “liberatory memory work.”⁹ The second designation is, in my view, a description of the effects that historical memory work brings to communities; that is, the fact that, in practice, the task of building historical memory translates into emancipatory work.¹⁰ This is especially important when working with survivors of a type of violence that I will broadly call here “traumatic.” By trauma I do not mean a diagnosis that pathologizes the survivor, determining beforehand their role – generally passive – in their own process of healing. I mean rather a particular type of experience, or better, a particular *structure* of experience that, in its devastating effects, profoundly *colonizes* the subjectivities, identities, bodies, and languages it cuts through.¹¹

9 I particularly thank Jarrett Drake for introducing this concept in the work with the community. Cf. “From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and Back Again: Towards a Liberation Theology for Memory Work,” *Reflections from the 2016 Mandela Dialogues*, 2017. See also for a detailed reflection on liberatory memory as a politicized form of healing, Elizabeth Deligio and Troy Harden, “Politicized Healing: Addressing the Impact of State Sponsored Violence,” *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* 12:2 (2021): 1–12.

10 By my experience working with historical memory I concretely refer to my participation in the elaboration of reports for the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Center for Historical Memory) with communities of survivors of paramilitary violence in Colombia, as well as to a project in the city of Chicago with survivors of police torture (Cf. Chicago Torture Justice Center (<http://chicagotorturejustice.org/>) and the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (<https://chicagotorture.org/>)). For a more detailed report on this work, my participation in it, and the history of the connections between the two, cf. María del Rosario Acosta López, “Haciendo memoria: la “Memoria Histórica” en Colombia y sus legados” in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. M. R. Acosta López (The World Humanities Report: South America (CHCI), forthcoming).

11 This is not to deny that there are also structural causes and forms of violence that operate on everyday life, and that this complicates the distinction between the “exceptionality”

Thus, the difficulties that arise in listening to testimonies of traumatic forms of violence have to do, on the one hand, with the fact that violence here not only springs from structural causes but is normalized, giving shape to the spaces we inhabit, instituting silences, and covering over the causes that might allow us to clarify its historical effects. On the other hand, violence in these contexts deeply traverses and affects the very possibility of *production of sense*. Sense should be understood here broadly, both at the level of our senses and of our capacity for meaning making. I thus interpret traumatic violence as colonizing, because *it is not only an assault on life but on the conditions of production of sense that make life legible*. By production of sense I mean both aesthetic and epistemological frameworks, that is, both the modes of perception and the conceptual structures that are required for any form of listening to be even possible – if listening means offering a site where one's story is not only heard but believed, and thus not only received but understood.

In this context, a philosophical approach to trauma can be a fruitful way to intensify the resonances of something which recent approaches have tried to make audible, above all in literary studies. I refer here to the critical relation between trauma as a specific modality of experience and the conditions of possibility for its audibility (entangled, as I want to show, with the conditions of possibility for its legibility), which include the conceptions of history and memory that accompany it, and that are radically challenged by it. If, as Cathy Caruth proposes, we follow Sigmund Freud closely in texts like *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, what we encounter in trauma is not really the diagnosis of a particular pathology. Even further, trauma presents us with a limit case to the very criteria – i.e., the priority of the pleasure principle and its “economies” – that, until then, had been utilized for any form of diagnosis. This is because one of the great difficulties that arises in the very possibility of listening to the voice that speaks to us from out of trauma, is that in cases of the so

of trauma and what Lauren Berlant calls the “overwhelming ordinary” or “crisis ordinariness” (*Cruel Optimism* [Duke University Press, 2011], 10). I agree with Berlant that sometimes the “exceptionality” of trauma is used to hide and erase these overwhelming ordinary forms of violence, and that it is essential for a critical historical outlook to “put catastrophe back into the ordinary” (Ibid, 54). However, I would also like to insist on the extra-ordinary character of some forms of violence, and particularly of their effects on someone's life, as well as on the conditions of meaning production and the tools that are available to make sense of these lives. If we let go this exceptionality, we also lose the critical capacity to signal, name, denounce and even historicize (I would argue here against Berlant) what otherwise remains erased and quieted down from experience. I would say that, like Berlant, I am looking for the “genres” that can turn into historical experiences (into “events” in the language of Berlant (cf. Ibid, 16)) the kinds of violence that, without a genre, remain untold – unheard, inaudible.

called “traumatic neurosis” one cannot appropriately or strictly speak about an “experience” being communicated: its usual structures do not apply, not even the usual breakdowns of these structures, and thus it is the very idea of a structure of experience, itself, that seems to have to be put into question. The original event that triggered the traumatic reaction has not yet been integrated and processed as an event, as something that *has* happened and *has* been experienced. The event is therefore not available, not even to the survivor; it is not yet *localizable* and has not been turned into memory. Thus, in Caruth’s words, “what returns to haunt the victim ... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way its violence *has not yet been* fully known.”¹²

The cause of traumatic neurosis, according to Freud, is an omission or absence in the formation or production of “anxiety” at the moment of receiving the force of the impact of an external stimulus. The mind is not ready to process the event, and therefore its impact is immediate and determinant but unlocalizable. The event thus leaves an indelible mark in the mind of whoever perceives it, but, insofar as it does not reach the usual channels that would permit its “working through” [*durcharbeiten*], it does not leave behind, nor could it reach, the “mnemonic traces” that would make it possible to localize it and reach it as a memory later on.¹³ The repetition compulsion that some survivors of trauma experience stems from this: “the wish to conjure up what has been forgotten and repressed”¹⁴ is linked in these cases to a structural *deferral* (the *latency* of the traumatic experience) that turns the event (the initial accident) into something that *has always already been deferred because, strictly speaking, it has not yet been experienced*. What is thus at stake is an event that, insofar as it is obsessively and repetitively *present*, cannot simply be left behind, though the mind cannot translate it in the *past* as a memory. The only possible access to such an event is the compulsive repetition of the originary fright that marks or refers to the *absence* of an experience – its unprocessed character – rather than to an experience as such.

Trauma, in this reading of Freud, shows itself as a paradoxical encounter between *an absence and an excess of memory*.¹⁵ It interrupts the mechanisms that usually make it possible to explain the transition from event to memory through a linear (narrative) conception of experience. The “too soon” of the

12 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 6.

13 Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *Selected Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 267–8.

14 *Ibid.*, 269.

15 Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma. Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 157.

happening of the event is conjugated here with the “too late” of the possibility of its integration, giving rise to a *paradoxical form of temporality*. Furthermore, beyond Caruth, and getting ahead of myself to what in the second part of this essay I will examine in greater detail following Frantz Fanon, we encounter here what I want to describe as the *colonizing* dimension of trauma. In Freud’s analysis, not only is the traumatic experience related to a violent irruption in the psyche, and with it the establishment of its violence as “unforgettable,” but it also brings with itself the additional element of the *erasure* of the traces of the original violent irruption. This ensures the establishment of such original violence as definitive precisely because of its inaccessibility or, following Rottenberg, its unlocatability.¹⁶ Hence, this rereading of Freud in a “literary” and “philosophical” key offers a description of his analysis of trauma as an experience that breaks every traditional epistemology and aesthetics by radically putting into question the very concept of “experience” and the spatio-temporal structures that make it possible. At the same time, it introduces the idea of a type of violence (which I’ve been calling here traumatic violence) whose lodging in the psyche goes together with its capacity for erasing the traces of its transgression. *In this way, traumatic violence renders its own causes inaccessible (unlocalizable), and in doing so, ensures that these causes are all the more effective.*

In this way, if rather than exclusively attending to the structure of the (non-) experience of trauma (of its latency and compulsive repetition), we attend to the ways in which this experience finds its own modes of expression and communicability, we would have to say, reformulating Caruth, that attempts to listen to testimonies in such contexts encounter the paradoxical combination of an *absence and an excess of sense*. Furthermore, trauma brings about a breakdown of the usual frameworks through which we make sense of the world. This breakdown is not due to a sort of “incapacity” of the mind affected by trauma; it is rather caused by what Nelly Richard aptly describes as a “catastrophe of meaning.”¹⁷ There are certain types of violence, Richard argues, that cause “the collapse of traditional categorial orders.”¹⁸ This collapse causes all the habitual contours of thought and usual modes of comprehension to tremble. At the same time, the *absence* of sense that both the testimony and its listening encounter, in the case of traumatic experiences, gets entangled with the unprecedented, unheard-of form of violence for which there is not

16 Cf. Elizabeth Rottenberg, “Freud’s Other Legacy,” *Parrhesia* 21 (2014): 13–22.

17 Nelly Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs* (Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

18 Nelly Richard, *Fracturas de la memoria. Arte y pensamiento crítico* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007), 13.

yet an adequate language because its excess has not yet been made intelligible. Once again, we are dealing here with a colonizing violence because it seeks to saturate every space for the production of sense and to strip those subjected to it of any possibility of participating in this production other than by means of an operation of subtraction.¹⁹

Traumatic violence, however, not only performs a radical destruction of sense and “disarming of meaning”²⁰ making it literally impossible for the survivor to bear witness to it by means of an already given language or available form of representation; it also introduces new senses, unthought, and previously unimagined realities, thus producing a radical change in the ontological composition of reality – of its unimagined possibilities and potentialities. This new ontological composition confronts us with what Hannah Arendt, referring to the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, described as an “abominable originality.”²¹ Not only are these realities abominably original, but their originality is also meant to remain unthought, hidden. This is accomplished, above all, through the pernicious – because particularly successful – strategy of stripping these unprecedented realities of their audibility in a regime of the perceptible and the intelligible controlled and determined in advance by violence, such that whatever becomes legible does so only within a regime dependent on hiding and erasing the traces of the very violence that it makes possible.

19 It is important to keep in mind here that while this is the goal of a colonizing form of violence, it does not necessarily succeed in doing so. I'll address the invention and resistance entailed in decolonizing strategies in the second section of this essay.

20 Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 5.

21 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt: New York, 1967), 441. What I consider central in Arendt's analysis is her emphasis on the fact that there are certain forms of violence that change the ontological structure of reality not only affecting what is, but even the conditions of possibility of what is (in the second section of this text I analyze this in greater detail with Fanon's help). Every time violence is elevated to this ontological dimension, it introduces something unprecedented that radically challenges our capacity to think it, name it, and therefore listen to it in the testimonies of its survivors. However, the emphasis on the unprecedented character of the violence of the Nazi concentration camps seems to go hand in hand in Arendt with the erasure of the equally unprecedented character of other historical violences, much older than the death camps. I am speaking here of such violences as the genocide of native-American peoples during colonization and the trade of slaves from Africa to America – as well as the practices of slavery perpetuated in the colony – between the 15th and the 19th centuries. Arendt's notion of the “unprecedented” is marked, one could say, by a profoundly colonial historical blindness (and I would insist this is the case in spite of her analysis of colonialism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*). I thank Miguel Gualdrón for insisting on this aspect of my reading of Arendt, and on the necessity of its critical revision in light of my project and its process of gestation.

At this point, a new dimension of the problem of listening is revealed, one no longer exclusively ethical but also, one could say, epistemological. Or, what is more, I would like to insist that this dimension is rather *aesthetic* (and epistemological precisely because it is aesthetic). By aesthetic here I understand the sphere of the distribution of sense within which there are always already criteria that decide in advance what is (or is not) perceptible; or, in this concrete case, what is – or, more to the point, is not – audible. These criteria determine what fulfills (or does not fulfill) the conditions for entry into the regime of what is perceived and listened to as legible. The dimension of the problem revealed here is aesthetic also because, in some ways, it precedes and determines the epistemological.²² Every production of knowledge is always already corporeal; the senses produced in knowledge are always already inhabited. We bear these senses on our bodies; they colonize our modes of perception while also colonizing our concepts, our languages, and our categories of thought.

A philosophical perspective on the question of listening in traumatic contexts thus leads to a critical analysis of the *criteria and conditions of possibility for something to become audible* – which is to say, *legible and recognizable* – where the very concepts of “legibility” and “recognizability” must also be put into question. In the case of trauma, this critical analysis further involves a critical revision of the *structures* that determine something *as* experience and render it *memorable*, including its spatio-temporal frames.²³ In this context, my project of *grammars of listening* insists, in the first place, on asking how philosophy can help us understand this aspect of the task of both listening and memory-making that otherwise risks remaining unnoticed – governed by categories, frameworks and criteria that have already organized, without us even realizing it, the very regime of audibility. It inquires, in the second place, how

22 Alejandro Vallega, “Displacements – Beyond the Coloniality of Images,” *Research in Phenomenology* 41 (2011): 218.

23 There is a close connection here too between the criteria for “memorability,” connected, as I intend to show, with the reigning criteria for audibility, and the more political question, raised by Judith Butler, of “grievability” (*Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009)). I don’t have the space here to develop this specific point further. It should suffice for now to recall that Butler is also concerned with understanding and bringing to light the conceptual frameworks and aesthetic structures that determine in advance the regime of distribution of bodies and their death in the space of the political and, I would add, of history and memory. Elsewhere, I’ve advanced a critique of Butler from a decolonial perspective following Fanny Söderbäck (“Performative Presence: Judith Butler and the Temporal Regimes of Global Assembly,” *diacritics* 46:2 (2018): 37–49), by insisting that what is or is not “grievable” should also be thought in connection to what is or not “memorable.” This connection, moreover, depends on a critique of the coloniality of time and history that Butler neither provides or attends to.

one could imagine and identify in practice much more responsible, inclusive, and plural listening strategies – above all modes of audibility adequate to the radicality of a violence that, while striving to be heard, still remains *inaudita*. This word in Spanish refers precisely to the two sides of what I want to emphasize when speaking about the “(in)audibility” of testimonies of traumatic violence. It refers, on the one hand, to something that has not yet been heard (something that remains yet to be rendered audible). It points, on the other hand, to something that challenges us as ethically unacceptable; thus, something “unheard-of” precisely because it breaks with all our already available aesth-ethic categories. In the case of listening to trauma, both are intrinsically connected: it is because of the radical challenge that traumatic violence poses to our already available frameworks of sense (ethical and aesthetic alike), that testimonies of these forms of violence risk remaining inaudible, as every attempt to communicate them is perceived as illegible or unrecognizable.

The task, then, is to creatively respond to the challenge posed to the very act of listening by these “catastrophes of meaning”²⁴ caused by traumatic forms of violence; to search for *grammars* (not only understood in terms of language or conceptual tools, but also in terms of the frameworks that govern and organize our perception) that can show themselves to be, as Richard puts it, in “solidarity with the accidents and forgeries [*contrahechuras*] of history through its damaged graphemes.”²⁵ Trauma, Caruth insists, is an experience “that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.”²⁶ And, I would add, it is an experience that demands, even as it defies, our *listening*.²⁷ What I call “grammars of listening” is precisely the search for *sites* for the production of sense capable of rendering audible (and thus legible) those lives that traumatic violence threatens to designate as impossible – a search which responds to the *demand* that such sites be found, produced, or wagered. As I’ve argued, traumatic violence threatens such impossibility and illegibility not only because of the type of destruction to which it exposes these lives, but also because this destruction occurs at the limit and even outside of the frameworks of meaning that usually enable the working-through of reality, both psychically and historically.²⁸ Consequently,

24 Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs*, 5.

25 Richard, *Fracturas de la memoria*, 125.

26 Caruth, *Unclaimed experience*, 5.

27 Cf. María del Rosario Acosta López, “Grammars of Listening, Grammars of Addressing: Towards a Philosophical Approach to Trauma and History in Conversation with Cathy Caruth’s Work,” *diacritics* 49: 2.

28 Thus, as Rosaura Martínez Ruiz has noticed recently in reference to my work, if my emphasis is precisely on the ethical and epistemological responsibility that falls on the listener, there is here also a political approach to the question of trauma in its psychoanalytical

what I am here calling traumatic violence is a form of violence that colonizes by erasing the trace of that which a grammar of listening should strive to render audible.

Grammars of listening – or grammars of *lo inaudito* – thus open up a site and a praxis of signification capable of subverting the breakdown of meaning produced by traumatic violence and its colonizing effects. They do so, on the one hand, because of their critical capacity to bring to light and denounce, while making them audible, the very erasures that violence has enacted and reinforced at the level of both the psychic as well as the historical.²⁹ That is, grammars of listening seek to interrupt the further concealment of erasure itself – its inaudibility – which allows traumatic violence to perform its colonizing function by presenting the effects of its traces as illegible to a colonized listening.³⁰ Grammars of listening are also, on the other hand, creative forms of resistance. In their capacity to open a space for listening to what otherwise would remain designated as “illegible” – and sometimes too as “unbelievable” as in not even “possible” – they confront the “abominable originality” of traumatic forms of violence with the inventive capacity of imagination to produce its own frameworks where there are none, to make sense out of what is otherwise interpreted as “unrecognizable,” and to render perceptible what otherwise runs the risk of dis-appearing in a regime of the sensible incapable of listening beyond the deafening roar of its colonizing hierarchies of sense.

2 Decolonizing Listening, Decolonizing Memory

Having established the conceptual context that gives rise to the project on grammars of *lo inaudito*, in this section I would like to briefly present two further developments of the question of listening at the site of trauma, when understanding trauma, as I have proposed, in its colonizing effects. On the one

connotations (cf. “Collective Working-Through of Trauma or Psychoanalysis as a Political Strategy,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (2020)). Or, better said, there is here an approach to trauma that underscores the political possibilities – and hence, perhaps, also responsibilities – entailed in the kind of listening that psychoanalysis can perform and offer. It is not my intention to follow this path, though I find these connections between my philosophical approach to memory in the aftermath of trauma and a philosophical approach to psychoanalysis such as Martínez’s very productive.

29 Cf. María del Rosario Acosta López, “One Hundred Years of *Forgottenness*: Aesth-Ethics of Memory in Latin America,” *Philosophical Readings* XI:3 (2019): 163–171.

30 Cf. María del Rosario Acosta López, “Perder la voz propia: de una fenomenología feminista de la voz a una fenomenología decolonial de la escucha,” in L. Cadahia, A. Carrasco Conde eds., *Fuera de sí mismas. Motivos para dislocarse* (Madrid: Herder, 2020).

hand, there is the question of listening as an emancipatory and subversive strategy *vis-à-vis* what I have called “traumatic forms of violence.” On the other, there is the question of decolonizing the grammars that allow for such forms of violence to perpetuate their silencing effects, in their capacity to undermine not only lives, but the conditions of audibility of the lives they designate as dispensable.

Let me begin by way of two citations which, at this stage of the project, have motivated me to further explore the possibilities of an encounter between decoloniality and trauma. The first is from Gabriel García Márquez’s acceptance speech for his Nobel Prize for Literature:

I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters. A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been *a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable*. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.³¹

This passage is particularly illuminating because it is linked to one of the central elements of the problem of listening at the site of trauma – and of trauma understood in its colonizing effects. By “the crux of our solitude” García Márquez does not mean the need for an excess of imagination in the interpretation of our reality as it is usually represented in romanticized versions of Latin America. Quite on the contrary, he is pointing here to the *lack of resources* required for the apprehension of a reality populated by “countless daily deaths.” Indeed, García Márquez points to what I call grammars of listening or *gramáticas de lo inaudito*, when he refers to the lack of means to render life believable – *our* lives, he says, namely those still governed by what Quijano in a similar context has described as the *coloniality of knowledge*.³²

31 García Márquez, G. (1982). “The Solitude of Latin America”. Nobel Prize Acceptance. This translation from: Gabriel García Márquez – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. 7/242020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1982/marquez/lecture/>.

32 Here I refer particularly to Quijano’s lucid analysis of how the coloniality of power does not only *expropriate* colonized populations of all those “cultural discoveries ... most apt for the development of capitalism,” but at the same time demands the repression of “the colonized forms of knowledge production, the models of the production of meaning,

He is thus, in turn, calling for the creative task posed in this context as a challenge to our imagination, namely, the need of producing frameworks of sense that can make audible/legible what otherwise risks remaining inaccessible (incommunicable). This is partly due to its unprecedented nature, partly due to the fact that what is at stake here are forms of life that are perceived, designated and presented as part of an “unbridled reality,” given the challenge they pose to “conventional” means of representation.

The passage also introduces an additional element, one that proves crucial for the question of listening. The problem of audibility is not only a matter of legibility, García Márquez points out, but of *credibility*. The “crux of our solitude” does not come exclusively from the lack of conventional resources to name a type of violence that, insofar as it is colonizing, ensures the unavailability of the means that could name it and make it audible.³³ This in turn, as one of its most devastating consequences, renders *unbelievable* the lives that coloniality has already designated as disposable. In this way, the status of these lives, when they are legible at all, appears closer to imagination than to reality. Because of this, these lives run the risk of remaining excluded from any historical indexation.

This emphasis on the question of credibility demands a deviation from the criteria of veracity and verifiability that, in the case of historical erasures, not only become the most evident obstacle for the construction of historical knowledge, but a mode of epistemic violence that silences again what historical violence has destroyed. The “crux of our solitude” that García Márquez refers to is also, thus, the isolation that results from this epistemic violence.³⁴ This isolation redoubles the excessiveness of a violence that does not let itself be *fully re-counted* (and therefore, it also does not *count*). *To produce grammars of listening in this context thus means to produce modes of remembrance and*

their symbolic universe, the model of expression and of objectification and subjectivity,” that is perpetuated in an operation of “colonization of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and giving meaning, the results of material existence, the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world: in short, the culture.” (“Coloniality of power ...”, 541)

33 One the of the most complex dimensions of the violence of coloniality is that, as we have been suggesting, it controls its own mechanisms of representation to the extreme, as Banu Bargu points out very well. The violence of coloniality is thus able to represent spectacularly its own capacity for silencing and erasing, on the condition that the representation does not allow access to what has been erased, but only to the fact that it has been erased (cf. “Sovereignty as Erasure. Rethinking Enforced Disappearances,” *Qui Parle: Critical Human- ities and Social Sciences* 23:1 (2014): 35–75).

34 Cf. Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26:2 (2011): 236–257.

possibilities of historical indexation whose criterion is not the verification of the past and the dependence on the archive, but the opening in the present of a space of credibility for the production of a past that has not yet been worked-through.

The second citation is from Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*, where he (famously) writes: “There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline essentially stripped bare (...) In most cases, the black man lacks the possibility of descending into a veritable hell.”³⁵ In this quote, besides pointing out the structural dimension of the problem that García Márquez indicates, Fanon reminds us of the radical type of exclusion – or better yet, of inclusion by exclusion – that racist colonial logics bring about.³⁶ The drama of the racialized/colonized subject is precisely that they lack even the privilege of choosing their own descent into hell. To do that, to access hell, one must be able to *name* horror, to make it audible. When horror has not yet been named, when there are no conventional means – to go back to García Márquez’s quote – to refer to one’s own condition, or when all the signifying tools have been imposed by the same logic that attempts to control all production of sense, one inhabits a “zone of nonbeing.”

We must take seriously the radical character of this statement. As Fanon proposes, working at the limits of ontology, or, better yet, in the place of its collapse, demands the recognition of the necessary dislocation of everything that, in complicity with the history of coloniality, has made the zone of nonbeing possible. Being and nothingness (Sartre), Fanon tells us, are not at all sufficient to account for the condition of the colonized subject. To put it more broadly, following Quijano, these categories are not at all sufficient to account for the logics and operations of coloniality (not only the coloniality of power or being, but also of language and aesthetics, as we also learn from Fanon). Coloniality, therefore, moves also (and perhaps particularly) on an aesthetic and corporeal level. It is a zone suspended *outside* of all possible ontologies, Fanon insists,

any ontology is made impossible in a colonized (...) society (...) In the weltanschauung of a colonized people, there is an *impurity* or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation. Perhaps it could be argued that this is true for any individual, but such an argument would be concealing

35 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xii, translation modified.

36 And let’s remember, for the sake of absolute clarity here, the redundancy of combining the words “racist” and “colonial.” If we are consistent with Fanon, there is indeed no colonialism without racism, and there is no racism without a colonial logic that sustains and reproduces it, thereby ensuring its own survival (cf. also Quijano, “Coloniality of power ...”, 534ff).

the basic problem. Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man since it ignores the lived experience.³⁷

The question is then how to subvert such a condition. How to conceive of what Fanon calls the *decolonization of the subject* starting precisely from an *impurity* that can, simultaneously, be understood as profoundly alienating and as a point of departure for emancipation. I return here to my first citation from Fanon, where I intentionally omitted one essential part of the quote: “There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline essentially stripped bare, *from which a genuine new emergence can be born.*”³⁸ The place where colonization is most radical is also the point of departure for resistance and emancipation. This task, however, should not be interpreted as the possibility of finally accessing the “zone of nonbeing” to make room for what it has constitutively excluded. The zone of nonbeing cannot be reduced to, or understood merely as, negation (and therefore as susceptible of constituting a dialectic that Fanon resists and rejects). It is rather the constant attempt to exclude the colonized subject of the frames of sense that sustain and perpetuate the colonial operation. Because of this, *any task of decolonization must be directed towards the radical reconfiguration of the aesthetic regime that serves as the foundation of the criteria for existence and/as legibility.* This seems to be the only way out of a kind of ontological violence that demands the *reinvention* of the very conditions of possibility of sense. It is the only escape when violence not only has dispossessed these conditions of possibility and made them obsolete but has also introduced something radically other to whom it seeks to deny access to comprehension by all available means.

In order to confront the fact that this limit zone risks paralyzing the process of comprehension – and thereby paralyzing the process of making intelligible, audible, and credible the lives that, taking Fanon seriously, inhabit outside the regime of the possible – it is necessary to open up, in Axelle Karera’s words, an “(im)possible site of invention.” Karera continues:

what Fanon’s invocation of the “new human” teaches us (...) is that the ongoing work of political transformation is not a project of retroactive clarification whereby ethically corrupted socio-political categories would

37 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 39. For an alternative reading of Fanon, that argues that Fanon is not only pointing to the limits of ontology in the case of black experience, but to the limits of ontology *per se* and in connection to lived experience *in general*, see William Paris’s reading of these passages in his forthcoming *Looking for Tomorrow in Yesterday: Black Critical Theory and the Epistemology of Utopia*.

38 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xii.

be restored their proper meaning (...) Fanon (...) conceived of political transformation to be the quasi-impossible task of introducing invention into existence.³⁹

We should be very careful, however, when interpreting “invention” in this context. To understand decolonization as a purely emancipatory and an emancipatorily pure operation, as if we could still presuppose a sovereign subject transparent to itself and capable of elevating itself above the material conditions that determine it and undermine it, is to forget the heart of Fanon’s analysis and the brilliance of his diagnosis. Nowhere does Fanon pose anything like an “authentic” black being that can be recovered from or beyond the violence that constitutes it and makes it possible as an “impure” and “muddy” subjectivity. Likewise, he rejects a progressive history or narrative understood as a dialectic that passes from negation to restoration. Even if, as Karera insists, the emancipatory and decolonizing struggle strategically demands the “nostalgic revindication of an irrecoverable past,” there is not, she continues, a “deferred unveiling at the horizon precisely because there is no face behind the mask.”⁴⁰

Thinking with Fanon, then, decolonization should not be understood as a progressive process of unconcealment or revelation/recovery of a lost past. If there is a relation to the past, it is because the past must be produced, “invented” in the present. If there is a relation to memory, it is because memory must be exercised as resistance to what has happened and has been normalized. *Invention of history and resistance of memory* – each one in the double sense of the genitive – emerge here as decolonizing strategies par excellence. Alternatively, they emerge as two strategies that point to the decolonization of listening as productive of memory and history, and, therefore, toward the opening of decolonial grammars capable of subverting the control that colonizing violence exerts over the conditions of production of sense and the means of its representation. A detailed development of this argument will have to remain the object of another paper. I will conclude, however, by briefly referring to two ways in which these ideas take shape as decolonizing strategies.

First, let me say something brief regarding the *invention of the past*, understood, as I have proposed, in the double sense of the genitive, that is, both as the production in the present of a past that has not yet been worked-through

39 Axelle Karera, “Frantz Fanon and the Future of Critical Phenomenology in an Anti-Black World,” *Philosophy Today*, ed. David Marriott. Special Supplement “On Blackness and Ontology” (forthcoming).

40 Ibid.

and as the inventive action that the past exerts over the present. To do so, I want to gesture towards Miguel Gualdrón's recent work on Édouard Glissant.⁴¹ The problem of the colonized for Glissant, Gualdrón argues, is precisely the impossible and paradoxical encounter between *an excess and an absence of history* (in the case of Gualdrón's work, this is also explicitly connected to the paradoxical structure of trauma (Caruth) mentioned above). For the colonized, the past not only weighs heavily upon and obsessively stalks the present; it does so because there is an absence of history, of memory, of a past that can only be and be recovered by poetically inventing it. In this context, Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation, which I interpret as a call to pay attention to the need to invent what the archive cannot name, no remainder can reveal, and no memory could redeem, becomes indispensable.⁴² Following these same lines, Gualdrón proposes to interpret Glissant's idea of a "prophetic vision of the past" as a decolonizing strategy. Here, *invention is not opposed to history but rather actualizes it, thus resisting the structural oblivion constitutive of the epistemological (and aesthetical, as shown above) operations of coloniality*.

Second, and in connection to the idea of a *resistance of memory*, I want to refer to what Rocío Zambrana has described as the decolonizing labor of memory in the present.⁴³ If, rather than focusing exclusively on colonizing forms of violence, we attend to how they are extended in the logics and operations by way of which coloniality re-actualizes and is permanently re-enacted in the present, we must recognize, as Hartman also does, that "the past is not yet over." Zambrana writes,

The present *is* the past. The task is to turn the present *into* past. This process demands that we not only remember by writing the history of the lives that suffered this originary violence in its singularity (...) To produce memory [*hacer memoria*] means attending to the lives that *today* experience the modalities of this violence. Likewise, to attend to these lives demands the *dismantling* of the world established by such a radical violence. It means *to make inoperative* the effectivity of the past that is the present. It requires, all in all, to undo the institutional, normative,

41 Miguel Gualdrón, "Transversality as Disruption and Connection: On the Possibilities and Limits of Using the Framework of Trauma in Glissant's Philosophy of Caribbean History," *Philosophical Readings* XI: 3 (2019), 152–162.

42 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 116.

43 Rocío Zambrana, "Vida póstuma," Columna en 80 grados.net. (<https://www.80grados.net/vida-postuma/>), trans. Julian Ríos Acuña for this essay.

perceptual, libidinal modes of linking that articulate this world restoring thus this originary violence in the present.⁴⁴

As I read it, the resistance *of* memory is understood here also, and strategically so, in the double sense of the genitive. On the one hand, as a resistance (in a psychoanalytic key) to remember what happened, to treat the past as “past,” and to accept what happened as history to be remembered. On the other, as a modality of memory that is exercised in the present as an act of resistance that demands the dismantling of a past that, in its capture of the present, saturates it with the operativity of its multiple and structural forms of violence.

In both cases, what is necessary for dismantling a past that is not yet over, is, among other things, the production of alternative grammars of sense, capable of listening and making audible what has been erased, silenced, obliterated by violence, but also of *making legible* the forms of resistance that, in the present, seek to interrupt and subvert its colonizing effects.⁴⁵ Herein lies the fundamental difference between archival recollection, dependent on a certain notion of truth as verification, and the idea of a memory understood as the act of “rendering believable” what otherwise would remain completely inaudible. Such is the turn that García Márquez proposes: from verifiability to credibility as the central criterion for the production of sense. From the standpoint of credibility, truth is not dependent on being proved; rather, it is the possibility of opening toward the very act of production of the structures that may render it communicable, with all the interruptions, contradictions, and subversions proper to a voice that, speaking from the zone of nonbeing, must seek, create, and invent the grammars that can make it audible.

Up to now, my project of grammars of listening has focused on thinking the possibility of a memory – paraphrasing Glissant – capable of “lending its ear to the absence of voice.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, an analysis of listening as a decolonial strategy demands taking the inquiry one step further. It demands, following Zambrana, thinking the possibility of listening not only to what history must dismantle, but also to the forms this dismantling takes and the strategies that articulate it in the present. From this point of view, the act of listening and of making oneself heard are, at the same time, the act of *producing a world*

44 See also for further developments of this idea, Zambrana's final remarks in her recently published *Colonial Debts* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), and the reading she proposes of Espinosa Miñoso in conversation with Hartman in Zambrana, “Dystopie et contre-mémoire,” forthcoming.

45 Rocío Zambrana, “*Pasarse Políticamente: Interrupting Neoliberal Temporality*,” *diacritics* 46:2 (2018): 98–116.

46 E. Glissant, *Le quatrième siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 304–305.

that was not but should have been. Grammars of *lo inaudito*, therefore, are also frameworks of sense capable of granting us access to an ethical face of both history and memory: the ethical demand of reclaiming the memory of what *should not have happened*.⁴⁷ This is the resistance to acceptance that memory must exercise in the face of violence and its radical forms of destruction. The resistance – perhaps in a psychoanalytical register, going back to trauma and a rereading of its experience in a non- pathological sense – to admit the world as it is, and the capacity to imagine and to produce another memory for the present. Perhaps this is, after all, as I believe both García Márquez and Fanon teach us, the decolonizing gesture par excellence.

47 I realize these two are not necessarily the two sides of the same coin and do not necessarily entail each other. It is one thing to wonder whether the history produced in the present – invented – must also point to what could have been and was not. Here, I am closely following Werner Hamacher's interpretation of Walter Benjamin's conception of "Jetzt," and thus, of a notion of history – and of memory – that must also bring about the possibilities that were left behind, denied, subtracted from the present. Hamacher relates this to what he calls in Benjamin a "theology of missed time": "There is historical time only in so far as there is an excess of the unactualized, the unfinished, failed, thwarted, which leaps beyond its particular Now and demands from another Now its settlement, correction and fulfilment" (cf. Hamacher, "Now': Walter Benjamin and Historical Time," in Andrew Benjamin ed., *Walter Benjamin and History*, (NY: Continuum, 2005), 43). It is something different to say that memory is also ethical, in the sense of remembering what happened not only as what happened but as what should not have taken place, what should not have been true.