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# One Hundred Years of Forgettingness: Aesth-Ethics of Memory in Latin America

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**Abstract:** This paper<sup>1</sup> is a response to the following question: how can we listen to, render audible, and thus resist the kind of erasures and institutional forms of oblivion imposed by power and political structures in Latin America? I propose to answer this question through the study of literary and artistic responses to a paradigmatic case of this kind of oblivion in the history of Colombia, namely, the *matanza de las bananeras*. By following the ways in which the case has been “recovered” in its undecidable character, first in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez, and then in José Alejandro Restrepo’s *Musa Paradisiaca*, I intend to show a concrete example of why, as Arendt suggests, “in their stubbornness, facts are superior to power,” and that “persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they can never replace it.” I begin my argument with a discussion of Ángela Uribe’s use of the case of the *matanza* and her treatment of García Márquez’s depiction as a refutation of Arendt’s statement. I take Uribe’s analysis as a provocation to build my own reading of the kind of memory and survival of the *matanza* made possible by García Márquez’s novel, and continued by Restrepo’s installation. I conclude by showing how, in both cases, the *matanza* stubbornly resists oblivion, even though, as Arendt suggests, the historical truth has indeed been destroyed.

**Keywords:** Gabriel García Márquez, Hannah Arendt, Ángela Uribe, José Alejandro Restrepo, masacre de las bananeras.

*“La poesía ... esa energía secreta de la vida cotidiana, que cuece los garbanzos en la cocina, y contagia el amor y repite las imágenes en los espejos.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“La peligrosa memoria de nuestros pueblos [...] es una energía capaz de mover el mundo.”<sup>3</sup>*  
Gabriel García Márquez

## 1. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the ambiguous case of the “*matanza de las bananeras*”

Let me begin with a scene of one of the final chapters of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The scene is told from the perspective of José Arcadio Segundo, who by then has become one of the main leaders in the big union strike against the American banana company in the region. What is then recounted with extreme detail here are, according to the words that open the chapter, “the events that would deal Macondo its fatal blow” (García Márquez

1972, 298). After a whole month of strikes, and more than a year of failed negotiations with the representatives of the company, who have entirely ignored the nine points of the petition signed by the union, the workers are asked to get together in Macondo. They have been promised that the civil leader of the province will arrive by train to intercede on their behalf with the company. This is the context where the following passage takes place:

José Arcadio Segundo was in the crowd that had gathered at the station on Friday since early in the morning. He had taken part in a meeting of union leaders and had been commissioned, along with Colonel Gavilán, to mingle in the crowd and orient it according to how things went. [...] Around twelve o’clock, *more than three thousand people*, workers, women, and children, had spilled out of the open space in front of the station and were pressing into the neighboring streets, which the army had closed off with rows of machine guns. [...] An army lieutenant then climbed up onto the roof of the station where there were four machine-gun emplacements aiming at the crowd and called for silence. [...] the lieutenant read Decree No. 4 of the civil and military leader of the province through an old phonograph horn. It had been signed by General Carlos Cortés Vargas and his secretary, Major Enrique García Isaza, and in three articles of eighty words he declared the strikers to be a “bunch of hoodlums” and he authorized the army to shoot to kill.

[...] Fourteen machine guns answered at once. But it all seemed like a farce. [...] A seismic voice, a volcanic breath, the roar of a cataclysm broke out in the center of the crowd with a great potential of expansion. [...] José Arcadio Segundo fell with his face bathed in blood, before the colossal troop wiped out the empty space, the light of the high, drought-stricken sky, and the whorish world where Úrsula Iguarán had sold so many little candy animals.

When José Arcadio Segundo came to he was lying face up in the darkness. He realized that he was riding on an endless and silent train and that his head was caked with dry blood and that all his bones ached. [...] Prepared to sleep for many hours, [...] he made himself comfortable on the side that pained him less, and only then did he discover that he was lying against dead people. [...] Several hours must have passed since the massacre because the corpses had the same temperature as a plaster in autumn and the same consistency of petrified foam that it had, and those who had put them in the car had had time to pile them up in the same way in which they transported bunches of bananas. Trying to flee from the nightmare, José Arcadio Segundo dragged himself from one car to another in the direction in which the train was heading, and in the flashes of light that broke through the wooden slats as they went through sleeping towns he saw the man corpses, woman corpses, child corpses who would be thrown into the sea like rejected bananas.

When he got to the first car he jumped into the darkness and lay beside the tracks until the train had passed. It was the longest

one he had ever seen, with almost two hundred freight cars and a locomotive at either end and a third one in the middle. [...] After walking for more than three hours, he was able to make out the first houses in the light of dawn. Attracted by the smell of coffee, he went into a kitchen where a woman with a child in her arms was leaning over the stove. "Hello," he said, exhausted. "I'm José Arcadio Segundo Buendía." He pronounced his whole name, letter by letter, in order to convince her that he was alive. He was wise in doing so, because the woman had thought that he was an apparition as she saw the dirty, shadowy figure with his head and clothing dirty with blood and touched with the solemnity of death come through the door. [...] José Arcadio Segundo did not speak until he had finished drinking his coffee.

"There must have been *three thousand* of them," he murmured.

"What?" [the woman responds]

"The dead," he clarified. "It must have been all of the people who were at the station."

The woman measured him with a pitying look. "*There haven't been any dead here.*" she said. "Since the time of your uncle, the colonel, nothing has happened in Macondo."

In the three kitchens where José Arcadio Segundo stopped before reaching home they told him the same thing. "There weren't any dead." (García Márquez 1972, 309-314. Italics are mine)

Every Colombian who reads this passage knows that this is none other than the description of what is remembered in our history as the "*matanza de las bananeras.*" As is the case with so many of the episodes of mass violence in the country, the name that has survived in the collective memory refers to the perpetrators instead of the victims as the protagonists of the events. The *matanza de las bananeras*, which could be translated as the "mass assassination by the banana companies," is the label given to what in fact could be one of the largest undocumented massacres in the history of Colombia, namely, the mass assassination of the *United Fruit Company* workers, who are the real protagonists of the story, and who were murdered at the hands of the Colombian army on the evening of December 5, 1928, in Ciénaga's train station in the Magdalena region under the command of General Carlos Cortés Vargas.

But why start with García Márquez's telling of the story, or more exactly, with José Arcadio Segundo's recollection of the events? Because as unbelievable as everything else happening in the novel may seem to those who cannot picture Macondo as anything but a magical fantasy created by the "unbounded" imagination of the novelist, this passage in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is one of the only "documents" that preserve the memory of the *matanza* in the long history of forgottenness that surrounds the events.<sup>4</sup> As it happens to José Arcadio when he comes back to Macondo, every single piece of official documentation completely denies this version of the story. "The official version," the novel continues,

repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government found at hand, was finally accepted: there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families, and the banana company was suspending all activity until the rains stopped. (García Márquez 1972, 315).

The rains, by the way, do not stop in the novel for four years, 11 months and 2 days (cf. García Márquez 1972,

320), so that every single trace of what happened that night in Macondo is entirely washed away, in the novel as much as in reality. José Arcadio, as the only survivor of the massacre, becomes in the novel also an "invisible" witness. García Márquez conveys this masterfully: the army that comes searching for José Arcadio is blinded before its more than evident presence, his almost transparent body disappears among history's racks, along Melquíades' innumerable scrolls that contain, as we learn at the end of the novel, the complete memory of the events as well as the announcement of their radical erasure – the perfect image for an archivist and totalizing form of memory, whose fate is to disappear at the very moment when its task has been completed.<sup>5</sup>

There is no way to know exactly how many workers were killed that night in Ciénaga. Several witnesses spoke of hundreds of bodies being carried to the train cars. Trucks were heard all night long coming and going from the town's streets to the train station.<sup>6</sup> Only nine cadavers, however, were found the next morning in the town's main square. Nine bodies, some would say, one for each of the now *dead* points of the workers' petition (cf. Arango 1981, 97). In General Cortés Vargas' report, these nine bodies are listed together with four more, who are said to have died afterwards as a result of severe wounds. 13 deaths is the official number (cf. Cortés Vargas 1979, 91), against the hundreds and even thousands that lived in the testimonies of those who were in Ciénaga that night and that by now have also died with them.

The only other "official" document that survives the *matanza* is the speech given the next year before the Congress by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, one of Colombia's most important leftist leaders in the thirties and forties, who was also assassinated in 1948, initiating with his death one of the most violent periods of partisan conflict in the history of Colombia (known as "La Violencia"<sup>7</sup>). Having gone to Ciénaga and its surroundings to investigate the facts, Gaitán claims in his speech to have collected enough testimonies to prove the death of more than a thousand people (cf. Gaitán 1997, 24). By contrast with the explanations of the General, who contends he gave the order to his squad to fire on a group of armed men to "prevent a bigger and true massacre" (Cortés Vargas 1979, 75), Gaitán accuses the General of being one of the main participants in a plot between the United Fruit Company and the Colombian Army (cf. Gaitán 1997, 35), and to have imparted the orders to a group of drunken soldiers against a sleeping crowd (cf. Gaitán 1997, 111 and 114). The witnesses have been bought, Gaitán denounces (cf. Gaitán 1997, 75), and the dead bodies have been made to disappear by throwing them to the sea and by burying them in mass graves in the surrounding land owned by the company and local landowners (cf. Gaitán 1997, 116. Cf. also Arango 1981, 89ff).

Despite all of Gaitán's efforts (which were, of course, also politically motivated), nothing was ever proven regarding these events, and as much as his speech helped to place Gaitán in an advantageous political position, and eventually led to establishing some minimal rights for the unions and workers in the banana regions, the episode of the *matanza* was completely erased from the official record. What is left is exactly what García Márquez recounts in the novel, namely, the impossible gap between

the eye-witness testimonies and the official report, the gap left between the 9 bodies found the next morning in Ciénaga's main square, and the more than 3,000 bodies that survived in the popular imagination, in the stories told from generation to generation, and that García Márquez collects in his literary account.<sup>8</sup>

One could perhaps argue that the *actual truth of the events*, unknown as it remains today, has been covered up even further by the fiction recounted in García Márquez's novel. One could assert indeed from a certain perspective that, independently of the intentions that led him to tell the story in the novel, the final effect could have backfired, redoubling what was already an act of double annihilation –namely, the destruction caused by the *matanza*, and the resources that were employed to erase any trace of its occurrence. This is the argument given to us by Colombian philosopher Ángela Uribe in an article that inspired me to write this paper. Uribe argues that, by capturing these two contradictory versions that survive, among others, in the historical archive, and by depicting them as “equally verisimilar” (Uribe 2010, 48), García Márquez's fictive tale has somehow guaranteed the perpetuation of the *lie*, the absolute substitution of the (absent) truth and the definitive inscription, as a lie and a fiction, in Colombian collective memory. As a result of the novelist's fictionalization of the events, Uribe argues, “what prevails is a fantastic tale in which both versions have equal incidence in the historical memory” (Uribe 2010, 48).<sup>9</sup> “The unbounded imagination of García Márquez,” she continues, has taken away from us the possibility of having a “secure place” to remember what happened in Ciénaga that night (cf. Uribe 2010, 49). That is, a place or a perspective that would allow the truth of the events to either be accessed or, at least, recognized as completely inaccessible, rather than being replaced by an ambiguous and unresolvable claim. By having entirely substituted a fictionalized myth for the reality of historical events, Uribe contends, the case of the *matanza* in Colombia proves Hannah Arendt's famous statement wrong: facts are *not always* more stubborn than lies, sometimes they turn out not to be superior to power, and hence persuasion and violence cannot only destroy, but also end up entirely substituting truth (Uribe 2010, 65-66).<sup>10</sup>

As much as I agree with Uribe that the case of the *matanza* is a paradigmatic case in the history of oblivion that demarcates the relationship between politics and memory in Colombia – a relationship that should be made audible and denounced every time, as her own paper does in its own way – I would like to go back to this paradigmatic case and show that perhaps a different conclusion is possible.<sup>11</sup> I intend to demonstrate that the very specific kind of survival that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* secures for the events, against the double erasure accomplished by the historical archive, could end up proving Arendt's statement right from a different perspective. I do not think that the novel's fictional account of the events – García Márquez's way of leaving them ‘unsolved,’ allowing for both contradictory versions to stand side by side as part of a collective memory – is necessarily equivalent to being complicit in the erasure of history. And I will show that it is precisely because of the literary devices employed by García Márquez in his novel that the *matanza* has resisted oblivion. By conserving the traces left by all the attempts

to make them disappear, the novel preserves the events as *unforgettable*. It preserves them therefore in their stubborn resistance to being erased from Colombian memory and history, even though – Uribe is right about this – they have been successfully replaced by lies in every single official record.

Furthermore, I would like to show that in this sense García Márquez's novel also becomes an example of a very powerful response to the kind of challenges posed by the attempts of politics and power, persuasion and violence, to destroy and substitute “historical truths.” I believe that in such a context, very well known to those of us who work on Latin American political history in the light of the production and reproduction of colonial structures of power and temporality, art and literature play an invaluable role. The aesthetic dimension of these works challenges us to think history and memory anew, perhaps no longer, or not only, as an *epistemological* problem (as I think is the case in Uribe's position), but as an *ethical* one.<sup>12</sup> That is, no longer connected to what Uribe describes as the “secure place” from which historical truth could be thought, free from any contamination with fiction, but, on the contrary, as the very difficult task of inscribing and denouncing once and again the very mark of forgottenness that not only erases history but that also, and perhaps even more prominently, constitutes history and memory in Latin America.

## 2. “To render our lives believable”: On Literature as Resistance to Oblivion

“The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to mention them it was necessary to point at them” (García Márquez 1972, 1, trans. altered). These are some of the first lines we read in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The origin and crux of our solitude in Latin America, as García Márquez pointed out several times, but most famously in his Nobel Prize speech, is that we come from a world that does not seem to have words to describe it. It is not the excess of imagination, therefore, that readers perceive in our literary depictions, García Márquez contends. It is rather our reality itself that seems to be unbounded (“*desmesurada*”), “out of all proportion,” he insists, and “this often presents serious problems for writers who can't find words to describe it” (García Márquez 1998, 60).

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.<sup>13</sup> (García Márquez 1982, emphasis added).

More than a mere lack of words, therefore, we are confronted with a lack of meaningful resources to render our reality plausible, believable, or, as Alejandro Vallega points out when reading these lines by García Márquez, to make it heard (cf. Vallega 2009, 155). Latin American reality can in this sense challenge us as a reality that lacks the appropriate frameworks of meaning to render itself communicable, to make itself audible in such a way that

what is being told is not only heard but believed, understood as possible in the realm of the real. It is not only words, therefore, but also an entire *grammar* that needs to be created from scratch if one is to render this reality audible.<sup>14</sup>

The problem, therefore, is not that the “unbounded imagination” of the writer has substituted fiction for reality, rendering it impossible to build a memory from a “secure place,” beyond the literary myths that are, for Uribe, complicit in the erasures of history. The problem is rather the opposite: how are we to render these experiences, these lives and deaths that *seem to be imagined* as something real? How can we make them audible, communicable, and integrate them in the realms of experience, memory, and history? How are we to listen to what could otherwise be reduced to fiction when *seen* from the perspective of a traditional framework of knowledge?

When García Márquez expresses the difficulty of rendering an unbounded reality real, of rendering it believable, he is speaking of the specific situation of coloniality in the Americas. “The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own,” he writes, “serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary” (García Márquez 1982a).<sup>15</sup> As we learn from Fanon (to bring here just one of the most well-known articulations of this problem), the world of the colonized is initially perceived as one “where words wrap themselves in silence” (Fanon 2008, 199), where every image is already a product of the colonizer, and, hence, reality does not seem to find its place in the world of experience, does not seem to touch and affect in any way the language that we try to use to refer to it.<sup>16</sup> Like the insomnia disease that affects the residents of Macondo, this cannot but lead to “a state of hallucinated lucidity,” where every image is like the image coming out of the dream of someone else (“the ones would see the images dreamed by the others,” García Márquez writes (46, trans. modified)),<sup>17</sup> and where the final result, as we very soon find out in the novel, is a state of total amnesia, “a kind of idiocy that has no past” (García Márquez 1972, 45). In this case, the experience of coloniality makes it impossible to have a history and a memory in the conventional sense of these words.<sup>18</sup> What is at stake here is also an urgent demand to rethink our traditional accounts of history and memory, precisely because such experiences of institutional forgetfulness represent a radical challenge to our traditional (inherited) frameworks of meaning and signification.

It is in this context that I also hear striking similarities with what philosophy has said in relation to, and in response to, extreme forms of violence and trauma. Going back once more to Arendt, this time however to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, one encounters, in the aftermath of the Second World War, a strong claim for the need to produce new frameworks of meaning in the face of the destruction, but also of the horrific originality, of the events that the testimonies coming out of the camps are attempting to convey.<sup>19</sup> The stories told by the survivors of the camps, Arendt writes, seem to come to us “from another planet” (Arendt 1967, 445), and refer more to a “nightmare” than to any possible reality (cf. Arendt 1967, 439). Those attempting to tell and convey their stories, to make them believable (going back to the quote from García Márquez), feel like they have survived a horrible

dream, a hallucinated reality. Not even the survivors, Arendt writes, seem to believe what their testimonies are attempting to render imaginable with little success.

There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him [sic] to believe fully in his [sic] own past experiences. (Arendt 1967, 444).

It seems impossible to integrate the tales told by the “living dead” in the world of the living. It seems equally impossible to listen to these testimonies, because they seem to bring with them the end of reality as we know it, the absolute collapse of all the frameworks that have made it possible for us to make sense of our world (cf. Arendt 1967, 446).

What is interesting in the case of Arendt’s analysis, specifically in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published for the first time in 1950 when even the “truth” of the testimonies of the survivors was still very much in doubt in the minds of many of her readers, is the way she manages to displace the discussion about the “credibility” of the testimonies towards the question of listening. What is needed, she claims, is the production of new categories of thought, new resources for meaning, that will make it possible to listen to what remains unheard in survivors’ testimonies, because what remains unheard will also remain “unintelligible” (cf. Arendt 1994, 310).

Thus, for Arendt, what we are facing, in the impossible gap between testimony and history, between the language of the witnesses and “reality as we know it,” is not a matter of credibility and verifiability, of being able to have a “secure place” on which we could build a memory and a history of the events in the traditional sense of these words (this is what I have described above as an *epistemological* question, concerned, as seems to be the case with Uribe’s position, with creating the adequate conditions for the production of verifiable truths). The challenge posed by the “horrible originality” of the camps is, for Arendt, how to produce what García Márquez’s describes as the means that would render our lives believable. “Only the fearful imagination”, Arendt writes, “can afford to keep thinking about horrors” (Arendt 1967, 441). It is imagination that allows us to find within ourselves, precisely where “we have lost yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular, the possibility to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules” (Arendt 1994, 321). Only imagination makes it possible “to understand something which has ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment appears thus less frightening” (Arendt 1994, 312).<sup>20</sup>

This is also entailed in García Márquez’s conception of what literature can do in the context of, and in response to, coloniality. For Arendt, the creation (every time anew) of these new frameworks of meaning, these new grammars, as I have called them, is the only way to respond to the urgent demand posed by the horrors of totalitarian violence. Only by making it possible to truly listen to the testimonies of survivors, can these grammars offer a kind of historical justice that can neither be provided (at least

not entirely) by the legal realm, nor by traditional and, in García Márquez's analysis, colonized, forms of history and memory.<sup>21</sup> These are the real stakes of "truth telling," according to Arendt, the task that is afforded to the historian, the storyteller, but also and perhaps more so, to "the (solitude of the) philosopher and the (isolation of the) artist" (Arendt 1977, 255). It is only in the displacement of the structures that make it impossible to listen to the radical singularity of the real, in the creation of new frameworks and new realms of signification, that "facts" can survive, stubbornly, no matter how much violence attempts to destroy them and substitute them with lies.

Such is also, in García Márquez's words, "the everlasting victory of poetry against the powers of death" (García Márquez 1982b).<sup>22</sup> Reality, as the source and the result of the power of imagination, always resists the telling of lies in literature.<sup>23</sup> "And lies," he insists, "are more serious in literature than in real life" (García Márquez 1998, 31). The kind of survival that literature can offer to the events surrounding the *matanza* in Ciénaga in 1928 is thus neither a perpetuation of these events as mere lies, nor a replacement of the truth with a myth that makes it impossible to decide between two contradictory versions of the story. By instituting a new grammar, a new framework of signification that displaces precisely the distinction between truth and fiction – and hence puts into question the very possibility of having a "secure place" from which to remember (cf. Uribe 2010, 49) – the novel offers a site for a *remembrance* of another kind.

Thus, what survives in and through the novel is not the truth of the events, but rather the truth—the mark and the trace—of their history; a history that is stamped by the very act of erasure and forgottenness. The novel inscribes the impossibility of remembering that surrounds the obliteration of the *matanza* from the public record and the official history. To make use here of Cathy Caruth's language – and trusting therefore, as Glissant suggests, that a certain parallel between trauma, coloniality and memory can be more than a mere "intellectual game" (Glissant 1999, 66)<sup>24</sup> – one could say that the novel "bears witness to the disappeared past," passing on "the evidence of an event that can no longer be reduced to the simple referent of any language" (Caruth 2013 67, 71). Literature shows here its own potentiality to become a site of memory, only and exclusively by its capacity to actively resist and inscribe the effects of forgottenness—to inscribe them by resisting them, to resist them by inscribing them. In a way, then, the novel enacts what it cannot recall, moving away from an idea of history and memory as representation, towards a notion of remembrance understood instead as the "recreation of the very experience of the loss."<sup>25</sup>

By presenting the past as that which can never be fully present, namely, as that which always exceeds the very same possibilities of its own representation, the novel is capable of evoking what has been made unforgettable by its inscription, preserved without being remembered, conserving it in its resistance to oblivion. The act—the enacting—of the novel is itself the sign that memory can make history in its erasures; a memory and history oriented exclusively by an ethical demand, namely, to listen and to render audible the erasure of the voices of those who would otherwise remain entirely unheard, completely forgotten.

### 3. After the Traces of Macondo, between the Archive and Oblivion: José Alejandro Restrepo's *Musa Paradisiaca*<sup>26</sup>

For anyone who enters the gallery and encounters, at first sight, the bunches of bananas hanging from the ceiling, invading the air of the room with their rotten fragrance (cf. image 1), this work cannot but remind us, once again, of the *matanza*. José Alejandro Restrepo's *Musa Paradisiaca* is the continuation of the story of this untold old truth, and of the consequences its multiple erasures still produce in the present. If García Márquez's literary account of the events has inscribed them effectively as unforgettable, as I was suggesting above, I would like to suggest that Restrepo's installation serves as a constant reminder that, as long as their erasure is not effectively recollected and recounted, it will continue haunting the present in its stubborn latency, in its claim for a place and a site for its remembrance.



Fig. 1. Restrepo. *Musa Paradisiaca*, second floor, FLORA, 2016

*Musa* summons us from the abyssal gap between myth and history that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has left open. The work speaks to us, once again, from the site occupied by the unmemorable figure of the *matanza* and its unrecoverable archive. What is at stake here, however, is not only the claim for a history that has not yet been told, whose absence the work eloquently proclaims. Restrepo's work also speaks of the history that develops from this absence, and the repetitive and ongoing effects this silence continues to generate – and to generate, once again, as officially and institutionally erased – in Colombia's present. The work performs, in its multiple installations, the historical repetition of the original massacre, its transformations and translations into the ongoing violence that the exploitation of banana production by foreign investors has continued to cause in the country up to the present, and the complications of this history in its connection to paramilitary violence in the late eighties and nineties in the Urabá region.<sup>27</sup> *Musa* is an ongoing search; a search for a form of representation, a language, a grammar, that can bear witness to the erasure of the events, their compulsive historical repetition, and the stubbornness with which they have managed to resist oblivion – all at the same time.



Fig. 2. Restrepo. *Musa Paradisiaca*, first floor, FLORA, 2016.

Everything in the installation seems to be about the ways in which Restrepo has attempted to produce and inaugurate these particular grammars. Everything in the work comes from the site of its forgottenness, inscribing in its anachronic temporalities its ongoing resistance to being left behind. We encounter first, covering the walls of the gallery, the “archival” part of the installation (cf. image 2): the numerous pieces of newspapers and journals that Restrepo has been collecting over the more than 20 years since the first installation of this work.<sup>28</sup> Cutouts that, in spite of the years, refuse to fade away – as usually happens with old newspapers. They all welcome us in the first floor of the gallery quietly denouncing what officially continues to be unrecognized, namely, the ongoing violence perpetrated by the banana companies in the north part of Colombia; deaths that are presented in the official records as related to “another” conflict, the war between guerrilla and paramilitaries, a conflict that refuses to see itself as entirely connected to the history of colonization and recolonization of Colombian territory by foreign investors.

We then climb the stairs to the darkened second floor of the gallery, towards what is perhaps the most striking and powerful part of the installation: the 13 banana bunches hanging from the ceiling (cf. image 1 and 3). One can only hear the noise that they make while they balance, being moved by those of us walking through the invisible aisles, and the almost imperceptible sounds coming out of the videos that are being projected on the floor of the gallery; recordings of journalists who have been documenting the ongoing massacres in the banana regions, most of which never made it to the news and have been discovered and preserved by Restrepo’s judicious research. These banana bunches, imposing, decomposing, almost invisible in the blackness of the gallery (our eyes need to wait before they start to appear in the darkness of the room), cannot but remind us of those corpses, innumerable, uncounted and unaccounted for; barely suggested by the images projected on circular mirrors in the floor; mere reflections and reminders of the untold and ongoing history of the *matanzas de las bananeras*, in plural, from Ciénaga (undocumented), to the Urabá (documented but forgotten, unnoticed and almost silenced, like the videos), to the present. How to mourn those corpses when the history about their deaths has not even been written yet?



Fig. 3. Restrepo. *Musa Paradisiaca*, second floor, FLORA, 2016.

Finally, in the upper floor of the gallery, in a room full of light, the images that complete the rest of the installation. We see the repetitions and reenactments of the engraving that originally gave title to the exhibition (cf. image 4), an image that tells the story of how this installation came to be, when Restrepo discovered the productive ambiguity created by the title of the image, *Musa Paradisiaca*, referring not to the *mulata* sitting at its bottom (as our colonized eyes would have trained us to see), but to the scientific name of the depicted banana tree. The image is surrounded by depictions of the “forbidden fruit,” together with ironic and erotic references to iconic representations of the religious scene.



Fig. 4. Restrepo. *Musa Paradisiaca*, third floor, detail, FLORA, 2016.

Across the room, Doré’s engravings of the “expulsion of paradise;” that moment when myth and history coincide and erase one another, when each becomes just one side of the other’s face. The image is framed and surrounded by hallucinogen mushrooms (cf. image 5), reminding us of the ambiguous but decisive colonial entanglements between hallucination and memory, myth, history and reality. Is Colombian history perhaps that a hallucinated dream? That “state of hallucinated lucidity” that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* relates, as mentioned above, with the disease, spread out through Macondo, of the disappearance of memory, that results, according to the novel, in an “idiocy” without a past (cf. García Márquez 1972, 46)? Or is it perhaps the invitation of Restrepo’s work to dream history anew, to reclaim its territory be-

yond the realm of the visible, and into the ominous realms of all those haunting figures of the past that always manage to seep through the porous multiple layers of the present?



Fig. 5. *Musa Paradisiaca*, third floor, detail, FLORA, 2016.

Archive, mourning and history, these are the three sides of a work that seems to be calling out for the need and the urgency to interrupt a traditional interpretation of these terms, to dislocate their use as accomplices in a history of forgottenness that the installation attempts to subvert. Thus, in the place of an archival will to closure – which is nothing but the other face of oblivion – we encounter the stubbornness of the unarchivable, the belatedness of an ‘unresolved’ excess that refuses to be left out of history, even if its truth may dwell forever in a sort of irrecoverable past. In the place of bodies to bury and names to mourn, the work invites us to remember the corpses that have been erased from history, hundreds of suspended graves that can only be inscribed in their erasure, in their survival as disappeared, as having been deprived of a proper wake. Finally, there is the resurgence of history and its amnesias, from the myth of colonization to a present colonized by its own myths. *Musa paradisiaca* inaugurates and installs, in all these very singular images, and through the force of its quiet, patient, and repetitive modes of denunciation, a grammar capable of reminding us of the need, the urgency and the task of moving from the indecidability of an erased history, to the decisive inscription of its memory.

If García Márquez, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, illustrates how memory can make history precisely by erasing it, Restrepo’s *Musa* succeeds in reminding us that this erasure marks precisely the site of its remembrance – in its non-localizable, ambiguous, and undecidable character, indeed, as the novel recalls, but even further, perhaps, in the decisiveness of its inscription in the present. As it is the case with the “unforgettable,” the event survives in its belated character, as that which cannot be entirely remembered, but stubbornly resists, nonetheless, as the “not yet” of an unresolved past; indeed, a past that is yet to be remembered, whose history has not yet been written. Is this not what happens in and with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*? Do we not learn in the end that what we are reading is just perhaps the traces of a history that has turned itself into ashes? Let us recall the last lines of the novel:

Before reaching the final line, however, he [Aureliano] had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth. (García Márquez 1967, 422).

By opening grammars where the claims of this erasure cannot be made silent, literature and art – and perhaps only literature and art – prove that the erasure announced in the last lines of the novel may not be the only destiny available for those “races condemned to one hundred years of solitude.”

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following is the final version of a lecture I originally gave at the University of Oregon by invitation of Alejandro Vallega. I also presented a shorter version of this essay in Cornell University by invitation of Gustavo Quintero, and in a workshop on Literature and Violence in Berlin organized by Ilit Ferber, Adam Lipszyc, Nassima Sahraoui, and Caroline Sauter. I thank everyone in all these events for their wonderful questions and suggestions. I also thank Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez at DePaul University, who not only has read several versions of this and other articles on this subject during the last two years, but who is also an indispensable interlocutor of my work on trauma and listening. Finally, thanks to Colin McQuillan for proof-reading this version, and for having become such an essential listener of my work.

<sup>2</sup> My own clumsy translation: "Poetry... the secret energy of our everyday life that boils the chickpeas in the kitchen, spreads love around and repeats the images in the mirrors."

<sup>3</sup> "The dangerous memory of our people ... an energy capable of moving the world."

<sup>4</sup> It is very telling, in this sense, that the report collecting oral testimonies of the *matanza*, published by Carlos Arango Z. in 1981, mentions *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the closest there is to an otherwise complete absent record of the massacre in Colombian archival history (cf. Arango 1981, 27).

<sup>5</sup> For a comparison between an archivist and totalizing form of memory, and one that, by contrast, allows for history to survive in its undecidability and lack of closure, see Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" (cf. also Acosta López 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. some of the oral testimonies gathered by Arango (cf. 1981), particularly Chapter 3 and 4, 63-102.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ángela Uribe's contribution to this volume, and the work of María Victoria Uribe on this historical period in Colombia's history, cited and analyzed in her paper.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview to García Márquez for a British radio show years later (1991), the author confesses that in his research for the novel he very soon realized that the massacre could not have been as spectacular as the collective memory had remembered it. He admits to have exaggerated the events to be able to "fill out all the cars in the train" (cf. García Márquez, quoted by Marco Palacios and Frank Safford (2002, 520)). I thank Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez for the reference to this interview. This, however, only helps to prove the point I am about to make, namely, that literature finds its own forms of resistance, even if not "objectively" accurate, when everything else leads to radical forms of oblivion.

<sup>9</sup> The translation of this and every other quote from Uribe's paper is my own.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt's famous assertion goes as follows: "In their stubbornness, facts are superior to power [...] Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it." (Arendt 1977, 255)

<sup>11</sup> I find Uribe's piece very inspiring, and very much in continuity with all the work she has been recently doing in relation to the history and philosophy of violence in Colombia. A lot of the archival work that supports my paper has been oriented by her investigation, and I also owe to her, and not only to her paper, but to her classes and conversations, the reference to Arendt as an important resource to rethink history in the contexts of both coloniality and trauma. I would like to think of this paper, therefore, as a continuation of a conversation that we once started, and as my way to take up her challenge of thinking philosophically from a specific situated geographical and historical context. For a wonderful sample of Uribe's work cf. her book *Perfiles del mal en la historia de Colombia* (2009).

<sup>12</sup> I am not claiming that Uribe does not consider the ethical consequences of what she formulates initially as an epistemological problem. I am rather claiming, as I am about to show, that García Márquez inaccurate

and ambiguous depiction of the events (and therefore epistemologically problematic, according to Uribe's argument), is however ethically driven and brings to light the kind of resistance that literature can provide in a context of radical archival erasure.

<sup>13</sup> "Poetas y mendigos, músicos y profetas, guerreros y malandrines, todas las criaturas de aquella realidad desafortada hemos tenido que pedirle muy poco a la imaginación, porque el desafío mayor para nosotros ha sido la insuficiencia de los recursos convencionales para hacer creíble nuestra vida. Este es, amigos, el nudo de nuestra soledad" (García Márquez 1982b).

<sup>14</sup> On the question of "grammar" here and how it connects to the question of the coloniality of language, I have written elsewhere (cf. Acosta López 2018a). My emphasis on an unheard reality, and on the need to develop new grammars of listening to convey what otherwise remains inaudible – "inaudito," in Spanish, with the double connotation of "unheard" and "unacceptable" – comes also in connection to my recent work on trauma and memory and the need to produce what García Márquez describes in these passages as the "means to render our lives believable." This implies producing frameworks of meaning that may allow for an erased reality – the silences imposed by history – to resonate (even if only in its absence) and be listened to, to be made believable and hence intelligible, even if there are no pre-existent "conventional" means to make this task possible. Those means, I contend, need to be produced, and literature and art are paradigmatic examples of how this takes shape in places like Colombia. For further developments of this topic cf. Acosta López 2018a, 2019, and my forthcoming book, *Grammars of Listening: Philosophical Approaches to Trauma and Memory*.

<sup>15</sup> "La interpretación de nuestra realidad con esquemas ajenos sólo contribuye a hacernos cada vez más desconocidos, cada vez menos libres, cada vez más solitarios" (García Márquez, 1982b).

<sup>16</sup> I am here referring also to the very clear analysis Alejandro Vallega offers of Fanon in the context of the coloniality of images (cf. Vallega 2011, 210-218). The problem, as Vallega formulates it, is not only how the colonizer imposes a language, or not, but also how "one's own vision" (as the colonized) "one's very possibility of knowledge through images has been colonized" (218), and what needs to be done in order to displace colonial images and produce new forms of visibility. I would like to take this further and insist on other forms of "audibility," together with an emphasis on a decolonization of frameworks of meaning, as well as of our colonized forms of aesthetics, very much in the line of what Vallega proposes in his most recent book (2014).

<sup>17</sup> On this idea of "dreaming someone else's dream" and on being dreamt by others, see Diego Cagüañas's contribution to this volume, also very closely connected to the possibility of producing other grammars and other sites of resistance to forgetfulness; alternative memories for mourning, remembering and working through what history and violence have insistently attempted to erase.

<sup>18</sup> See also in this volume Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez's articulation of this very same issue in connection to Édouard Glissant's work. I would suggest that what Gualdrón analyzes in his essay as the creative possibilities underlying the non-history of the Caribbean, are not very far away from what I am calling in this same context the need and the urgency of grammars of listening, as a way of articulating new possibilities for the present, while resisting constitutive structures of erasure of the colonial (and the coloniality of the) past.

<sup>19</sup> I have argued elsewhere for the importance of the two sides of Arendt's argument here, namely, the destructive character of an ontological violence, like that of the camps, but also the horrific originality of what this violence is capable of introducing as radically new in the realm of the possible (cf. Acosta López 2018 b and 2019). I think that it is important to take these two sides into account in any attempt to reflect philosophically on the possibilities (and impossibilities) of language to convey horror, or, as I am arguing in the present paper, on the possibilities of resisting historical and political erasure. In its capacity for "erasability," as Banu Bargu argues, post-colonial forms of sovereignty are also able to produce alternative regimes of visibility, designed precisely to sustain and make as "visible" as possible their invisible threat, that is, their capacity of rendering invisible and inaudible their own constitutive forms of violence (cf. Bargu 2014, 62ff). It is therefore to the productive and creative sides of violence, as much as to their destructive effects, that an aesthetics and ethics of resistance needs to attend to.

<sup>20</sup> In later works Arendt will develop in more depth the ways this possibility is available to philosophical understanding through the power of imagination. She will relate it to Kant's *Third Critique*, offering a reading of Kant's reflective judgment and his idea of the exemplarity of the judgment of taste. It is also connected to this exemplarity of the aesthetic experience, and the capacity of the aesthetic judgment to be regulated by a rule that cannot be determined but that is nonetheless produced every



single time anew in the face of the singularity (and unclassifiable character) of the beautiful, that I have conceived the notion of “grammar” mentioned above. I cannot develop this here. For a more developed explanation of this concept, see *Grammars of Listening* (Forthcoming).

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin is tacitly present at this point in Arendt’s text in the figure of ‘the storyteller,’ and in the urgent need for the recovery of the value of communicable experience that goes together, hand in hand, with a gift for listening that, according to Benjamin, is rapidly disappearing and being substituted by modern experiences of isolated forms of language (the novel and information are his main examples in his essay on this issue, cf. Benjamin 1968, 83-110). His reflections in the essay are directed to the recovery of a kind of memory that only the experience of language in storytelling is able to give life to and preserve. Benjamin is also responding in his text to the problem of trauma after the war (this time, however, the silence of the soldiers coming back from the first World War) and his essay can offer a very fecund introduction to the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. For a more detailed analysis of Benjamin’s *The Storyteller* in the light of these preoccupations see “The Storyteller’s Silence” in Felman 2002, and Acosta López 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Curiously enough, the concluding paragraphs of García Márquez’s Nobel prize speech, where he talks about the victory of poetry against the powers of death, are never translated in the English versions; the translation here is my own.

<sup>23</sup> “With time, I discovered that you can’t invent or imagine whatever you fancy because then you risk not telling the truth, and lies are more serious in literature than in real life. [...] I think that imagination is just an instrument for producing reality and that the source of creation is always, in the last instance, reality” (García Márquez 1998, 31).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. in this collection Miguel Guadrón Ramírez’s contribution, and his analysis of the possibilities and limits of this parallel between coloniality and trauma.

<sup>25</sup> The expression comes originally from an unpublished text by Daniel Moreno. I have used it in some of my previous work to talk about the very singular role art has played in Colombia in the context of a resistance to a history of oblivion and forgetfulness, and in reference to specific works of art by Oscar Muñoz, Doris Salcedo and Juan Manuel Echavarría (cf. Acosta López 2014, cf. Moreno’s chapter in that same volume, and his reading of José Alejandro Restrepo’s *El caballero de la fe*).

<sup>26</sup> The following section is a longer version of what I wrote originally for the catalogue of the exhibition of *Musa* in Flora in 2016 (Cf. Restrepo et al. 2016, 111-120. For another reaction to this very same installation, cf. Bruno Mazzoldi’s contribution to this issue.

<sup>27</sup> In this sense, Restrepo’s insistence in reinstalling the work, once and again, is also a performative inscription of the ongoing history of this violence in Colombia. The archival work is therefore always in the making. The excess of documentation contrasts with the relative invisibility that characterizes these events in Colombia and the kind of impunity that still today surrounds the events connected to paramilitary violence and political violence against the unions in the Urabá region.

<sup>28</sup> Part of this archive can also be consulted in the catalogue of the exhibition at FLORA (cf. Restrepo et al. 2006, 37-110). The catalogue also includes excerpts of the above-mentioned speech by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán before Congress in 1928.