



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

LISTENING TO THE VULTURES¹

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A note on “vultures”

The internationally understandable Spanish translation of “vulture” is *buitre*, however this is not what we call them where I grew up. In Colombia, we call them *chulos*.

Chulos are emblematic figures in the popular history of the country. From many songs to all sorts of artistic iconography, we have endeared this bird, with a note of dark humour, as a familiar companion. Once I saw beautiful graffiti where someone had replaced the glorious Andean Condor at the centre of the national flag with a Fat Vulture. This is understandable when you know that 40 years of war have reportedly left 49,000 people dead,² our *chulos* are well fed, and they are very often darkening our sky with their circling flight.

Through this text, I will share the path I threaded starting from an individual one-to-one practice of mediation between a deceased person and a living person, the *Landscapes of the Dead*, and arriving at a collective performative practice of noisy listening titled *To know the vultures so well*. This path has led me through intimate, in-depth research on the different sensorial and imaginal relations we can establish with the dead.

The *chulos* have been accompanying me through these years of research. Their flight is not as majestic as the one of the condor, but their elegant turns and glides in the air give us a sign in the sky of where death is happening on the ground. I have made of them my allies in the search for material signs of the invisible in the visible realm. I have asked for their wisdom, trying to tune my intuition with their sense of smell, listening to their daily closeness to death as nutrition, as something we cannot do without.

A note on fragment

I have walked this research path with colleagues and friends in practice and also with voices coming from books, and from texts handed in by other friends.³

Below, you will follow my thoughts and words (some of my writing comes from journals of times in research through the years) but also theirs, following the not-so-linear logic of the fragment. Often my work as an artist ends up dialoguing with fragment, collage and association as a form of meaning-making that relies not so much on the deployment of an argument, but more on the resonance of meanings that happen when you place a thing next to another. I recognized my gesture when I read Clara Schulmann in her book *Chicanes* (2023), and, with her I propose this text to be “imagined as a listening device where writing serves to record and preserve. All one has to do is listen to these voices and isolate them from the context in which they initially appeared, so they can be perceived differently. The work takes on the form of a re-transcription, and eventually a reassembling” (12).

Passing things through my body that come from outside of it is a practice I've kept in my work since I can remember. It may be by reading aloud for hours in the night, or re-dancing very old dances, or sounding and singing by transforming my throat into an open radio frequency. Today this text will pass things through my fingers to let them resonate with each other. Sometimes I have masticated and digested these excerpts for a long time and sometimes I will be just spitting them back almost unchewed. You are invited to engage in a process of association following this path without me holding your hand too tight, letting meaning emerge through different coherences and incoherences that might remain unsolved.



Figure 1: A torn wing in the ground in Nuquí, Chocó, Colombia. Photo by Catalina Insignares



As soon as the crowd was out of sight they closed in in circles. The near ones got nearer and the far ones got near. A circle, a swoop and a hop with spread-out wings. Close in, close in til some of the more hungry or daring perched on the carcass. [...] The flock had to wait the white-headed leader, but it was hard. They jostled each other and pecked at heads in hungry irritation. Some walked up and down the beast from head to tail, tail to head. [...] He had scented the matter as quickly as any of the rest, but decorum demanded that he sat oblivious until he was notified. Then he took off with ponderous flight and circled and lowered, circled and lowered until the others danced in joy and hunger in his approach.

He finally lit on the ground and walked around the body to see if it were really dead. Peered into its nose and mouth. Examined it well from end to end and leaped upon it and bowed, and the others danced a response. That being over he balanced and asked:

'What killed this man?'

The chorus answered: 'Bare, bare fat.'

'What killed this man?'

'Bare, bare fat.'

'What killed this man?'

'Bare, bare fat.'

'Who'll stand his funeral?'

'We!!!!'

'Well, all right now'

So he picked his eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on. The yaller mule was gone from the town except for the porch talk, and for the children visiting his bleaching bones now and then in spirit of adventure.

(Hurston [1937] 2018, 70)

In the beginning of my work with the dead I wanted to understand different ways of taking responsibility for them, for those with whom I had a relationship, but also all the others.... How did I relate to them as invisible entities that accompany the living? How was their apparent absence made present through different bodily practices?

The research was developed in response to the apparently "disenchanted" western context where I have been residing for almost 20 years, in which death is something that needs to be dealt with as quickly and as silently as possible. This heritage and certain currents of psychology leading from it, see grief as a thing to be done with; they condemn the dead to be only bodies to be buried, never spirits that can speak and consider mourning as a passage to leave behind the person who departed, never as a way to keep them with us for the future.⁴

I could feel, through appearances in dreams, smells showing up abruptly, lively memories, sensations in my skin, and conversations happening in my head or in my heart, that my relationship

with the people that were said to be “gone” or “absent” was actually quite vivacious. As Fanny Howe reminds us, “The dead grow in stature as time passes. Their personality intensifies becoming a scent. They seep into the faces of passers-by and emerge out of trees and restaurants in dreary new forms” (Howe 2001, 175).

I had no need for any sort of confirmation that would decide whether those presences would be “real” or “imaginary,” since those binaries had not been very important in my life. As my grandma used to say in her southern-Colombian accent “*los fantasmas no existen, pero que los hay los hay*,” ghosts don’t exist, but for sure they are among us. This place where things are and are not simultaneously has shaped the epistemology within which I’ve lived and felt all my life. When I started wanting to tend towards dead people it was never a matter of disentangling belief, superstition, imagination, hallucination, reality, absence or presence.

I had other problems.



The research actually started with my difficulties in maintaining and entertaining relationships with my dead. Between 2016 and 2018, my aunt Popola, my cousin Quique, and my aunt Susi died in Colombia and I was not there to participate in the collective ritualization of their deaths. I had to find my own way to relate to them in the new state they had transformed into. I knew that doing this alone would not provide the comfort or sense-making I felt I needed; the presence of other living people was required. In general, I have never been able to make sense of things without entering into dialogue with someone. Some people make sense through solitary moments, walks, writing. I make sense through encounters, and my work has always put relationship at its centre, whether in one-to-one performances or in group gatherings. Thus, I started conceiving different practices of an imaginary, sensorial or psychic nature, putting in place exercises to be done in groups or in twos, to try different ways of nourishing my relationship to the loved people that died in those years.

The door suddenly opened to all the other relationships that I hadn’t been tending to: Willis, Pacho, Enrique, Grandma Chelo.... And at the same time, when you start relating to your own dead together with other living people who want to talk or nourish their own set of relationships, slowly “their” dead become yours too.

When invoked in a porous sensorial context, the presence of dead people is surprisingly easy to activate, it just requires some space for story-telling or sharing how you feel the presence of that person in your life, and very simply others can feel them too. When my friend Maritza told me that her mother always comes to her house in the form of a bird, whenever I see this bird, I think of her mom. When somebody tells me that this song reminds them of their deceased friend, I will think of their friend next time I hear that song. The dead are easily invoked, this was a phenomenon I wanted to study and handle with care, since, obviously, there are also some dead I definitely did not wish to invoke.

As an artist, my background rests in modern and post-modern dance training, and for years, dance, movement and touch have become tools for paying attention to the world and the way I relate to others. Inhabiting the body through different states of consciousness has been crucial to me, informed by somatic practices such as Continuum Movement or Body Mind Centering, hypnosis, Reiki, Zen meditation, Paulina Oliveros' Sound Meditations, and different syncretic spiritual practices active in the feminist circles of Bogotá.⁵

Shifting the focus of movement and touch practices towards sensing different invisibles, I began holding workshops and performative spaces where we could feel death as deeply entangled with life, and the relationship with a deceased person as something that we can re-invoke, and remember as a presence to keep us company. I worked in response to an ideology of forgetfulness and of cutting life from death, one that pushes death to the realm of the unnameable and unrelatable. I responded to the socially acquired habit of silencing the dead with a piercing ear ready to listen to the quieted murmurs around us.⁶

Through these different practices, a vision kept coming: all living beings are surrounded by a thick mesh of relationships, a mesh that surrounds us all (sometimes holding us and sometimes binding us). With my friend and partner-enquirer Carolina Mendonça, we began to call this the Matrix of the Dead. We started to understand that we were practicing ways of keeping this mesh of relationships alive, through deep listening, tuning-in and amplifying the capacities to feel them. All of these practices were collective discussions and storytelling that utilized chanting and learning to catch and utter almost imperceptible information.

Within those spaces, together we developed a practice called *Landscapes of the Dead*, in which we channelled images through touch and movement, inviting information of a person who is deceased (human or not) to appear and take the form of a landscape.

One person lies down and another person touches them and lets images come to their mind and their mouth. It is a touch that awakens memories, sensations, images, a touch that pays attention. In this practice we invite images and we speak them aloud, generating strange poems said by our mouths but coming from places that are still mysterious to us. We follow the intuition that if we think and feel the relationship to someone who is deceased *in the form of a landscape*, we will literally *make space*, for that relationship to exist, be nurtured as a soil.

The body-as-landscape becomes a relationship-as-landscape. The images that come from sensation, the images that come from the dead person, and the images that come from the tissues all overlap and enmesh in an affective and sensorial moment that gives us embodied time to be with the dead.



Letting the images come means allowing the imagination to be something that does not come from *within* but somehow from an *out there*.

For a few years before all this, I had been training in a practice called Remote Viewing, after my friends and collaborators Myriam Lefkowitz and Simon Ripoll-Hurier had taught it and practiced it with me. It is a pen-and-paper practice where one trains to see things at a distance with the mind's eye, speak it aloud and write it down on paper. In the ideology of Remote Viewing, it is said things are all related through a matrixial field, and a "viewer" can tap into the field and thus see objects, places and people, through the distance of space and time.

In the *Landscapes of the Dead* we also wanted to tap and see, but instead of using the paper and pen for this, we were using touch and the bodies of two people. We were less interested in the early cybernetic thinking that was behind Remote Viewing and more interested in what felt like information that was at the same time in the body and somehow below it, in deeper currents of water or in invisible caves.

By synchronicity, the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa came back to my life at that moment, and helped give these caves or deeper currents names we could understand. She spoke of *nepantla*, the liminal space where realities bridge, where things are and are not what we are used to recognizing. She spoke of *el cenote*, the pool of the collective imaginaries, memories, shapeless dreams.

When you wake up you're still between realities, in "nepantla", a Nahuatl word for the space in between, un lugar no-lugar or tierra de un medio. Via nepantla you tap el cenote, the archetypal inner stream of consciousness, a dreampool or reservoir of unconscious images and feelings stored as iconic imagery. El cenote is a mental network of subterranean rivers of information that converge and well up to the surface, like a sinkhole or an opening to the womb of the earth. (Anzaldúa 1999, 250)

Anzaldúa knows that the body is the place that allows the access to vision, she knows it is the flesh, with its charge of denial and of wounds that can tear open the access to what is otherwise invisible or unsensible.

I want to inhabit the body, discover its sensitivity and intelligence. When all your antenna quiver and your body becomes a lightning rod, a radio receiver, a seismograph detecting and recording ground movement, when your body responds, every part of you moves in synchronicity. All responses to the world take place within our bodies. Our bodies are tuning forks receiving impressions, which in turn activate responses. An artist has to stay focused on the point of intersection (nepantla) between inner and outer worlds through her senses. (Anzaldúa [2003] 2009, 292)

I committed my practice to finding different ways of being this radio receiver, and to study how different ways of activating the senses of touch, of the ear, of the inner sight, could connect us through intuition to collective knowledge and imagery. Spooky coincidences started to happen: someone in a workshop ended up describing with precision the house of someone's deceased grandma; I once described the stones hidden underneath the land by the grandfather of one of the participants; a flower that was given a few years ago by the deceased person came up in someone's vision while touching the body of her sister. Signs that our imaginary was not only "ours" started to appear.

I can only invent words, play with what happens when we call it *The Matrix of the Dead*, for what happens when we call it *el cenote*. As Fanny Howe did, so I must say, "I don't believe in the unconscious, because whatever it is, it is not un-anything. That watery junk that floats through and around my bones is alive and well and near the luxuriate in sheets and pillows and night all around them as if the head is a bed" (Howe 2001, 111).

It is not my place to theorize about where these images come from, some might call it collective unconscious, others the imaginal, others perhaps quantum continuum, Anzaldúa calls it *el cenote*... what I am interested in is engaging with the effects that take place when signs and coincidences start being activated between us, creating some form of dialogue with what seems to be cut from our reality.



Belief in immortality is harmful because it is not in our power to conceive of the soul as really incorporeal. So this belief is in fact a belief in the prolongation of life, and it robs death of its purpose.

Piety with regard to the dead: to do everything for what does not exist.

(Weil [1947] 1997, 84)

After a few years of embodied practice and research, it became clear how necrocapitalism—or, the world order of dispossession based in the fact that some lives are disposable for the sake of accumulation—has dedicated itself to denying the presence of death in our daily lives in order to advance its constant, underhanded killing. It erases death from our view and tries to convince us of the project that we should all be immortal through outsourcing the care of the dead or simply hiding it under social carpets. Certain places in the world get to forget about the killings that sustain their lives *because* they have been made to forget that they too will die. To be able to sustain consumption of goods, we need to forget how the cobalt in the phones, the diamonds in the medical tools that save lives, the cocaine that provides a good party, the ingredients of the medicine that allow people to live until 100 years old, are all a direct consequence of killing and forced displacement of certain other people. Denying the existence of death seems to be the best way to get away with murder.

I come from a place where imperialism and capitalism have produced over 49,000 killings, over 6,000 internally displaced people, and over 80,000 missing persons. Having moved and lived in Europe or North America for almost 20 years, I have been a constant witness of parallel realities: places where life can be lived by forgetting death; and places where death is never out of the conversation for more than 20 minutes. As a witness of this, there was always a sense of responsibility (not unproblematically linked with a sense of guilt for having left the place I grew up in) for the masses of people killed and buried under that territory. However, in the years following the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC (and an incredible national movement towards testimony and memory work that was taking place through the Comisión Nacional de Memoria Histórica and other grass-roots organizations), I also felt strongly that I did not want to engage my work in any narrative of memorializing, collective mourning or repair.

Resonating with visions of history stemming from black and indigenous thinkers such as Saidiya Hartman, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Christina Sharpe, in which “the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe 2016, 9), I was interested in holding space where we did not need to engage with logics of reparation, or the compulsion to leave anything behind in order to “move forward.”

And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans*local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event? Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory. That is, if museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? (Sharpe 2016, 22)

Materially, my research became hosting social situations where all participants could be together with the dead, in a sense of connection and continuation of relation, but also of obligation that could be somehow negotiated and set in movement. Yes, the dead sometimes feel heavy; when we start speaking about them our chests, our guts and in general our muscular tissues more often than not start dragging us down. The spaces my work was holding wanted to acknowledge these weights and feel them and move them in our tissues, but also give space for the weight itself to perhaps change its quality.

In these spaces grief could find a space, but also all sorts of different affective modulations and complications of the relationships we entertain with the deceased. Some people might want to celebrate the fact that somebody has finally died, some might feel a loss as a relief, not everyone wants to honour a dead person or mourn them, but this doesn't mean they would not like to have a space and time to engage in this relationship.

Sometimes the deceased oblige us to do things we actually would prefer to refuse to do, but if we see the dead as a monolithic force that deprives us from our agency then we might feel stifled by

them. We attempted not to romanticize our relations with them, but to enter the complexity, and this sometimes meant to tell them to fuck off. Other times the weight and obligation and accountability the dead were asking from us was one we did want to respond to, and then we could use the collective space to think and imagine ways of doing this.

November 2021

If the dead are composed of fungi, and we are too, then the Matrix of the Dead is indeed going under and through us. And carrying so much knowledge and traces of what has always been, of who has come before.

In Aymara culture, it is said that in places where there is a bigger number of cruel deaths, there are more ways into the World Below, the aka pacha. More cruelty creates more caves and tubes and holes and entrances.

Does this mean that some horrible locations can give us a privileged access to the Matrix of the Dead? Or just that in some places the living are surrounded by so many holes that they cannot connect anymore?

In one of these places people sit down in plastic chairs and put on random music at the loudest volume possible. People seem to use this technology to become deaf to the voices of the dead speaking, or at least try.

A young soldier who came from another one of these places, told me that when he was there, they told him that if you dream of a friend who is dead, then you will die the next day. To mute the voices of the dead because their presence can imply our own death.

The dead often demand a response, in some places they even demand a payment... what is our debt to the dead? Especially to those who die from a violent death? Am I here to honour them? To propose some form of reparation? What if dead is not heroic? What if it is not a wound that seeks to be closed?"

(Catalina Insignares, research journal)

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In 2019 I met Léa Rivière, a dancer and poet that had been actively nourishing and learning from C., a dead person that was always close to her, actively intervening in her life by apparitions, synchronicities and songs. The learnings that C. brought to Léa, catalyzed her into being an amazing facilitator for other people to nourish their relationships with the dead. Since we met, we keep on thinking together what responsibility with the dead might mean, what it may or may not have to do with grieving.

Léa also accompanied me from far when my grandmother Judith died in 2021. This time I could be in Colombia and by the years of death-practice I had within me, I could be present in the time of

her passing in aesthetic, poetic and ethical ways I would not have previously been able to access. On whatsapp, Léa asked me to describe to her how the room looked and felt after my grand-ma had just died. I could then observe, by the means of being able to address this to someone, the suspension in the air, the silence cut off by sobs and wailings, the cleaning of sheets and carrying of weights, I could take in every moment of this incredible assemblage of movements of care and pain. I could breathe in and breath out through death as one breathes in and out of pain, as one breathes in and out of a thought. I could be there.

Recently, Léa has been busy defining the intricacies of traditions, dead people and the central work of trans people in the masterdom of all sorts of transitions (between life and dead, or between different gender embodiments). Her thought keeps twisting linear narratives, keeps twisting time, keeps twisting bodies and gender roles, twisting the relations between peoples and their milieux, keeps helping me twist.

I see our work and our researches growing like neighbouring plants in the same soil, but with different shapes and uses. We have both dedicated ourselves to inhabiting worlds in which death is as necessary as life and where the concrete and sensorial relationship with our dead is part of a way of listening, consenting and being part of the rhythms that the earth and our bodies need. All of this sometimes feels like grief work, for ourselves or for others, sometimes it feels more like awakening relationships that have been dormant. It implies becoming sensitive and practicing materialities and epistemologies that think time and space from non-linear logics, that know that there are wounds in territories that have been open for centuries, and that dialogues and material exchanges with the invisible are as important as the dialogue with rivers, mountains, plastics, and birds.

[From an encounter] with Guaranis, Aymaras and Qhichwas emerges an image of effective non-contemporaneity: the juxtaposition of spaces, populations and cultures that seem to emerge from the depths of other times. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz expressed the same idea, but emphasizes the traces of pain:

'[In our territory] various epochs confront each other, ignore each other, or eat one-another up on the same land or separated only by a few kilometres. The old epochs never disappear completely, and all the wounds, even the oldest ones, still stream blood'. (Cusicanqui 2018, 29, my translation)

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui speaks of the time of colonized places as one where the present is made of strata that make past, present and the future-to-be, simultaneously sensible. In resonance with this thought, Léa speaks of the entanglement of past and present that is necessary for acknowledging and countering the violence made on trans bodies and on the dead.

She asks, so, do you think it's the dead who make our traditions?
Lila replies, yes, but that's not enough. She catches
her breath as she ties up her hair.

The dead don't do anything on their own.
In fact, it's often said that without traditions, we end up forgetting our dead. But it's true that without our dead, we'd probably end up forgetting what it even means, a tradition.

And yet, we have to manufacture the dead to make them able to oblige us. And I imagine that a tradition is supposed to prevent us from forgetting to do it.

It's neither the one that makes the other nor the other way around, or rather always both at the same time.

[...]

When you take care of the dead, you take care of everything.
And we don't give a shit about anything when we don't give a shit about the dead.
If there's one thing we don't make it's traditions
(making new traditions my ass, the new world my ass, the new age my ass).

We take care of the dead by maintaining their ability to oblige us, to make of us the obliged of the world.
What a joy, damn it, we relay, we do with, we manufacture to be manufactured, we manufacture because we're manufactured.

Taking care of the ancestors just means to stop killing the dead. The other day, a guy said on the radio "It's because things don't last that they last." He died a few months later and I hear him even better now.

In English, passing on means transmitting and it means to die. Two birds with one stone.
If we don't take care of making our dead last, we prevent them from really dying. We deprive them of the luxury of polysemy, we kill them by not having let them die, by not letting them last. Passing on, passing away, passing for: who are the artists of passing if it is not trans people?"

(Rivière 2023, 82–85; my translation)



In 2021, Carolina and I were invited for a residency to share the practices with the dead in Nuquí, a small town on the Colombian Pacific coast. The people from the town are Colombians of African descent and Embera natives. Their history is one of slavery, impoverishment, and abandonment by the state and more recently, violent control by groups of drug dealers and corrupted military or police members.

The art association that hosted us insisted on the pertinence of our proposal and thought that a four-week residency period could be a good time for us to develop and transform our practice with the local community. Yet we knew that it is a region where violent death is omnipresent, and we knew it would be a challenge to speak about death.

We came to Nuquí with the intention of proposing to people to engage with the practice of touch and vision that we called the *Landscapes of the dead*. This never happened. Sometimes out of disinterest, sometimes a strong wilful refusal, sometimes a distrust in what the practice could actually do or not do as a spiritual tool, the “NO”s we received questioned the very basis of our beliefs and the ideas behind the practice. It became clear that our ways of listening to the dead were inadequate to resonate in the context.

In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that that might look something like wake work. (Sharpe 2016, 20)

In Nuquí, the dead are so present, so urgently present (as unsolved violent murders, as funerals that mobilize the entire town in songs and dance for a few days), that our proposal of “reconnecting” with them made no sense. And furthermore, if someone in this community did need to reconnect with someone or find help to grapple with grief, they would never go to an artist, even less one that is white and comes from the capital or another country. They had *las mayores*, the elderly wise that heal the pains of bodies and souls for the community. Hundreds of years of spiritual and bodily practices of epistemic resistance were in place and next to that our proposals were not only irrelevant but, in many ways, impossible.

We lost all ability to know how to respond in Nuquí, and yet we did not leave. We remained there and listened to the refusals, listened to the soundscapes and the dogs and the parties. All we believed our practices could do was in crisis, so we did nothing else but listen.

July, 2022

I lost, we lost something
and I think the most interesting space we need to make now is to share this loss.

Not so much the practice that creates relation and another mode of relating to the dead, not exposing or sharing that. Not sharing the past, not exposing what we lived in Nuqui neither.

How to be and act with the feeling of constant loss?

Yesterday three more people in the news, killings killings killings,
I guess since we went together to Colombia the question is less, what to do with the dead? and more, what to do with the constant murder?

with what is lost without any sense of justice, without any sense other than to expropriate and capitalize and make more profit.

The knot in the stomach for me is that.
The unstoppable snail.

The vultures that don't stop going around and don't forget.
Before I could sometimes forget, and now I can't

and that's winning and losing something.
And that doesn't only generate despair or sadness or helplessness,
I also feel that a power is acquired with the knowledge that I no longer forget,
with the fact that my chest and my stomach are bound to that place,
that land is so heavy.

The question is no longer how to channel a dead person or the dead in themselves,
But how to channel a vibration que retumba, it rumbles and it does not stop,
a death drive, a tremor under the earth that announces that we can no longer forget.

It's as if a tube is always connected from me to there, and it doesn't let me forget it anymore. And I know so many of us have all those tubes connecting them to places, close and far.

I would like to dwell, to stay inside that hole with others.
To create the possibilities so that this hole can be inhabited for a while and that during that time, not only we won't forget but also
We will see what else is in that black cave.
To enter a little cave of the Aka Pacha and to linger there,
because it is that negative that sustains us
as well.

A density of space
Knots that do not let go.
Not to tell the story of what generated the knot,
but to be there, inside of it.
A darkness, a fear, a warmth, of gathering inside there.

(Catalina Insignares, research journal)



After the humbling learning we had to do in Nuquí, and after dwelling in our incapacity of responding to that situation for over a year, we decided to propose another collective practice called, *to know the vultures so well*.

This is a listening experience proposed to a group of people, or audience. Five moving speakers, each one playing a different playlist containing songs or sounds that are in relation to a dead person (human or not). One of the playlists is made by songs that the group gives us on that day. Then they sit and listen to a loud, sometimes overwhelming, cacophony of the five playlists sounding at the same time. Carolina and I start moving the speakers around the space allowing different acoustic relations to take place between speakers and between them and the people, dead or alive. This work is for us a way of training how to listen to the dead that come in multitudes, because they have always been part of the collective, to the dead that are so much a part of the constant background noise that we sometimes don't manage to hear them. It is a work that trains this group of people to listen through what seems to be unbearable noise; to listen to other affective, sonic, vibratory information; to train how to not shut down when we are overwhelmed, but to keep engaging, leaning into the discomfort, to sustain the listening of the tumult of the worlds inside and outside.

Within the practice, loss is acting as an amplifier of connections with the world. Loss shows up as constitutive to living, and death exits the realm of the unthinkable, of the notion of a limit beyond which we cannot know. In cyclical time there is no origin story, and there is also no ending. There is mystery, there is loss, there is grief that undoes the self, but these things are what being is and they can then be embraced, instead of avoided. Seeing death as part of life does not stop the grieving and the mourning, it does not dissolve the fear of death, but it does mean that we can inhabit the affective places made of the discomfort of loss and the discomfort of not knowing.

In 2021, I invited Camila Marambio as part of a program I was curating to performatively expand her writing and thinking with cancer and necro-powers. In the end of the performance, *The House of Cancer*, she, together with the sound artist Ariel Bustamante, conjured and repeated these words over and over: "*hay enfermedad porque hay medicina, hay enfermedad porque hay medicina, por debajo, dispuesta, y la tenemos que encontrar.*" There is sickness because there is medicine, underneath and we need to find it. This has been a spiritual teaching that they received and passed on, and it has remained with me. There is loss, because there is grieving. Grieving is what constitutes and facilitates change. We need change; therefore, we need loss. A world without loss is an illusion that would want us to believe we can remain identical, to believe we can remain, to believe we will not die. In a recent talk with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2024), she was talking about the bread that is made in Bolivia for the altars to the dead. She said it is absolutely necessary that this hard bread-dough is strongly massaged and rubbed, *sobada*, so that your body heats up and you sweat. The bread needs your sweat, and it also needs your tears. We need to give our body liquids to the dead, the dead need to be fed this bread, we need to literally lose parts of ourselves for us to continue living.

[...] Wailing, i pull my hair
suck snot back and swallow it
place both hands over the wound
but after all these years
it still bleeds
never realizing that to heal
there must be wounds
to repair there must be damage
for light there must be darkness.

(Anzaldúa [2002] 2009, 249)



Figure 2: A dead cat in the beach of Nuqui. Photo by Carolina Mendonça.

Notes

¹ I started writing this text in September 2023, I've been re-writing and editing for months now, and all along, I have, as probably you all have, seen hundreds of images and read horror stories on the killings of the Palestinian people. Every time I go back to the text, every time the notion of a plural idea of "the dead" is with me, I sense this growing number of murdered people. It has been like that before I started writing; there has always been ongoing genocides, but the scale and horror of what is happening in Palestine today is relentlessly screaming to me and leaving no escape, to in the very least, feel the un-bridging distance between the air entering my lungs, the sun touching my skin, the laughter in my days, and all those manifestations of life that are disappearing every second. I do not address this explicitly in the text, as I do not address this explicitly in my practice, but I did not want you to start reading without us invoking all those children, all those people, and making space for them in the weight of our hearts.

² The actual numbers come from the Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica) in 2022.

³ One person that has been such an important figure for making me read voices that resonate, challenge and push further my thinking is Tamara Antonijevic. I see this text as the counterpart to a text I asked her to write in response to my practice and that we co-edited with Das Publishing and De Nieuwe Dansbibliotheek, *High Shine* (Antonijevic 2023).

⁴ Very early in the research, I came across Vinciane Despret's book *Au bonheur des morts* (La Découverte, 2015), and her thinking of the dead as agents resonated deeply with the ways in which people had spoken about the dead around me throughout my up-bringing. Also, her analysis of the West's apparent disenchantment allowed me to bring together two epistemologies that were co-existing in me. Her work got intertwined with my research in ways so deep that I can't even disentangle. Her book is now translated in English: *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of those left behind* (Despret 2021).

⁵ In particular, the witch and psychic Ana Ortiz has been great company and a dialogical force in the past years. A talk between her and ecologist Brigitte Baptiste took place as part of the development of my research in the DAS Third research program in Amsterdam (Baptiste et al 2021).

⁶ María del Rosario Acosta López (2019) touches precisely and delicately upon this idea of silences and silencing in the context of the labouring of Historical Memory that has been taking place in Colombia after the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC in 2016. Her article, "Gramáticas de la escucha: aproximaciones filosóficas a la construcción de memoria histórica," was a beautiful recommendation for a resonator to the listening that this text proposes.

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Biography

Catalina Insignares is a Colombian choreographer and dancer based in Brussels. She's interested in how to use the sensorial and fictional means of the body and of touch to develop ways to communicate with the invisible. Her practice includes, among others, a duet danced with a participant over a few weeks (*us as a useless duet*, 2015), a night reading addressed to sleeping bodies (*useless land*, 2017), and sensory practices that listen to the connections we have with the dead (*landscapes of the dead*, 2019; *to know the vultures so well*, 2022). Since 2015, she collaborates with Carolina Mendonça, maintaining close complicity in different manners of working together. Since 2017, she has been working with Myriam Lefkowitz in a collaboration that seeks to infiltrate sensory practices in the social and political realities of exiled people (*La facultad*, 2017). From 2019 to 2022 Catalina developed her research as part of DAS THIRD in Amsterdam. From 2019 to 2024 she was a co-curator at the Gessnerallee in Zurich, where she developed the festival El Caldo and the curatorial programme Discrete. Catalina has been periodically invited to intervene at DAS Choreography, as a teacher or mentor, and more recently at P.A.R.T.S for the Master program. She teaches in the Master Program Live Art Forms in the Nuremberg Academy of Fine Arts.

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