

The World Humanities Report

Toward an Undisciplined Listening

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar
in conversation with
María del Rosario Acosta López



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for funding this project.

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This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Castillejo-Cuéllar, Alejandro. "Toward an Undisciplined Listening." Interview by María del Rosario Acosta López. In *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, edited by María del Rosario Acosta López. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

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Toward an Undisciplined Listening

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María del Rosario Acosta López: Alejandro, to begin, I would like you to tell us about the trajectory that led you to work in the field that here in Colombia we call, among other things, “historical memory.” I would also like to hear about how you became a member of the Truth Commission,¹ which I know starts with your work in South Africa and passes through a series of fieldwork experiences that you have collected in some of your writings.² When I met you in 2007 (I had just started working at the University of the Andes), you were working on a series of projects connected with the Historical Memory Group. Specifically, you were working on a report that you titled *Tras los rastros del cuerpo* (Following the traces of the body). This report ended up being partially included in another report, *Justicia y paz: ¿Verdad judicial o verdad histórica?* (Justice and peace: Judicial truth or historical truth?); those of us who knew your work could see where and how it

* All interviews included in this project took place in June–July 2021. To keep their original nature and tone, they were not significantly updated and therefore might contain information, references, or comments that have become outdated by the time of publication.

¹ The Commission for Clarification of Truth in Colombia (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad), usually known as the Truth Commission, was established in the context of the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian state and the communist guerrilla Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo, FARC–EP).—Trans.

² See, among other works, Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, *Poética de lo otro: Una antropología de la guerra, la soledad y el exilio interno en Colombia* [Poetics of otherness: Anthropology of war, solitude, and internal exile in Colombia], vol. 1 (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, Universidad de los Andes, [2000] 2016); Castillejo-Cuéllar, *Los archivos del dolor: Ensayos sobre la violencia y el recuerdo en la Suráfrica contemporánea* [Archives of pain: Essays on violence and memory in contemporary South Africa], vol. 2 (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, [2009] 2013); and Castillejo-Cuéllar, *La metástasis del terror: Meditaciones intempestivas sobre la violencia en México* [Terror’s metastasis: Untimely reflections on violence in Mexico] (Mexico: Portal Lado Be/Pie de Página, 2018).

was included.³ Please tell us about what happened with all this, about how you started working with, and later distanced yourself from, the Historical Memory Group—which later became the National Historical Memory Center—and how this led you to your current work with the Truth Commission.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: OK. It all started with *Poética de lo otro* (Poetics of otherness). The fieldwork for the book started in 1997. I had just returned from a season in Europe, particularly in Austria and Spain, where I had met some refugees from Rwanda. Then, when I returned to Colombia, I wrote this book on forced displacement. It was a very heterodox book because two chapters were literally centered on people's testimonies and stories. Nobody had done anything like it until then. I received much criticism from academics because I centered the testimonies themselves and was not willing to exegetically interpret or provide commentary on them. This criticism raised for me the question about the boundary between the academic book and the book understood, as it is in my work, as a *resonance box* that is still rigorous and has a dynamic relationship with so-called theory. In a previous book-exploration, written when I was very young, only twenty-six, titled *Antropología, posmodernidad y diferencia*,⁴ I had explored with a more philosophical gaze the relations between voice and alterity. I later brought this concern into *Poética*. Everything really began there. All the big questions that appear in my other books, and that ended up becoming a trilogy on silence, absence, and fracture, were born in *Poética*. I then took to South Africa all these questions, especially the question about space and terror, about the cartographies of terror that I had described at the end of the 1990s and published at the beginning of the 2000s. I took my questions to South Africa, though not without first going through Auschwitz, which was originally going to be the focus of my doctoral thesis in the United States.

I then became involved for over a year in studies about the phenomenon of the international traffic of human organs. I could not deal with this, and for

³ See the forthcoming ethnography, Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, *Tras los rastros del cuerpo: Etnofonías, (in)materialidades y la vida sensible de la desaparición en Colombia* [Following the traces of the body: Ethnophonies, (im)material rests and the sensitive life of disappearance in Colombia], vol. 3. This is the third volume of an ethnographic trilogy about fractures, silences, and absences. Fragments of this text were published in Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Justicia y paz: ¿Verdad judicial o verdad histórica?* (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2012), <https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Justicia-y-Paz-Verdad-judicial-o-verdad-historica.pdf>.

⁴ Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, *Antropología, posmodernidad y diferencia: Un examen crítico al debate antropológico y cultural del fin de siglo* [Anthropology, postmodernity, and difference: A critical examination of the anthropological and cultural debate of the end of the century] (Bogotá: Instituto de Investigaciones Signos e Imágenes Editores, 1997).

various reasons, including my personal life, I ended up working in Cape Town. I translated the questions gathered in *Poética*—questions about the meaning of narrating forced displacement and about the relationship between space and violence—into my work there. Besides these, another question that accompanied me in that period was how violence introduces alterity into the world of life.

So when I arrived in South Africa and asked myself these questions, I encountered in a very tangible way what foreign anthropologists often find when they come to Latin America or go to Africa: namely, that they are too “White” for the context, and that they do not speak the language well enough. This also happens, however, when you work in rural Colombia. At that point I started having radical doubts about the geopolitics of the production of knowledge. I, in fact, started to realize that what was for me only a narrative in *Poética* becomes “historical memory” when it is institutionalized. I realized this because it was the debate that they were having at the time in South Africa. So, what I had written about as “forced displacement” in Colombia was called “memory” or “memory studies” in South Africa. I thus discovered that there is a relationship between memory, transitional justice, and the gigantic machinery that revolves around reflecting on a violent past.

Poética is one of the germinal texts that turned toward experience in the context of the study of violence in Colombia. All of this was concentrated in South Africa, so I ended up bringing back to Colombia a much more global and critical reflection on transition and truth commissions. Almost by chance, I later became involved in an investigation carried out by the Historical Memory Group, where I carried out an ethnography of the very process of justice and peace.⁵ This is how I ended up landing in what we called Critical Studies of Political Transitions (PECT), the program that I founded at the University of the Andes.

So obviously at such a point you start reflecting about the materiality and immateriality of what we call “memory” or about the relations through which specific societies or communities establish themselves through different pasts. How can a wound be recognized? Who can measure a wound? Who can quantify it? All these questions turned into a research project at PECT, which I would call “productions of the past.”

This is my trajectory in broad strokes. I have always been very concerned with testimonial issues, with seemingly irrelevant questions: What does it mean “to listen”? Or what does it mean “to hear”? Or, even, what does it mean “to

⁵ See Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Justicia y paz*, where Castillejo is listed as contributor.

have a voice”? Or, what even *is* a voice? (By the way, no one has ever been able to give me an answer to this last question.) These are the kinds of issues that interest me. I like to stay close to what is obvious in these issues, because I understand that complexities lie in the obvious. And I have continued writing as time passes. I wrote *Poética*, the first volume. Then, I wrote *Archivos del dolor* (Archives of pain), the second volume. Right now, I am halfway through the book that you mentioned, *Tras los rastros del cuerpo*. I was starting my ethnographic fieldwork at the state coroner laboratories when the Truth Commission came about. Because of this, I have not made much progress on the book; it is halfway done; some chapters have been published, others have not.⁶

Now finally, in relation to the Truth Commission, the story is similar. First, it is an opportunity to do ethnographies of the productions of the past. And second, I believe that a critical reading of what truth commissions' processes have lacked can contribute to addressing some failures and insidious issues that have emerged in other commissions. So, though I was full of doubts, I presented my candidacy to the commission. Working now inside the commission has allowed me to return to questions that I address in my classes: What does the practice of historical memory entail? What is even involved in the practices of memory? I ask these questions no longer as an academic, because, despite being in the university, I have always had a nonacademic agenda in my work. The questions are: How can you be inside an institution and, at the same time, be somewhat at the margins of the institution, at its external borders? What can you contribute from there, and what is beyond your contribution? All in all, it has been a very interesting learning experience. It has even been an opportunity to do very beautiful things. I believe my current work with the commission closes a trajectory that began with the question about the voice.

I am not sure what is coming after my work with the commission. The testimonial volume that I am editing for the commission is, however, like a closure, an obvious closure for me. After so much traveling, so many difficulties in different aspects of my life, and thinking about the past, the most obvious closure is to think through all this from the perspective of a truth commission and to see how my work can contribute an alternative perspective on their processes. This is how I understand and approach what I do for the commission.

⁶ See, among the published chapters, Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Utopía y desarraigo” [Utopia and uprootedness], *International Journal on Collective Identity Research* 1 (2015): 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1387/pceic.13036>; and Castillejo-Cuéllar “El dispositivo transicional: De las administraciones de la incertidumbre a las nuevas socialidades emergentes” [The transitional device: From the administrations of uncertainty to the new emerging socialities], *Papeles del CEIC* 1 (2021): 1–15, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1387/pceic.21624>.

María del Rosario Acosta López: So, Alejandro, from what you are saying, it seems as though you are still invested in the concept of historical memory. I would like you to tell me, in your own words and from the perspective of your own process, what distinguishes this notion of historical memory from others? And why is it important to keep working with this notion even though it cannot figure in the title of what you are producing for the Truth Commission?

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Well, what I can tell you is that I say “historical memory” because I understand that this is the language normally used to talk about the relationship and the links people have with the past. I still avoid using the word “memory,” however, because I think that it fossilizes relationships with violent pasts in a limited model of time. There are, nevertheless, aspects of the concept that do interest me, of course. How do macro-historical general processes become conjugated and intersect with intimate and personal processes (what I call “itineraries of sense”)? What are the corporeal, aesthetic-political, or sensorial languages in which this intersection is materialized?⁷ In this way, I am indeed interested in memory in my work, but I situate this intersection in the phenomenological everydayness of people, unlike a project of historical memory that is actually preoccupied with looking for the historical causality of events. So the volume that I am editing for the Truth Commission is actually situated in what I call the “reverberations of violence” or the “echoes of violence” in the lives of people, particularly their everyday lives.

I thus attempt to decenter myself from the “orders of discourse” established by the transitional mechanism, so as to inquire into other social forms of pain. Currently, for example, I am exploring the testimonies of the trees and

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the historically situated layers of devastation. I think this is what I would say is my “investment.” I am “invested” in ways of narrating the nation outside of certain cartographies. Because of this, I have had to acquire deep knowledge about the system of information—dangerously deep knowledge, I dare say. This is why I call it an “investment.”

⁷ See Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, “De las grafías a las fonías: La voz, lo (in)audible y los lugares de desaparición” [From -graphies to -phonies: On voice, the (in)audible and places of disappearance], *Fractal: Revista iberoamericana de ensayo y literatura* 90 (2021), <https://mxfractal.org/articulos/RevistaFractal90Castillejo.php>.

María del Rosario Acosta López: This is very interesting because it shows the history of how the term “historical memory” has been appropriated in very specific contexts in Colombia and how this notion brings with it a political charge that is highly problematic at this moment.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: I agree.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I would say that historical memory was the least institutional approach in the beginning. One could even speak of “counter-memory” to describe much of the work around historical memory in Colombia. The term “historical memory,” however, is currently loaded with very clear and totalizing political decisions during Duque’s government,⁸ decisions directed toward telling an official history, as is the case with the new direction of the National Historical Memory Center, with all the problems that we know have surrounded a project like the center.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Definitely. And what makes all of this worse, I would dare say, is that fifteen years after the inception of the language of memory and of hearing about grotesque events ad nauseum, only now are we “becoming conscious” of the well-known mantra that memory is a contentious field. Some even thought that the question about memory had been resolved with its conversion into public policy or into some kind of “ministry” of the testimony.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I believe it was first necessary to institutionalize the tasks of memory work. It was necessary to centralize them during the discussion about transition, reparation, ending the armed conflict, and so on. However, the dispute over who decides how far to take the plurality of memory emerges as soon as one begins the task of building precisely this plural, diverse, polyphonic, kaleidoscopic memory—as you have described it. There seems to be a lack of cogent arguments to counteract the state’s initiative of an “official”

⁸ Iván Duque Márquez was president of the Republic of Colombia between August 7, 2018, and August 7, 2022.—Trans.

history, which contradicts, I believe, what the National Historical Memory Center was able to institutionalize prior to Duque's government.⁹

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Yes, for fifteen years there was unanimity. We agreed that there were victims and that there was state violence—and that was the whole story. It was evident, however, that a moment like the current one was going to come.¹⁰ I could imagine a director of the National Historical Memory Center saying: “FARC also produced a lot of victims, and there are voices here that have not been heard.” How could this not happen? It is precisely what has happened but in a disjunctive way. What lingers in the air is a stench of revisionism. So this is the mistake, and this is not only happening in Colombia. I think there is a certain atrocious tendency in Latin America toward revisionism. At the present moment I rather ask myself, Did we really think that the language of transitions and human rights was going to be the antidote against historical revisionism and negationist tendencies? So this path leads straight to questioning the themes of transition as a teleology.

María del Rosario Acosta López: This is true. I agree. Alejandro, I think that this has a lot to do with something else that I wanted to talk about with you; these issues in fact have many ramifications. On the one hand, we have the way in which your work is concerned with demanding the centrality of the testimony itself, as you have been saying from the beginning. On the other, we have the ways in which the centrality of the testimony also leads to a question that I would say is philosophical (if we have to use the language of disciplines). The centrality of the testimony not only leads to a question about, as you say, the meaning of “listening,” but it also raises the issue of what criteria determine in advance what is “audible” and what is not. What is and what is not inaudible in specific contexts? In your own words, there are some cartographies established in advance that must be broken.

⁹ President Duque's government, following the line of his party, the right-wing Centro Democrático (Democratic Center), actively attempted to shift the orientation of the work of the National Historical Memory Center. Before his government, the center held that there had been an armed conflict in Colombia involving not only illegal organizations but the Colombian state itself, but under Duque's government the center's position, expressed by the director appointed by the president, denies the existence of an armed conflict involving the state as an agent. The new institutional narrative asserts that there never was a conflict, but rather an irregular war between a legitimate state and a variety of criminal organizations. As a consequence, many of the voices of victims of the armed conflict have been excluded from institutionalized historical memory.—Trans.

¹⁰ By the “current moment” Castillejo refers to former president Duque's policies regarding the National Historical Memory Center (see note 11).—Trans.

Here a question also emerges about your discipline and the “undisciplined” in your practice, about the undisciplined at the heart of the relation between ethnography and anthropology in your work. When you redefine your work no longer in terms of ethnography but even of *ethnophony* (*etnofonía*), what do you intend to do to challenge the priority traditionally assigned to inscription and writing and to, as you say, challenge certain cartographies that determine in advance what is registered and what is not—indeed, what can actually *be* registered? I see a long-sustained continuity in your work on this point. You are concerned with what escapes us when we not only do not listen but also do not inquire into the criteria that make possible what becomes audible or not. The point is therefore not only about one’s disposition to listening, but about the fact that from the beginning we must change or at least question certain criteria so that what otherwise remains inaudible can be listened to.

From this, we also move into the rather complex question about translating the aural into the written while also changing the practice of writing. From a perhaps theoretical or disciplinary point of view, this seems to be one of the most current and central proposals in your academic practice. In this context, I use the notion of the *inaudito*¹¹ in my own work. I often emphasize that in Spanish, *inaudito* is a word with two fundamental meanings. On the one hand, it refers, of course, to what has not yet become audible. In this sense, it has to do with the epistemological question that you raise, namely, what does it mean to develop epistemologies committed to other ways of sense transmission, other ways of making the narratives of testimonies perceptible and sensible? On this point, for instance, you have talked about “aural epistemologies.” On the other hand, the *inaudito* brings with it the burden of the ethical, because it is something that challenges our ethical imagination, something for which we do not yet have adequate concepts. We say in Spanish: “Esto es absolutamente inaudito!” The *inaudito* thus entails the radical challenge that some historical events, and particularly certain violent historical events, pose to our pre-given semantic categories. In this way, it invites us to look for other modes of making sense, other conceptual frameworks, other “grammars”—as I call them in my work—that may allow us to listen and make audible what otherwise ends up being doubly silenced—by violence, in the first place, and then by a recurrent impossibility of making itself audible.

¹¹ As the interviewer will explain, the word *inaudito* has a double meaning in Spanish. This double meaning is central in Acosta’s recent work on grammars of listening (see for instance María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo *inaudito* as Decolonial Grammars: Notes for a Decolonization of Memory,” *Research in Phenomenology* 52, no. 2 [2022]: 203–22). Because of this, I have chosen to leave the word untranslated in this context.—Trans.

Please tell us about this constellation of questions and problematics that both in the past and in the present have guided you in your work. These questions that have guided you through your work with historical memory (or whatever we want to call it) and that now frame a very clear commitment on your part to a “disciplinary” approach that can in fact be “undisciplined.” I am not sure if my question is clear, but I would like to hear you talk about this.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: It is a very clear question. I will share a trivial anecdote. One time, a French reporter with France TV or something like that came to the university while she was in Bogotá doing some kind of journalistic work. She came to the university and listened to me for close to an hour. At the end, as if in a fantastic lapse, she told me: “Your undisciplined perspective is very interesting.” What she wanted to say was *disciplinary* perspective; she immediately made an apology. I, however, told her: “There is no need to apologize! In fact, I am going to quote your words because this is exactly what I want, what I want to do.”

Now this question of discipline has very many ins and outs. I have always felt close to music. However, starting about three or four years ago, and probably influenced by Pink Floyd (someday I will have to write an essay in honor of Pink Floyd, by the way), I began listening to music more seriously. I started listening to new music, contemporary music from the classical tradition, what in Germany they call the *Neue Musik*. Slowly, I started reading about this new music while also looking for what I was going to do for the next fifteen years; I still have a lot of time, and I do not want to become ossified in a single language or area of work. I rediscovered authors and composers that I had abandoned, and suddenly a chip in my brain that said “listen differently” turned on. I immediately started transcribing the archive of interviews I collected in 1997–98 for the book *Desplazamiento* (Displacement),¹² and so digitized the archive. They were cassettes with over eighty hours of recording. When we were done, two things struck me greatly. The first one was our obsession, mine and yours, our obsession in the universities with the semantic and the textual. We only want from people what they tell us and the meaning of what they say. This is what interests us. We transcribe the interviews and forget about the cassettes (these cassettes were lost for ten years, I had to resort to military-like “intelligence” to find them; isn’t this quite something?) So, what interests us for our exegesis, or hermeneutics, or analysis, or whatever it is, is only *what* people say.

¹² See Alejandro Castillejo, “El desplazamiento: Descenso al ‘infierno’ o la cartografía del terror,” *Suma Cultural* 1, no. 1 (2000): 167–209. This article is an early publication of chapter 5, “El descenso al inframundo,” in *Poética de lo otro*.

While hearing and reading the transcriptions, the truly fascinating part for me was everything around the interview; the interviews themselves didn't matter to me anymore. At that moment, I came to a terrible conclusion: we as researchers work with an abstraction that we call *la palabra*.¹³ Words and speech are completely abstracted from their conditions of enunciation. I, however, only came to this realization relatively recently, only a few years back. Listening is not only, as you say, a disposition—which it is; it is a complex disposition, among other things. It is, however, also a kind of oscillation between the meaning and the philosophical sense of listening, namely, even the word “voice” has different tonalities, according to the side of the pendulum. From this moment I started attending to this oscillation between the sensible and the intelligible. I realized too that I had already been working on this in my book about absence, *Archivos del dolor*.

Then the question came to me: how am I going to talk about forced disappearance and absence with a present and material object? How can I talk about absence through a text? This entailed at least some questions that then, about five years ago, intersected with the dimension of the sonorous. It thus occurred to me, What better way is there to talk about absence than through sound? Sound is a form of presence that is intangible to the eyes; it is a different form of presence. I recalled the object of the incense in the Catholic Church; the way that it is used in the abbeys to give the feeling that Jesus is there, even if we cannot see him. So I took up sound recording and bought the equipment to do it more professionally. I put myself to the task of making a large archive and came up with a project called “Los lugares obliterados” (The obliterated places). The project consists in sitting around to take pictures and record sounds in all the places of disappearance in Colombia: in bodies of water, cliffs, holes. It started becoming articulated in a book called *Tras los rastros del cuerpo*. It is, in fact, a book about searching and, of course, about absence.

Everything started coming together there. At a certain moment I thought: “Well, I think I can use the sensory to approach other things.” I started wondering what would happen if I took away the suffix *-graphy* from all the terms that we use in the social sciences and replaced it with the notion of *-phony*. What would geography be if it were a geo-phony? Or what would an ethnophony be compared to an ethnography? I could not stop after I started moving in this direction. Immediately my universe was totally widened in theoretical terms because of the number of things I found. I read Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a very different way, for example. I was also thrown into the technological field. I

¹³ *Palabra* in Spanish has the double sense of “word” and “speech.”—Trans.

had to learn to operate the equipment, to follow the processes, to learn about my own limitations regarding technology. Thus, slowly ethnography became for me a “phony,” and a gigantic universe of lack-of-knowledge [*desconocimiento*] opened up and fascinated me. And as an artist friend likes to tell me, without wanting to become a sound artist I have become a researcher that grounds his work in sound creation.

I then started to inhabit a kind of border zone between documentation and creation. I started to understand that technology and, as you point out, the arts and the humanities are creative universes that can be part of academic work. I realized at the same time that the relation between “academic work” and “creative work” is one of close conversation though no longer from the exterior, no longer from the perspective of the critic that critiques the artwork, but from the perspective of someone working from within with their own hands.

This is my trajectory. After it all started, well, I have not been able to stop following this line; so much so that all my work with the Truth Commission is the exploration of this area between creation and documentation. It is in fact impossible for me to think in different terms at this point.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Alejandro, when I hear you talk, I think a lot about a critique often thrown at my work. I am asking you if I understand you correctly when I say the following. People say to me: “You seem to be exchanging one hierarchy for another one; the visible occupies a central place, and you want to change this, to make it so that the sonorous, the aural, or the auditory starts occupying that central place.” I have insisted that the need to entirely change the grammars with which we organize the sensible arises when you start attending to another sense. Everything changes when you start attending to other modes of doing and listening precisely because you are giving importance to things that disappear if you only focus on the “visible,” for example. I insist on a redistribution of the sensible that, then, does not involve privileging the aural but rather dismantling—or at least starting to dismantle—all these hierarchies that we are given in advance and of which we are not even conscious when we perceive the world. You gave the example of the incense because it is not only about the auditory. The point is to start to understand, as you say in many of your works, the corporeal in a much more material sense that involves the redistribution of the sensible and of sense, in the multiple senses of the word “sense” that you bring to light in your work.

So that is how I respond when I receive this critique. I would like to emphasize this a little so that it does not sound simply like it is a matter of sound and

the auditory. The point is that they open up a completely different world of perception that can allow us to interpret the other senses in different ways as well. I don't know how you relate to this question; I receive this criticism a lot.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: OK. We could say that I have materialized these things by saying that there is a method to listening and by imploding the word “listening.” For example, part of my work has been to explain to my colleagues that, for me, “listening” is not what a person does when they stand in front of another person with a tape recorder. “Listening” has to do with the possibility of attending to the social processes through which people's words reverberate and create echoes of previous generations and social contexts. I see listening more as a long and complex social process that begins with the simple desire to go and listen and continues when we sit down and listen and in the process of transcription. Transcription is also a form of listening—to transcribe is to hear—and listening passes through what we do after transcription, when we decide what to highlight from what a person said, and what ends up domesticated, boxed in the argument of a book, for example, or a report. The report will highlight some words and not others, and therefore, from the perspectives of the society to which it is addressed, it will listen to some and not to others. Listening is thus a long process. What we have to ask is: How does this all circulate?

In the end, the debate is about affectivity. I approach this question from the perspective of the sensorial. For me, affect is an expression of personal vibration; sound has a properly physiological dimension. I am profoundly concerned with the multiple perceptual and sensorial changes that human beings go through to construct and inhabit their world. And inhabiting, again, is for me an oscillation between the sensible (what is felt) and entelechy (conceptualization and comprehension). I am interested in asking about the interfaces of what we call “culture” and what we call “the material world.” My humble approach is to take the path that I like the most, the world of sound. I could talk about the world of the tactile, which is absolutely fascinating as well, but it entails a very different conversation. To talk about the tactile, you would have to know about a different physiology: the physiology of touch is not the same as the ear's, and so on. All in all, when you insert the sensible into what we have always done—knowing, producing knowledges—when you “introduce the sensible,” you can choose five different paths. You can walk the path of knowledge from hearing or from any of the other senses, and I chose the path of the sonorous. When I did this, I simply understood that this is a world in itself, one that throws me into different conversations and even takes me a little bit outside the hegemonic

debates of the social sciences. Questions like: When is the vibration of sound in the air captured by the ear? When does sound become music? When does vibration become word? What is the bridge between word and vibration?

I am not interested in establishing what is more interesting or more hierarchically important, whether seeing or hearing, because, by the way, I believe that academic work does both. We see and we hear; sometimes we even touch. It is rather an epistemological adventure: What does it really mean to listen to the world? I designed a method, and I feel like listening involves the whole body. This intuition has now traversed all my work, and there is nothing to do about that. I take the idea that knowledge is embodied seriously as well as all the epistemological questions that come with that: How is it that we learn to hear in one way rather than another? How are there truly audible things as well as inaudible ones?

María del Rosario Acosta López: Of course. The question is, precisely, beyond the human, about what remains without being heard and what resonates without being perceived.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Exactly. I have been exploring other things that I have not been able to work on properly yet. The sounds of nature are important in this context as well. The path of the sonorous has been and still is a totally different and distinct exploratory path, especially on a personal level. The fact that it has coincided with other debates is a different story. For me, it is a road of personal adventure.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Yes, of course. Besides, this is a path you have walked for a long time. It has been a long-term work. I think that your current approach brings together a number of things that were already reverberating in your previous work. I would like to know, however, given that you are now a part of the Truth Commission, how do you feel that your work has changed in the commission? Has it changed you? Has it affected you? Has it taken you to unexpected places? And also, what have you brought into the work of the commission, precisely, with all this experience and this particular attention to questions that, as you said, others have not formulated? I would like an answer to this double confluence: what you bring to the work, and what the work with the Truth Commission has brought to you.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: The commission has shown me that these mechanisms are made of actual human beings, discussing human things, all too human. This is actually something that I already knew, but I now see it every day. It has perhaps allowed me to substantiate some things more deeply. I have found truer examples of things that I had already thought about. It has brought me, to put it in a different way, a certain ethnographic capacity to understand the productions of truth. This makes me happy; being able to be an ethnographer in this context makes me happy.

Moreover, I feel that I have been able to find a place for myself there, though it is a rather contested place because it did not exist before. The simple fact of having proposed the commission as a “sonosphere”¹⁴ was an extremely weird thing at first, and it is still strange. People say, “‘Sound’ and ‘commission’? This must be Castillejo.” This is paradoxical because we talk about the commission as a mechanism of listening. The commission, however, inherited academia’s blind spots, where listening means to attend to the meaning and the text. So in these circumstances I thought: “I must make a place for myself here.” Through reflection and strategy, I was able to argue that truth commissions always revolve around issues of clarification and that the voices of people, the testimonies of people, end up being totally irrelevant with respect to the clarification of facts and events.

In this sense, I feel like the truth commission mechanisms that I studied in South Africa and in Peru have centered on the concept of clarification as total truth. They inhabited a strange place because they ground their processes of clarification (with comparison as their methodological foundation) on the “voices.” This evidently has some limitations. When the moment came, I told them: “We have two definitions of testimony here.” One is a function of corroboration. There should, however, be another dimension of the testimony that is not about corroboration but, rather, involves trying to understand, as anthropologists say, the words of people from their own point of view and from their own worlds. I believe that this is an interesting task. It is innovative in some capacity because there have not been many commissions that do this; they have not tried to understand the languages of pain and hope from the point of view of the society where the hope and pain are happening.

With this, I started building the volume for the commission that is, at the same time, a closure in relation to my own work. The volume is in a sense a version of *Poética de lo otro* but on the scale of the nation. It is organized around concepts—fragmentations, subjectivities, spatiality, corporeality, and others—that, in my opinion, are fundamental to understanding any war and

¹⁴ Castillejo’s neologism is *sonósfera*.—Trans.

any violence from the perspective of everyday life concepts. I also proposed that the last part of the commission's volume should make an effort to listen with a forward-looking perspective—what I call “prospective listening.” This would have been new, because every commission is retrospective, always looking to the past. The Truth Commission has not really taken up prospective listening, as its interests understandably lie elsewhere, but it nonetheless gave me the opportunity to create a complementary process to look for and build new stories in a futural perspective. In this context, we are preparing a beautiful project called “Territorios de la escucha” (Territories of listening), which has to do with creat-

Truth commissions have not tried to understand the languages of pain and hope from the point of view of the society where the hope and pain are happening.

ing eight new stories about the future in the Colombian Caribbean. We have collected these stories by walking around talking to people.¹⁵

The commission's volume is not strictly speaking testimonial fragments but stories within stories told by people. I have also introduced my approach through sound and the aural and ended up producing a digital platform for that aspect of the work.¹⁶ Everything really just fell into place. This is why I was saying that the work that I do with the commission makes me happy. I like it because I really feel as though it is an opportunity to be able to bring together everything I have done throughout the years, from the most orthodox to the least orthodox, and to create projects and even imagine futures—to do different things. I feel like I am in the best possible situation to do this, and I also have the resources and many committed people working with me.

In summary, I feel like what I bring to the commission is in fact a different vision of the issues of memory and testimony. At the same time, the commission became a propitious space to bring long-standing concerns to a close and to open up toward new things as well. I am already imagining, for example, presenting a testimonial report in November this year within a sonorous space. I want to situate it in multiple places throughout the country. These are such beautiful things, and this is the only moment when they can be done. This will never happen again.

¹⁵ See Comisión de la Verdad, “Territorios de la escucha” [Territories of listening], July 18, 2021, video, 4:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yE-J59GqZkI&t=61s>.

¹⁶ See Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar, “Ethnophonías: De las grafías a las fonías” [Ethnophonies: From *-graphies* to *-phonies*], field recordings, uploaded in August 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/alejandrocallejo/sets/de-las-grafias-a-las-fonias>.

María del Rosario Acosta López: It is an immense opportunity as well.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Yes.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I think, however, that it is also an opportunity not only to show the need to diversify the ways of working on memory, but also to insist on the fact that memory is not a matter of the past, as you explain in many places. On the contrary, memory pertains to the present and to the possibility of opening other futures. Memory work involves attending to the “languages of pain” but also to the “languages of hope”; that is, the production of knowledge and concepts that can redefine the *future*, not only the past, among other things. It is, however, also an opportunity to blur these boundaries; for example, as you were saying before, the boundaries that mark the difference between the work in the humanities and the work in the arts. The point is not to work *on* art but rather to work so that the space and the materiality of the artistic can become an important part of the work of anthropology and ethnography as well as a part of the place that you occupy and that you propose within the Truth Commission. I am interested in finishing this interview with this question: How do you see the place of the humanities, broadly construed, in your own work on memory? How do you see the future of this productive relation? Or, better yet, how do we make these relations increasingly productive and increasingly responsible in the practical work of memory?

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Well, from what I remember very generally from my colleagues at the university, I do not think that many of them are interested in crossing the border toward other ways of saying, speaking, and writing. One time, I gave a presentation at the Pontifical Javeriana University that was very illuminating. I wanted to present sounds and images as part of an inaugural talk of the Cátedra Libre Martín Baró¹⁷ at that university. By mistake, the person responsible for the lighting misunderstood my request and ended up turning off all the lights in the auditorium leaving me in the dark. I presented completely in the dark; I had only the little light with which I was reading and showing the pictures and the sounds. Although I had not planned it, I ended up doing a performance. I was so struck by this experience that I thought: “We must present our work in new ways.” This became very clear for me in that moment.

¹⁷ The Cátedra Libre Martín Baró is a Colombian organization that designs and develops processes of research and accompanies social processes from a psychosocial perspective with the goal of dismantling multiple violences in Colombia (<http://www.catedralibremartinbaro.org/html/home1.php>).—Trans.

I do not feel like people in universities have much of a disposition toward such acts of decentering themselves. I don't know what else to call it. The logic of product standardization and hierarchization has made matters much worse.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Could we call them “undisciplined” acts? In some ways they entail giving up, or at least moving away from, our disciplinary training to give our attention to other things.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Yes, and doing it is a risk; it is always a risk. How is this translated into the work of the Truth Commission? This is the question. For example, the commission will soon have to disseminate the material collected during its legally determined period of functioning. I am starting to design something that I call “ritual readings.” I am thinking about traveling to specific places in the country where I feel that reading words out loud is weighty, the words of victims are weighty regarding death and devastation. I am not exactly sure what we will read. The idea is to bring the stories that people gave the commission. People gave the commission their words through interviews, and in my work group, we managed, through a very discreet process, to listen to these great interviews, which are stories. I want to propose a project in the form of a resonance box for those stories that also creates concrete ritualized spaces in which to read them—I call these spaces “networks of resonance”—and to read these stories with the children and youth specifically in mind. In this context, the ritual performance implies the creation of appropriate spaces for listening; we ultimately want to produce a collective disposition for listening and to create conditions of audibility. To do this, I will use the sounds that I have recorded in other places to produce specific sensorial conditions. It is a lot of effort for such short sessions, because they can be no longer than forty minutes or maybe an hour at most. This is the work that I will be doing.

Returning to what you were saying about the disciplines, I agree. I think that we must create a lot of indiscipline, even if we must do it on the basis of a very solid discipline. You can start in one discipline; I always started in anthropology. However, I also always crossed into philosophy and aesthetics, or into literature as a craft, among others. At the end of the day, I have to say that I am still somewhat of an anthropologist, but I believe that I give myself a little freedom to allow these disciplines to relate to each other, to let what we call the “creative arts” or “creativity” in itself be part of how I present my work and how I am a scholar. I think this is very important. Universities are insisting so much on some forms of academic work that they are liquidating other ways in which we

could, or should, do things. I am certain that my work as a commissioner does not help me accumulate points with Colciencias!¹⁸ Indeed, if you want to be at the “top of the list” you are not going to risk publishing a book of poetry, you are not going to risk putting together a sound installation. You are rather going to write for the journal that will earn you points because this is what gives you better pay and more prestige. So there is a huge game of risk in all this. You have to evaluate carefully when you take the risk during your career. Most likely, I would not have done any of what we are talking about twenty years ago, but I can afford to take the risk at this point. Academic institutions do not allow for “indisciplinarization”¹⁹ but rather the very opposite. This is the game they increasingly play.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Yes, Alejandro, I agree. This is a problem because the academic world, and especially its institutionalization, seems to go against the needs of academic practice. The fact is that what makes, and would make, the humanities pertinent seems to go against what makes them prestigious and valid within the university system. This gap could even separate definitively the practice of the humanities from the university. It would be a big loss for both sides.

Now, to conclude, I will ask you something that I am going to ask everyone in these interviews: Who are the authors whose work you always keep present, including Pink Floyd, which you already mentioned?

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Lately, I have inadvertently discovered influences on me that I hadn’t realized before, María del Rosario. I have discovered for instance T. S. Eliot, the poet, because of the way he describes things. I have also discovered how very deeply Samuel Beckett has influenced me, actually more than anyone else.

María del Rosario Acosta López: That makes total sense. You have mentioned the writing of silence and absence so many times in this interview . . .

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Yes, yes . . . Otherwise, in an academic sense, I feel very close to the Frankfurt School and even to the phenomenological tradi-

¹⁸ Colciencias is a department of the Colombian government in charge of promoting research, innovation, and technology in the country. It is also in charge of administering the National System of Science, Technology, and Innovation that collects information on Colombian researchers and their work and uses a point system to rank and evaluate them.—Trans.

¹⁹ Castillejo coins here the neologism *indisciplinarización*.—Trans.

tion. I, however, see more traces of Pink Floyd in my work; I see more traces of Samuel Beckett. I ask myself Paul Celan's questions all the time. These are the types of people whose questions have always concerned me.

María del Rosario Acosta López: They are, we could say, the voices that accompany you.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: Yes, they are always present, and I always return to them—artists and poets.

María del Rosario Acosta López: This makes sense in light of your work.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: To be sure, I am close with some authors. I am close . . . I don't know . . . to the early Friedrich Nietzsche, for example. But I do not consider myself a man of literary traditions. I do not subscribe to a person wholesale but rather to some of that person's moments.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Nor do you subscribe to schools.

Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar: No, not really.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you very much, Alejandro. This has been a wonderful interview. I think that you have given us a lot in a short time, and I especially think that whatever comes out of this interview has to be later complemented and confronted with what you are doing for the commission, which will be very soon publicly available.²⁰

Translated from the Spanish by Julian Rios Acuña

²⁰ See the Truth Commission's entire public final report, "Hay futuro si hay verdad" [There is a future if there is truth], available at <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/hay-futuro-si-hay-verdad>.

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