

*‘almost/ you would/ have lived’: reading
Paul Celan in Colombia*

Book or Report Section

Published Version

Elston, C. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0623-0187>
(2021) ‘almost/ you would/ have lived’: reading Paul Celan in
Colombia. In: Eskin, M., Leeder, K. and Pajevic, M. (eds.) Paul
Celan Today: A Companion. Companions to Contemporary
German Culture (10). De Gruyter. ISBN 9783110653403
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/92592/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: De Gruyter

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Cherilyn Elston

‘almost | you would | have lived’. Reading Paul Celan in Colombia

Since his death in 1970 Paul Celan’s reputation has been consolidated as ‘the greatest German-language poet’¹ or even ‘the major European poet’² of the second half of the twentieth century. This is in large part due to his status as the ‘exemplary postwar poet’,³ read in light of his biography as a Holocaust survivor and held up as the paradigmatic example of how, despite Adorno’s dictum, poetry can be still be written ‘after Auschwitz’. In this way, his famously difficult, ‘hermetic’ poems – characterized by silence, aporia and syntactical dislocation – have become the predominant aesthetic model for how to bear witness to the non-representable horror of the Holocaust, registering the catastrophe within the German language. While the complexity of Celan’s verse, with its lessons for post-Holocaust critical theory and philosophy, has resulted in a diverse body of critical literature on the poet, it has also meant that Celan – the Holocaust poet – has been largely subsumed within a predominant critical discourse on Holocaust representation. Informed by poststructuralist approaches to history and language, this critical framework saw the incomprehensibility of traumatic experience best served by textual strategies of fragmentation and testimonial failure, of which Celan’s ‘resistant, modernist aesthetics’ are the pre-eminent example.⁴

One of the consequences of this interpretative framework has been, as Marjorie Perloff notes, the placement of Celan ‘in a kind of solitary confinement’.⁵ Charles Bernstein states that a ‘crippling exceptionalism’ has isolated the poet ‘from any other poetry, contemporary or subsequent’, making ‘his work a symbol of his fate rather than an active matrix for an ongoing poetic practice’.⁶ Yet this isolation seems strange for a poet who, despite his ‘hermeticism’, in his own statements on poetry actually envisaged it as a ‘dialogue’ or an ‘encounter’; fa-

1 Paul Celan. *Selections*, ed. by Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 3.

2 George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 191.

3 John Felstiner, *Paul Celan. Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. xvii.

4 Anthony Rowland and Robert Eaglestone, ‘Introduction. Holocaust Poetry’, *Critical Survey*, 20.2 (2008), 1–6 (p. 4).

5 Marjorie Perloff, ‘A Poet’s Hope’, *Boston Review*, 1 November 2005 (<http://bostonreview.net/marjorie-perloff-paul-celan-a-poets-hope>).

6 Charles Bernstein, ‘Celan’s folds and veils’, *Textual Practice*, 18.2 (2004), 199–205 (pp. 200–1).

mously ‘a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land’.⁷ It is furthermore perplexing because, beyond the huge number of intertexts and allusions in Celan’s own poetry, his work has consistently been cited across diverse contexts, and in different artistic media, over the last half century. As Jonathan Mayhew argues, updating Benjamin’s conclusions on Baudelaire’s pan-European influences, the case could be made for Celan as a writer of ‘European repercussions’, whose relevance is ‘obviously not confined to the European continent’.⁸ This chapter, consequently, takes up Bernstein’s task ‘to imagine other, still contemporary, company for Celan’.⁹ Specifically, it makes the case for Celan’s global relevance by analysing his reappearance far from his own historical, geographical and personal topographies, and in the context of another of the twentieth century’s histories of political trauma: the Colombian conflict. The chapter focuses on how two of Colombia’s most important female artists, the sculptor Doris Salcedo and the poet María Mercedes Carranza, have dialogued with Celan’s poetry as a means of thinking through the role of art in representing violence.

Holocaust studies scholars, however, might be surprised at the claim for Celan’s significance in relation to other, geographically diverging histories of trauma, especially in non-European contexts such as Colombia. In recent years there has been a significant move within Holocaust studies to question the global applicability of paradigms derived from the Holocaust. As part of a challenge to what has been termed the field’s Eurocentric assumptions, scholars have re-examined the positioning of the Holocaust as a unique and singular event, privileged over other (non-Western) histories of genocide and violence, and have also critiqued the predominant tropes of anti-representation, ‘unspeakability’ and incomprehension associated with trauma theory and Holocaust literature, such as Celan’s poetry. As Stef Craps argues, these paradigms:

marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity; and they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma.¹⁰

⁷ Felstiner, *Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. 115.

⁸ Jonathan Mayhew, *The Twilight of the Avant-garde. Spanish Poetry 1980–2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), p.101.

⁹ Bernstein, ‘Celan’s folds and veils’, p. 200.

¹⁰ Stef Craps, ‘Beyond Eurocentrism. Trauma Theory in the Global Age’, in *The Future of Trauma Theory. Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2014), pp. 45–61 (p. 46).

According to this framework, the appropriateness of speaking about Celan, the modernist, anti-representational poet par excellence, in relation to other political traumas could be questioned. This chapter, however, argues for a more nuanced reading of Celan's life and oeuvre, which would allow us to understand his impact on a global scale and particularly his relevance in non-Western and postcolonial contexts.¹¹ Against the predominant critical interpretation, which simply situates Celan in a Western trauma canon or majoritarian European modernist tradition, this chapter argues that Celan's 'complex, migrant fate',¹² his experience of racial segregation, exile and homelessness *within* Europe – which echoes throughout his poetic language – speaks powerfully to both the postcolonial condition and artists working in other contexts, like Colombia, marked by loss and displacement. Drawing upon recent work that has traced the multi-directional links between the Holocaust and other, particularly postcolonial, histories of violence, this chapter demonstrates that the appearance of Holocaust discourses in Colombia is not a Eurocentric imposition of external trauma paradigms. Questioning the idea that anti-representational, fragmented aesthetics are solely part of a European tradition, I argue that Colombian artists have drawn on Celan's work precisely because he provides a model to explore how art can respond to the dynamics of political violence in Colombia. Significantly, this model does not only reflect, as the critical literature would seem to imply, the incomprehensibility of trauma and impossibility of testimony. As scholars have pointed out, Celan's poetry also draws upon an ontological philosophical-poetic tradition, which seeks to find a poetic language that could enact an encounter with the lost 'Other' of the Holocaust. It is here, I argue, that Carranza and Salcedo dialogue with Celan, in their creation of an aesthetic mode that recognises and makes visible the absent presence of the forgotten dead and disappeared of the Colombian conflict.

Decolonizing Holocaust studies and Celan's Holocaust legacy

Alongside the postcolonial critique of trauma theory and modernist aesthetics outlined by Craps, the recent transnational turn in memory studies has sought

11 While Latin America is part of the Western hemisphere, the category "non-Western" is understood to refer to those parts of the world outside the historically hegemonic powers of Europe and the United States.

12 Felstiner, *Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. xvii.

to challenge the singularity of the Holocaust by questioning its separation from other histories of trauma. In particular, Michael Rothberg's work challenging competitive memory models has been key to understanding how Holocaust memory did not develop in isolation but emerged in dialogue with post-Second World War decolonization processes and 'their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism'.¹³ Building on a tradition of intellectual reflection on the Holocaust, beginning with Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire and W.E.B. Du Bois, which conceptually linked the genocide of the European Jews and the history of European colonialism, Rothberg identifies a 'minoritarian tradition of "decolonized" Holocaust memory'¹⁴ that uncovers the connections between post-colonial and Holocaust studies, and analyses the interrelatedness of the Nazi genocide and the broader histories of violence, racial oppression and imperialism which have constituted the 'darker side of Western modernity'.¹⁵ Following on from Rothberg, scholars have now begun to trace the ways in which the Holocaust has enabled us to think through other histories of victimization, and how these traumas, such as the Algerian War of Independence, slavery in the US and British colonialism, among many others, have also informed Holocaust memory in a multidirectional sense.¹⁶

Within Western memory studies' comparative work, however, the dialogue between Holocaust memory and Latin America's traumatic late-twentieth-century history has received little attention. As Edna Aizenberg notes, beyond the assertion that many Nazis went into hiding in the Southern Cone, Latin America's complex engagement with the Holocaust and Nazism has been 'eclipsed' by a focus on the US, Europe and Israel.¹⁷ This has occurred despite the fact that

13 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 22.

14 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 22.

15 Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011)

16 See for example: Eaglestone "'You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I had seen". Holocaust Testimony and Contemporary African Trauma Literature', *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1–2 (2008), 72–85; Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism'; Stef Craps and Michael Rothberg, eds, *Transcultural Negotiations of Holocaust Memory*, special issue of *Criticism. A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 53.4 (2011). This also builds upon earlier work, such as Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Bryan Cheyette, 'Venetian Spaces. Old-new Literatures and the Ambivalent Uses of Jewish History' in *Reading the 'New' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 53–72.

17 Edna Aizenberg, *On the Edge of the Holocaust. The Shoah in Latin American literature and Culture* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016), p. x.

the 'Shoah has a unique echo in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and other countries of the South' after the establishment of right-wing military dictatorships in the 1970s.¹⁸ Whilst scholars in Latin American memory studies have shown how the region's own turn to memory in the 1980s was conceptually influenced by Holocaust paradigms and trauma theory – which played a key role in emerging memory debates as post-dictatorial societies struggled to come to terms with the past¹⁹ – this scholarship has largely focused on the Southern Cone dictatorships to the exclusion of other memory models in the continent that do not fit the post-dictatorial model.²⁰ Thus, the 'echo' of the Shoah in Colombia has received even less attention, notwithstanding extensive evidence of Holocaust discourses and memory paradigms in the country. These range from the use of Holocaust rhetoric to speak about specific acts of political violence in Colombia – for example the use of the term 'holocaust' to refer to the 1985 siege of the Palace of Justice,²¹ and naming the assassination of more than 3,000 members of the left-wing Patriotic Union party a 'political genocide'²² – to the emergence of Nazism and the Second World War as a key theme in recent literary works about the country's past.

While an in-depth analysis of how Holocaust memory dialogues with the Colombian conflict is beyond the scope of this essay, it is clear that Holocaust rhetoric has been articulated in Colombia as part of attempts to confront the country's history of violence. Home to the longest war in the Western hemisphere, since the mid-twentieth century Colombia has suffered the brutal effects of a complex armed conflict between the Colombian government, guerrilla forces, right-wing paramilitary groups and drug traffickers, which has left more than 220,000 people dead,²³ almost 8 million displaced,²⁴ and more than 60,000 dis-

18 Aizenberg, *On the Edge of the Holocaust*, p. 161.

19 Michael Lazzara, 'The Memory Turn', in *New Approaches to Latin American Studies. Culture and Power*, ed. by Juan Poblete (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 14–31.

20 Colombia, unlike its Latin American neighbours, did not have a right-wing military dictatorship in the late twentieth century and memory debates emerged later, in the 2000s, and *prior* to the end of the conflict.

21 Sigifredo Leal-Guerrero, "'The Holocaust' or 'The Salvation of Democracy'". Memory and Political Struggle in the Aftermath of Colombia's Palace of Justice Massacre', *Latin American Perspectives*, 42.3 (2015), 140–61 (pp. 148–49).

22 Andrei Gómez-Suárez, 'Perpetrator blocs, genocidal mentalities and geographies. The destruction of the *Union Patriótica* in Colombia and its lessons for genocide studies', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9.4 (2007), 637–60.

23 National Centre for Historical Memory, <http://www.centrodehistoriahistorica.gov.co/en/noticias/noticias-cmh/262-197-muertos-dejo-el-conflicto-armado>

24 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/colombia.html>

appeared.²⁵ In this context, Marta Cabrera points out, violence has become a central theme across literature and the visual arts,²⁶ as artists have sought ways to represent trauma, bear witness to grief and critically explore the role of art during times of war. In seeking aesthetic languages for this task, certain Colombian artists have looked to the post-Holocaust aesthetic tradition; specifically, they have looked to one artist in particular, Celan, who provided a model of how art could respond to violence. As Julie Rodrigues Widholm emphasises, Celan's poetic exploration of displacement, silence and the possibility of representing absence takes on a particular significance in relation to the specific modes of violence in Latin America:

Notions of presence and absence on a global scale take on highly charged political meanings when considered in the context of Colombia and other regions of South America, where the violent and widespread phenomenon of 'the disappeared' (*desaparecidos*) has created a culture characterized by profound loss.²⁷

However, although Celan's presence in Latin America has been noted in relation to individual artists exploring how to represent traumatic loss – specifically Salcedo's celebrated sculptures and Jewish-Argentinean writer Juan Gelman, whose poetry echoes Celan's creation of neologisms, use of wordplay and fragmented syntax to speak to the disappearance of the poet's son and daughter-in-law at the hands of the 1976–1983 Argentinean military dictatorship – a comprehensive analysis of Celan's significance in Latin America and other non-European contexts has yet to be undertaken.

This is the result of the critical framing of Celan, within which his work has largely been read within the context of a 'nearly nationalistic "Germanistik" tradition'.²⁸ This has limited analysis of the poet's influence even in his adopted country, France,²⁹ or on English and American poetry. Moreover, the common ci-

25 National Centre for Historical Memory, <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/hasta-encontrarlos/>

26 Marta Cabrera, 'Representing Violence in Colombia. Visual Arts, Memory and Counter-Memory', *Brújula*, 6.1 (2007), 37–56 (p. 45).

27 Julie Rodrigues Widholm, 'Presenting Absence. The Work of Doris Salcedo', Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL (<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/texts/presenting-absence/index.html>)

28 *Paul Celan. Selections*, pp. 14–15.

29 An exception to this is Benjamin Hollander, *Translating Tradition. Paul Celan in France* (San Francisco: Acts, a Journal of New Writing, 1988) and Dirk Weissman's doctoral thesis: *Poésie, judaïsme, philosophie. Une histoire de la réception de Paul Celan en France, des débuts jusqu'à 1991* (Université de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, 2003).

tation of Celan within the 'trauma canon consisting of non-linear, modernist texts by mostly Western writers',³⁰ and the recent arguments against the appropriateness of these aesthetic paradigms in the context of other, non-Western political traumas, has inevitably restricted a broader, global study of Celan's influence. This positioning of Celan, however, is strange, for, as John Felstiner states, there are many claims for Celan's identity, all of which point to a 'complex, migrant fate'.³¹ Indeed, Celan's biography – as a Romanian-born German-speaking Jew victimized and exiled by the Nazi genocide – complicates the simplistic reading of the writer as representing a predominant European cultural tradition. As Rothberg's multidirectional framework allows us to recognize, 'the experience of Jewish difference within modern Europe – and the frequently violent reaction Jews confronted – foreshadows many of the debates and problems faced by postcolonial societies and by postcolonial migrants in contemporary Europe'.³² Thus, Celan's own direct experience of marginalization and oppression could be viewed comparably with the subaltern experience of racial segregation, exile and displacement typical of the postcolonial. This is clearly how Celan is viewed by Salcedo. For the Colombian artist, Celan's poetry doesn't just represent an artistic response to the horrors of the Holocaust but a broader exploration of dispossession, racist exclusion and oppression. This was represented in Salcedo's installation of a massive fissure in the floor of the Tate Modern in 2007, its title taken from Celan's poem 'Shibboleth', which itself draws upon the Hebrew word that 'has been used as a measure of belonging or exclusion in different societies'.³³ For Salcedo, 'the crack represents a history of racism, running parallel to the history of modernity'³⁴ which corresponds to the minoritarian, dialogical tradition of decolonized Holocaust memory identified by Rothberg.³⁵

In this way, Celan's exilic status can be seen as clearly speaking to the postcolonial condition and contexts, such as Colombia, characterized by loss and

30 Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing. Trauma Out of Bounds*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 41.

31 Felstiner, *Poet, Survivor, Jew*, p. xvii.

32 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, pp. 22–23.

33 Manuel Toledo, 'Doris Salcedo. Canto contra el racismo', *BBC Mundo*, 9 October 2007 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/misc/newsid_7035000/7035694.stm)

34 Doris Salcedo, 'Shibboleth', *Tate Modern*, 1 October 2007 (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/doris-salcedo-2695/doris-salcedo-shibboleth>)

35 See, for example, the inclusion of Celan as one of the thinkers in the Global Social Theory project, which seeks to challenge the Eurocentrism of the theoretical canon and decolonize the curriculum by 'amplifying the voices and perspectives of those from across the globe' (<https://globalsocialtheory.org/>).

displacement. Moreover, it also enables us to reflect on why the poet's particular aesthetic has influenced artists responding to other political traumas. While I am in agreement with Craps that there are other ways of representing trauma beyond 'experimental, modernist, textual strategies'³⁶ – and indeed, within Colombia diverse artistic responses to the conflict can be found – I would argue that we must also take care not simply to assume that certain artistic practices associated with literary texts written about the Holocaust, such as fragmented modernist aesthetics, are solely part of a European tradition or are inappropriate responses to trauma outside of Europe. If the transnational turn in modernist studies has challenged the idea that literary modernism is a Western phenomenon that can be limited to an Anglo-European canon,³⁷ recognizing the 'border-crossing flows'³⁸ of memorial forms should provide a space to analyse how and why specific discourses associated with the Holocaust also appear in the context of other political traumas. Indeed, as I will show in the case of Carranza and Salcedo, the artists draw on Celan's anti-representational aesthetics as part of their attempts to find a way of artistically responding to the dynamics of the Colombian conflict, which, as Michael Taussig has influentially stated, is marked by a 'war of silencing' that has prevented the construction of a collective memory of the victims in Colombia.³⁹ Consequently, their inability to represent the violence in Colombia is not a Eurocentric imposition of post-Holocaust aesthetics but an aesthetic reflection of the dispossession, terror and silencing of the population within a war which 'victims do not easily manage to weave into a narrative with a clear meaning'.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Carranza and Salcedo do not just demonstrate the incomprehensibility of trauma or impossibility of witnessing; through their art they seek to make present the dead and disappeared who have been erased from Colombian history. In this manner their work also engages a different reading of Celan, one which reflects the history of the translation of Celan's verse into Spanish. As Mario Martín Gijón and Rosa Benéitez Andrés highlight, Celan's appear-

36 Stef Craps, 'Beyond Eurocentrism', p. 50.

37 A crucial part of this work, as Patricia Novillo-Corvalán highlights in her study of modernist networks between Latin America and Europe, *Modernism and Latin America. Transnational Networks of Literary Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2018), has been to identify the transnational circulation of modernist ideas and practices, as well as analysing how modernism responds to questions of empire and projects of decolonization.

38 Michael Rothberg, 'Afterword. Locating Transnational Memory', *European Review*, 22.4 (2014), 652–656 (p. 652).

39 Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), p. 26.

40 Daniel Pécaut, 'Memoria imposible, historia imposible, olvido imposible', in *Violencia y política en Colombia. Elementos de una reflexión* (Medellín: Hombre Nuevo Editores, 2003), p. 117.

ance in the Spanish-speaking world was posthumous, with the first translations of his poetry published in the 1970s.⁴¹ The most influential of these translations were those by post-Civil War poet José Ángel Valente, whose reading of Celan formed part of a shift in his work away from his early, politically engaged poetry, towards a more hermetic, 'High Modernist' verse rooted in the Spanish Heideggerian tradition with its 'ontological conception of poetry'.⁴² This tradition, as I will show, also influenced late-twentieth-century Colombian verse and points towards another way of understanding Celan's global influence. Against the predominant reading of Celan's poetry as solely displaying the ineffability of the Holocaust, scholars have also argued that Celan's anti-representational breakdown of language actually forms part of a search for language's ability to find a source of meaning. This interpretation draws heavily on Celan's famous poetological statement, the *Meridian* speech, where the poem is described as a place of encounter, a conversation with another: 'The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it'.⁴³ The encounter with the abstract other – comparable with 'l'Autre' of Levinasian and Sartrean philosophy, or Heidegger's 'das Andere'⁴⁴ – situates Celan's poetry within the realm of philosophy, influenced by Heidegger's ontological conception of poetry not as a mimetic reflection of the world but as a space that will respond to Hölderlin's query surrounding the role of the poet in a destitute time. Yet, if for Heidegger poetic language had a mythologizing function and was the dwelling place of the sacred after the disappearance of the gods,⁴⁵ Celan's understanding of language was founded on a dialogical relationship, in line with the philosophy of Martin Buber, where poetry became a 'way to measure the measureless suffering of those who have perished, a way to find a resting place to commemorate the

41 *Lecturas de Paul Celan*, ed. by Mario Martín Gijón and Rosa Benéitez Andrés (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2017), p. 1.

42 Mayhew, *The Twilight of the Avant-garde*, p. 87.

43 Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', in *Paul Celan, Collected Prose*, trans. by Rosemarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 49.

44 Joanna Klink, 'You. An Introduction to Paul Celan', *The Iowa Review*, 30.1 (2000), 1–18 (p. 9).

45 In the critical literature the influence of Heidegger's philosophy on Celan's poetry has been well established, even if, as Bambach states, 'Celan had a deeply ambivalent relationship to Heidegger' (p. 187): 'if Celan could find deep affinities with Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence and with his emphasis on the need for a philosophical-poetic dialogue on the thematics of loss and abyssal absence, then he could not follow the lines of Heidegger's exclusionary Graeco-German axis of affinity or his inability/unwillingness to enter into dialogue about the fate of European Jewry' (p. 189).

scattered ashes of the dead'.⁴⁶ In reaching out to the absent dead, the wholly other, Celan's poetry can be read as part of a counter project which, in the face of Auschwitz, seeks to countervail 'through poetry the very possibility of catastrophe'.⁴⁷ I argue that it is this visionary, ontological aspect of Celan's legacy which we can also find in evidence in the work of Colombian artists such as Carranza and Salcedo.

What are poets for? Celan and María Mercedes Carranza

In 1989, the Colombian poet, public intellectual and peace activist María Mercedes Carranza addressed the crowd at a poetry recital in the city of Medellín. Speaking during one of the most violent periods of the conflict, Carranza denounced the social, political and moral crisis which was ravaging the country. As she stated, 'extreme left- and right-wing assassins who have unleashed a war to defend their interests' exist alongside 'the drug-trafficking mafia who want to impose their own laws' and a state that has failed to address the tremendous social inequalities and injustices that are the root causes of the conflict. Asking what role poetry played in the context of this crisis – 'What is the role of poetry in the time of the assassins?' – Carranza responded by making the case for poetry as a communicative, humanistic practice in a nation saturated by conflict. For Carranza poetry was a weapon 'against destruction, against chaos, against horror', which 'provides clarity', 'is feeling' and allows us 'to communicate and dialogue with ourselves and others'. Most importantly, the poetic word 'is a social product, which, on being said, reveals reality in its most essential characteristics'.⁴⁸

In arguing for poetry's essential role in a country ravaged by conflict, Carranza was drawing upon an important poetic tradition. Although largely considered a feminist poet by critics, who have characterized her poetry as provocative and iconoclastic, using a colloquial language drawing upon popular culture, Carranza's defence of poetry in the series of poetic campaigns and editorial pieces

⁴⁶ Charles Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice. Hölderlin, Heidegger, Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), p. 229.

⁴⁷ Michael Eskin, *Poetic Affairs. Celan, Grünbein, Brodsky* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 25.

⁴⁸ María Mercedes Carranza, 'La poesía en la hora de los asesinos', *Revista Casa Silva*, 3 (1989), 6–9 (p. 6).

she published from the late 1980s, actually suggests a position close to the High Modernist tradition of poetry, as articulated in post-vanguard Latin American poetry and its 'search for humanist values in a world where they seem to have disintegrated'.⁴⁹ Moreover, in querying poetry's role in the time of the assassins, Carranza was also articulating a way of conceptualizing poetry in philosophical terms, which not only dialogued with modernist poetics but with a tradition of thinking about poetry that derives from the German literary-philosophical tradition. Explicitly paraphrasing Heidegger's exploration of Hölderlin's famed question, 'Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?', Carranza's Medellín speech is evidently influenced by a Heideggerian understanding of poetic language.⁵⁰ As Heidegger argued, poetry could become the dwelling place of the sacred in a destitute time, registering the trace of the fugitive gods; Carranza echoed this in her understanding of poetry in Colombia as revealing the truth of the world in the midst of degradation: 'it goes beyond, it doesn't remain in the superficial part of reality, but goes to its essence'.⁵¹

The influence of the Heideggerian tradition on Carranza's reflections on the role of poetry during the Colombia conflict provides an important link to her most well-known collection of poems, *El canto de las moscas* [*The Song of the Flies*] (1998). Written in the midst of Carranza's poetic campaigns and during the worsening of the conflict during the 1990s, this short volume was the

49 Donald Shaw, *Spanish American Poetry after 1950. Beyond the Vanguard* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008), p. 11.

50 From the 1960s German emigres and Colombian intellectuals had promoted greater dialogue between Colombian culture and German philosophy in Colombia, particularly through the influential magazine *Eco. Revista de la cultura de Occidente* [*Echo. Magazine of Western Culture*], which published key German thinkers in translation, such as Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Arendt, as well as Celan (Claudia Supelano-Gross, 'El contrapeso de la barbarie. Benjamin en Colombia', *Constelaciones. Revista de Teoría Crítica* 2 (2010), 318–41, p. 320). Those who collaborated with the magazine included a new generation of Colombian philosophers, such as Danilo Cruz Vélez and Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot, both of whom had studied under Heidegger in Germany in the 1950s and played a key role in introducing phenomenology and Heideggerian thought in Colombia. Carranza would have been familiar with these intellectuals. Her father, the poet and diplomat Eduardo Carranza, moved in the same intellectual circles as Danilo Cruz Vélez; in her own literary criticism Carranza cited the work of Gutiérrez, who was also an important reader of Celan in the Colombian context, first encountering his work in Germany in the late 1960s and later publishing a number of articles on the poet in the late 1980s (Claudia Supelano-Gross, 'La significación de la poesía. Paul Celan en la obra de Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot' in *Lecturas de Paul Celan*, ed. by Mario Martín Gijón and Rosa Benéitez Andrés (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2017), pp. 213–26, pp. 204–5).

51 María Mercedes Carranza, 'Por qué la poesía hoy y aquí?', *Lecturas dominicales*, 29 (November 1987), 10–11.

poet's last collection before her death by suicide in 2003. Celebrated as one of the most powerful artistic representations of Colombia's late-twentieth-century violence, *El canto* represented a shift in the style and content of Carranza's verse, being dedicated entirely to 'the evocation of the violence in Colombia'.⁵² Consisting of twenty-four short haiku-like *cantos*, each poem is named after a rural town in Colombia where massacres and gross human rights abuses took place in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the second poem of the collection, 'Mapiripán', draws its title from the town where a horrific massacre of an unknown number of civilians by paramilitary forces was perpetrated in 1997:

Still the wind,
time.
Mapiripán is now
a date.⁵³

The historical specificity of the poems and their concentration on the violence has led the few critics who have analysed the collection to define it as a work of political testimony or social protest.⁵⁴ Yet, as 'Mapiripán' demonstrates, the aesthetic and formal features of the poems – marked by a sparse, minimalist, austere language – actually suggest a different mode of poetic witnessing which shares affinities with the post-Holocaust anti-representation tradition. With an intense concentration on time, stillness and silence, the four-line poem is unable to describe or represent the horrific event; instead, the poem itself is constructed around the ineffability of the violence, which becomes an irrevocable date in the catastrophe of history.

The rest of the poems, like 'Mapiripán', are similarly characterized by their brevity and silence in the face of horror. Unable to represent the violence evoked in the toponyms of the poems' titles, instead the collection is dominated by images of the natural world, albeit one marked by absence and destruction. In

⁵² Antoine Ventura, 'La poesía colombiana escrita por mujeres y lo real. Realidad social, lirismo amoroso y estereotipos de género', in *Palabras de mujeres. Proyectos de vida y memoria colectiva*, ed. by Marie Estripeaut-Bourjac (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012), pp. 121–45 (p. 127).

⁵³ María Mercedes Carranza, *Poesía completa y cinco poemas inéditos*, ed. by Melibea Garavito Carranza (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura; Alfaguara; Casa de Poesía Silva, 2004), p. 186. All translations from Spanish are my own.

⁵⁴ See for example: Sofia Kearns, 'Political and Toxic Discourse in María Mercedes Carranza's Latest Poems', *Ciberletras. Revista de crítica literaria y de cultura*, 5 (2001), <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v05/kearns.html>; Enrique Yepes, 'Regiones en vías de extinción. *El canto de las moscas* de María Mercedes Carranza', *Lingüística y Literatura*, 0.61 (2012), 107–27.

'Confines', for example, the desolate imagery of the poem simply represents nothing: 'Rain and silence | is the world in | Confines';⁵⁵ in 'Vista Hermosa', the name of the town, which literally means 'Beautiful View', is ironically refigured in the poem's sole image, of a 'spectral, | burnt, stiff, | solitary' plant stalk.⁵⁶ It is clear that in deploying such aesthetic features Carranza is not just drawing upon the fragmented aesthetics of post-Holocaust poetry but more particularly on its key exemplar, Celan.⁵⁷ In negating any direct representation of scenes of traumatic loss, in transforming catastrophe into fragmented silences and images of destruction, *El canto* echoes the 'negative poetics of silence and absence at the heart of Celan's poetry'.⁵⁸ Paralleling Celan's 'very short poems, where terms, phrases seem, by the rhythm of their brevity, undefined, surrounded by blankness',⁵⁹ the collection deploys a very Celanian language, allusive and elliptical, which appears to reinforce Adorno's conclusions that the most extreme horror is only expressed by remaining silent. Thus, in death-infused 'Sotavento': 'Like the clouds | death | in Sotavento today. | Deceased whiteness'.⁶⁰

This is not to say that Carranza's deployment of Celanian aesthetics represents the imposition of Holocaust paradigms in Colombia. Elsewhere I have argued that in fact the aesthetics of the collection reflects the 'amnesia surrounding violence and its causes in Colombia'.⁶¹ Indeed, the collection's subtitle, 'version of the events', engages with political scientist Daniel Pécaut's description of the modes of Colombian violence:

the terror that a great proportion of the population live through, the law of silence that is imposed on them when they find themselves caught in the crossfire, the forced displacement that affects them, the absence of a front in the war, represent extreme but dispersed experiences that engender a memory based on events, that victims do not easily manage to weave into a narrative with clear meaning.⁶²

55 Carranza, *Poesía completa*, p. 198.

56 Carranza, *Poesía completa*, p. 195.

57 Although Carranza never cited Celan directly in her work, it is not beyond reasonable assumption that she was familiar with Celan's legacy thanks to her association with the movement to promote German post-war philosophy and critical theory in Colombia. Spanish translations of Celan's poetry, including those by Valente, form part of the library of the Silva House of Poetry, the cultural centre founded by Carranza in 1986.

58 William Franke, 'Poetics of Silence in the Post-Holocaust Poetry of Paul Celan', *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, 2.1–2 (2014), 137–58 (p. 137).

59 Maurice Blanchot cited in Franke, 'Poetics of Silence', p. 138.

60 Carranza, *Poesía completa*, p. 203.

61 Cherilyn Elston, *Women's Writing in Colombia – An Alternative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 135.

62 Pécaut, 'Memoria imposible', p. 117.

However, alongside this deconstructive reading of Carranza's use of language in *El canto*, we can also find another reading of the collection which also demonstrates traces of Celan's influence. As we have seen, at the same time in which she was writing these poems Carranza was also espousing a Heideggerian vision of poetic language that advocated poetry's ability to access truth in a destitute time, as well as arguing for its significance as a dialogical act: 'poetry is above all the desire for dialogue, for communication'.⁶³ It is here, I argue, that an interesting dialogue between Celan's and Carranza's poetic philosophies emerges. In his *Meridian* speech, Celan also articulated the importance of poetry as a part of a dialogue or encounter. Yet, as scholars have shown, Celan's difficult, hermetic verse, with its rejection of instrumental language, was not aiming at some facile notion of communication. Although drawing upon Heidegger's ontological conception of poetic language, which rejects mimesis in seeking to enable 'the unmanifest symbolic world to break into view',⁶⁴ unlike Heidegger Celan's aim was not to access the 'house of Being' but to forge an encounter with the 'effaced Other of the Holocaust'.⁶⁵ Bambach similarly states that Celan engaged the work of Heidegger to help him think through 'the uncanny relation of language to the topoi of terror'.⁶⁶ Thus, in pushing language to its uncanny limits, Celan sought to enact a form of poetic language that could lead to an impossible encounter with the 'immaterial, yet earthly, terrestrial' traces of the absent dead who populate his poetry:

the poet seeks in the shadow of the unspeakable to somehow recover what can never be recovered. Within this impossible landscape, this 'topology of the abyss,' as Jean Bollock calls it, Celan dares to suggest that in spite of everything the poem 'remain mindful of its dates'.⁶⁷

It is this Celanian impossible landscape, I argue, that Carranza also seeks to enact in *El canto*. Indeed, the landscape depicted in the collection is not simply defined by absence. As Michael Sisson states, it is 'a deserted landscape, or better said a populated one, but with the dead'.⁶⁸ As Celan creates a poetic land-

⁶³ María Mercedes Carranza, '¿A quién le interesa la poesía?', *Revista Casa Silva*, 4 (1990), 6–8 (p. 8).

⁶⁴ Klink, 'You', p. 9.

⁶⁵ Eric Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny. Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), p. 26.

⁶⁶ Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice*, p. 188.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶⁸ Michael Sisson, 'María Mercedes Carranza en inglés. Perspectivas de un traductor', *Forma y Función*, 20 (2007), 253–62 (p. 255).

scape characterized by images from the natural world, but within which the uncanny surfaces and the traces of the effaced dead emerge, Carranza guides the reader through an *unheimlich* landscape, occupied by the presence of what is no longer there. In 'Tierralta' the poem is constructed around the image of those who once populated the town – 'This is the mouth that was' – but who now lie buried beneath the ground, 'Now only earth: earth | in the still mouth'.⁶⁹ The image of the still mouths of the dead call to mind the repetition in Celan's verse of mouths that cannot speak – 'mouthsfull of silence'.⁷⁰ This image is repeated in 'Paujil' where 'the mouths | of the dead' uncannily appear in the flowers that bloom after the violence – recalling Celan's own 'Flower – a blind man's word'⁷¹ – and are paralleled in 'Encimadas' where the 'flowering eyes' are hauntingly conflated with the bodies 'Under the ground' where 'the terror still shines'.⁷²

Moreover, drawing upon a Heideggerian language of dwelling and topology, Celan's emphasis on poetry as topos research in his *Meridian* speech and his suggestion that 'every poem is marked by its own "20th of January"'⁷³ is recalled in *El canto*'s own emphasis on specific place names and dates. Scholars have read the toponyms in the collection as simply reflecting the poet's engagement with history.⁷⁴ However, Carranza's mindfulness of the date of Mapiripán, her naming of places that evoke a topography of terror in Colombia, suggests a Celanian positioning 'toward the historical date of the Other's effacement'⁷⁵ and an attempt to draw her own meridians to the lost places and the forgotten dead of the conflict. In Celan's verse this topography, as Bambach states, is particularly evoked in his references to moorland and the 'thematic complex of moors', which come to symbolize not only his own youth in Czernowitz but 'the traces of the Jewish dead whose names echo at the margins of these moors'.⁷⁶ This is also echoed in the topography of the moorland in *El canto*, which appears in its particularly Colombian formation, the *páramo*. Thus, the 'Moorland desolation'⁷⁷ which Carranza depicts in the collection represents not an empty landscape post-catastro-

69 Carranza, *Poesía completa*, p. 191.

70 Paul Celan, 'Language Mesh', in *Paul Celan. Selected Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), p. 50.

71 Paul Celan, 'Flower', in *Paul Celan. Selected Poems*, p. 49.

72 Carranza, *Poesía completa*, p. 189.

73 Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', p. 47.

74 Sisson, 'María Mercedes Carranza en inglés', p. 53; Yepes, 'Regiones en vías de extinción', p.114.

75 Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny*, p. 28.

76 Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice*, p. 227.

77 Carranza, *Poesía completa*, p. 198.

phe but also a symbolic reminder of the dead hidden beneath the ground, many of whom in Colombia, like the millions of murdered Jews, lie in unmarked mass graves.

What are poets for in a destitute time? Carranza responds, echoing Celan by creating a ‘topography of landscape as a way of coming to terms with an ethics of remembering the dead’.⁷⁸ In turning towards the effaced Other, Carranza creates a poetic space that also becomes a symbolic crypt for the unburied dead of the conflict and imagines their presence in an attempt to countervail the official oblivion surrounding the violence in Colombia. Thus, as the Holocaust dead manifest their impossible presence in Celan’s verse – ‘A strange lostness was | palpably present, almost | you would | have lived’⁷⁹ – in *El canto*, years later and at a different point in the meridional line, ‘someone | dreams that they lived’.⁸⁰

Palpable presences: Celan and Doris Salcedo

In 1998, the same year that Carranza published *El canto*, Colombian artist Doris Salcedo exhibited her sculpture series *Unland*. Consisting of three conjoined tables of differing sizes, their surfaces painstakingly drilled with tiny holes through which hair had been threaded, the sculptures deployed an aesthetic language of minimalism and conceptualism typical of Salcedo’s work.⁸¹ Since first becoming internationally recognized in the 1990s, Salcedo – now Colombia’s most celebrated contemporary artist – has become known for her creation of abstract sculptures, such as *Unland*, characterized by their materiality – represented in the use of found objects, furniture and clothing, which are embedded with organic materials such as human hair, bone and grass. Yet, like Carranza’s final collection, Salcedo’s abstract sculptures are also intimately related to Colombia’s traumatic history. Behind each installation lies a detailed investigation into an aspect of the conflict, often involving interviews with victims or the direct collaboration of victims’ groups in the process of artistic production. For example, the first of the *Unland* sculptures, subtitled ‘the orphan’s tunic’, was inspired by the story of a six-year-old orphan whom Salcedo met in northern Colombia who, after witnessing her mother’s death, refused to wear anything but the dress her mother had made for her.

⁷⁸ Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice*, p. 219.

⁷⁹ Paul Celan, ‘Dumb Autumn Smells’, in *Paul Celan. Selected Poems*, p. 69.

⁸⁰ Carranza, *Poesia completa*, p. 187.

⁸¹ Cabrera, ‘Representing Violence in Colombia’, p. 50.

However, in line with her minimalistic aesthetic practice, Salcedo does not translate the testimonies that inspire her sculptures into direct representations of the violence. 'Unland: the orphan's tunic', for example, consists of two conjoined tables, one of dark wood and the other covered in white silk; where they join a thick strand of human hair is woven into the tables' surface. As Andreas Huyssen says, in the girl's testimony 'the dress is a marker of memory and a sign of trauma',⁸² which Salcedo metaphorically evokes through the silk covering the table:

approximating it, never quite getting it, compelling the viewer to innervate something that remains elusive, absent – the violent death of the mother that left the child orphaned, the orphan present only in the residual tunic, which now seems more of a shroud covering part of the table.⁸³

As the table metaphorically approximates testimony but is unable to represent directly the violence evoked, Salcedo's art suggests a mode of witnessing that dialogues very clearly with the ineffability of post-Holocaust aesthetics. Mieke Bal notes, analysing another of Salcedo's sculptures, *Atrabilarios* (1991), where the theme of female disappearance in Colombia is explored through the metonym of worn shoes placed in niches, that Salcedo's artistic response to the Colombian violence openly places itself in the lineage of Adorno's discussions of post-Holocaust art and thereby evokes one artist in particular, Celan.⁸⁴ Indeed, the 'orphan's tunic' in the subtitle of the first *Unland* sculpture is a direct citation of an untitled poem by Celan from *Lichtzwang* [*Lightduress*] (1970) in which the state of orphanhood – a key theme in Celan's work, where many his poems evoke his mother's killing – is symbolized by a tunic, which is also the orphan's flag, as well as 'his | first | birth-marked, se- | cret-speckled | skin'.⁸⁵ As Edlie L. Wong notes, the skin enveloping the orphan in Celan's poem is hauntingly cited in the dress that covers the orphan's body in Colombia, later becoming the skin-like membranes shrouding Salcedo's tables.⁸⁶

82 Andreas Huyssen, 'Unland: the orphan's tunic', in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. by Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo and Andreas Huyssen (London: Phaidon, 2000), pp. 92–102 (p. 96).

83 Huyssen, 'Unland: the orphan's tunic', p. 101.

84 Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak. Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 17.

85 Paul Celan, 'Night Rode Him', in *Paul Celan. Selected Poems*, p. 98.

86 Edlie L. Wong, 'Haunting Absences. Witnessing Loss in Doris Salcedo's *Atrabilarios* and *Beyond*', in *The Image and the Witness. Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, ed. by Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 173–87 (p. 178).

The ‘orphan’s tunic’ is not the only reference to Celan in Salcedo’s corpus. Indeed, critics have spoken about an ‘ongoing dialogue’ between the Colombian artist and the Holocaust poet⁸⁷ who is repeatedly cited by Salcedo and referenced across the critical studies produced about the artist.⁸⁸ While the links between Carranza and Celan can be read, as we have seen, within the context of the Heideggerian philosophical-poetic tradition in Colombia, Salcedo’s dialogue with Celan reflects a closer engagement with post-war European philosophy and the influence of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Primo Levi and Celan on her approach to trauma and memory.⁸⁹ It also demonstrates, in dialogue with scholars such as Eric Kligerman, who have explored the ‘ripple effects’ of Celan’s poetics on ‘visual artists who probe the Holocaust’,⁹⁰ the impact of Celan beyond poetry and on the field of visual culture. Noting Celan’s influence on the Colombian artist, scholars have read Salcedo’s sculptures in line with Celan’s negative poetics, defined by mourning, absence and the impossibility of witnessing. As Carlos Basualdo comments in an interview with the artist, her practice parallels Celan’s translation of ‘the experience of absence, the horror of the Holocaust precisely through the disintegration of language and its structures’.⁹¹ The title of *Unland*, for example, is a Celan-inspired neologism coined by Salcedo to refer to the loss inherent in the dispossession of war; it replicates Celan’s tendency to coin new words and his negation through wordplay, as he pushed against the limits of language. Salcedo herself also directly links her anti-monumental, material images – such as *Unland*’s conjoined tables – to Celan’s fragmented, ruptured language, pregnant with silences: ‘Celan’s poetry involves piecing together from ruptures and dissociations, rather than association and union. This is the way I approach sculpture. I concern myself with the disassembled and diachronic’.⁹²

Salcedo’s anti-representational aesthetics is moreover reinforced by the second citation of Celan in *Unland*’s subtitles, ‘audible in the mouth’, which dialogues more explicitly with the ideas of silence and bearing witness associated

87 Ángela María Lopera Molano, ‘El diálogo que se encamina. La traducción entre Paul Celan y Doris Salcedo’, *Hallazgos*, 12.24 (2015), 31–48.

88 In the 2000 survey of Salcedo’s work, for example, various poems by Celan are featured as part of the ‘Artist’s Choice’, alongside an extended extract from the Meridian speech.

89 Cabrera, ‘Representing Violence in Colombia’, p. 50.

90 Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny*, p. 5.

91 Charles Basualdo, ‘Interview. Carlos Basualdo in conversation with Doris Salcedo’, in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. by Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo and Andreas Huyssen (London: Phaidon, 2000), pp. 8–35 (p. 25).

92 Basualdo, ‘Interview’, p. 26.

with Celan's work. This quotation refers to an earlier Celan poem, entitled 'An Eye, Open', from *Sprachgitter* [*Speech-Grille*] (1959). As Tanya Barson explains, this, like much of Celan's poetry, is about the act of bearing witness to suffering and the impossibility of articulating this through language.⁹³ Faced with the inability to describe or even speak of the 'no more to be named', referring to the dead, the poem describes in minute detail the physical movements of the eye:⁹⁴

Aching depth of the eyeball:
the lid
does not stand in its way, the lash
does not count what goes in.⁹⁵

As Celan's verse is unable to express in language the horrors witnessed – in the poem the images of suffering remain 'audible in the mouth' – Salcedo's sculptures, which never literally reveal the testimonies behind them, are likewise read as aesthetic statements on the failure of testimony: the silence of the victim and the fact that trauma cannot be transformed into narrative. While Salcedo refers to herself as a secondary witness, 'I try to be a witness of the witness',⁹⁶ her work is seen as materially embodying the Celanian axiom that 'No one | bears witness for the | witness',⁹⁷ for the true witness will either not have survived or will be unable to utter the unspeakable horror. Salcedo has therefore described her art as 'a hopeless act of mourning',⁹⁸ representing art's inability to recuperate the lost lives it evokes: 'Art is unable to redeem. In the face of death, art is impotent'.⁹⁹

Yet, similar to *El canto*, Salcedo's deployment of post-Holocaust aesthetics does not mean she imposes Holocaust paradigms on the memory of a very different conflict. Various critics have drawn a connection between Salcedo's aesthetics of absence and silence, and the nature of the Colombian armed conflict. Both Bal and Wong cite the work of anthropologist Michael Taussig, who, like Pécaut, has written about the 'war of silencing' and the 'creation of terror through uncer-

⁹³ Tanya Barson, 'Unland. The Place of Testimony', *Tate Papers*, 1 (Spring 2004) (<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/01/unland-the-place-of-testimony>)

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Paul Celan, 'An Eye, Open', in *Paul Celan. Selected Poems*, p. 56.

⁹⁶ Doris Salcedo, 'Interview with Charles Mereweather' in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. by Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo and Andreas Huyssen (London: Phaidon, 2000), pp. 134–45 (p. 140).

⁹⁷ Paul Celan, 'Ashglory', in *Breathturn into Timestead. The Collected Later Poetry*, trans. by Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 62.

⁹⁸ Basualdo, 'Interview', p. 21.

⁹⁹ Manuel Toledo, 'Doris Salcedo. Canto contra el racismo'.

tain violence' in Colombia: 'There is no officially declared war. No prisoners. No torture. No disappearing. Just silence consuming terror's talk for the main part';¹⁰⁰ Salcedo herself has spoken of the 'precariousness of thought: an inability to articulate history and therefore form a community' in the midst of conflict.¹⁰¹ Relatedly, in her influential study, Bal argues that Salcedo's anti-representational aesthetics, while not obviously political, actually creates a space in which the political can be enabled. Drawing upon political theorist Chantal Mouffe's distinction between politics and 'the political', Bal states that in the Colombian context, where 'antagonism is violently silenced',¹⁰² alternative practices are required to open up the spaces of 'the political' and the social life it makes possible. Like Celan, who constructed an alternative aesthetic language in the aftermath of trauma, for Bal Salcedo creates a new aesthetics in the face of Wittgenstein's conclusion that the 'unspeakable must be kept silent'.¹⁰³ It is here, Bal states, drawing on Celan, that the political potential of Salcedo's work and a definition of political art can be found: 'To make audible in the mouth whereof one cannot speak: this is as good a description as any for political art today'.¹⁰⁴ Importantly then, Salcedo's anti-representational sculptures do not just enact the psychic experience of trauma; rather, as Wong argues, they seek to transform 'the alienation of a state-imposed silence' into a silence that 'becomes a site of shared collective engagement that preserves the painful inarticulateness of loss'.¹⁰⁵

This can be clearly seen in the series of large-scale installations that Salcedo has created in recent years – ranging from *Noviembre 6 y 7* (2002), where she lowered chairs down the walls of the Palace of Justice to commemorate those killed in the siege, to *Sumando Ausencias* (2016), where Bogotá's central square was covered in a white shroud stitched with the names of victims in ash. Despite Salcedo's negative conclusions on the role of art in the face of suffering and trauma, these large-scale acts of mourning point to how her artistic practice does not simply imply testimonial failure and traumatic incomprehensibility. Although it is clear that Salcedo's aesthetics reinforce the post-Holocaust limits to representing trauma, this clearly forms part of an attempt to find an aesthetic language appropriate for registering the absence of the disappeared and forgotten dead of the Colombian conflict. As Salcedo herself states: 'When a beloved per-

100 Taussig, *The Nervous System*, p. 26.

101 Basualdo, 'Interview', p. 25.

102 Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, p. 12.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

105 Wong, 'Haunting Absences', p. 179.

son disappears, everything becomes impregnated with that person's presence. Every single object but also every space is a reminder of his or her absence, as if absence were stronger than presence'.¹⁰⁶ Paralleling, the 'strange lostness [that] was | palpably present' in Celan's verse,¹⁰⁷ Salcedo's deployment of mundane domestic objects in her sculptures, alongside the shoes, clothes and hair of the missing – which are juxtaposed in a very Celanian, *unheimlich* way – powerfully evoke how the material objects left behind after displacement, war and disappearance are incessant, haunting reminders of the absent person. In this way, Salcedo's artworks seek to 'counter acts of disappearance with acts of reappearance',¹⁰⁸ bringing to presence the invisible victims of Colombia's conflict.

Significantly, this practice also suggests another reading of Salcedo's engagement with Celan which is highlighted by the inclusion of the *Meridian* speech as part of Salcedo's 'Artist's Choice'. In Salcedo's own reflections on her artistic practice she echoes Celan's description of poetic language in the *Meridian* speech as an encounter, a 'desperate dialogue', which hopes to speak '*on behalf of the other* [...] perhaps of an *altogether other*'.¹⁰⁹ As Salcedo states, dialogue is crucial to the process of creating the sculpture – 'it is what allows me to know the experience of the Other, to the point at which an encounter with otherness in the field of sculpture is possible'.¹¹⁰ This process allows not only for 'a form of communion' between the artist and the Other who makes herself or himself present in Salcedo's work,¹¹¹ but seeks affectively to bring to presence the trauma, pain and loss of the absent victim for the spectator viewing the artwork. Thus, the traumatized speech that, as Celan expresses, is 'audible in the mouth' of the victim is transformed into the silence of the artist and the viewer who come together in a moment of silent contemplation 'that permits the life seen in the work to reappear'.¹¹²

106 Basualdo, 'Interview', p. 16.

107 Huyssen also draws an explicit connection between Celan's poem 'Dumb Autumn Smells' and Salcedo's work in his analysis of 'Unland: the orphan's tunic'.

108 Rodrigues Widholm, 'Presenting Absence'.

109 Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', p. 48.

110 Basualdo, 'Interview', p. 13.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

112 Salcedo, 'Interview with Charles Mereweather', p. 137.

