

Resisting the silencing of the word: a matter of dignity

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Abstract

This paper presents language as a scenario where the word in its multiple manifestations constitutes a symbolic field around which reality is constructed (as it is not unusual for someone to want to control it). It is briefly explained how in the processes of cultural plundering in Latin America, the word as a technology of power was taken by the barbarians to subjugate and steal the peoples of Abya-Yala (1). To exemplify the resistance that occurs in language, some photographs of murals, graffiti and artistic interventions corresponding to the social outbreak in Colombia in 2021 are selected. And two examples of reading education programs that link political memory. However, in the struggle for the domination of words and the need to say, there is a resistance to the plundering of language that aims to take back the word, to resist the silencing of subaltern voices and to guarantee human rights. Thus, the act of resisting the violent dispossession of words is presented as a question of dignity, which is directed towards forms of communal organization where, through language, spaces can be promoted to uphold life, the human condition (2).

Keywords: *language, resistance, dignity, human rights.*

Introduction

*"Now pay attention.
The words belong to everyone.
You have, therefore, the obligation
To do with words what
no one has done."*

Le goût de crin, by Pierre Reverdy

The purpose of this article is to present the social resistance, especially in Latin America, that occurs in contexts of authoritarian regimes, as an exercise aimed at dignity.

To talk about exercises of resistance in contexts of the dispossession of language, of the word, we mandatorily need to refer to the dispossession of language in violent contexts, which in Latin America have been present in the processes of dictatorship in the Southern Cone in the second half of the 20th century: Nicaragua. Somoza family (1934 - 1979); Dominican Republic. Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1930-1961); Cuba. Fulgencio Batista (1952 - 1959) and Fidel Castro (1959-2008); Guatemala. Carlos Castillo Armas (1954 - 1957); Paraguay. Alfredo Stroessner (1954 - 1989); Haiti. François Duvalier (1957 - 1971); Bolivia. Hugo Banzer (1971 - 1978); Brazil. Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1964 - 1985); Uruguay. Juan María Bordaberry (1973 - 1976), Alberto Demicheli (1976), Aparicio Méndez Manfredini (1976 - 1981) and Gregorio Álvarez (1981 - 1985); Chile. Augusto José Ramón Pinochet (1973 - 1990); Argentina. Jorge Rafael Videla (1976 - 1981) and Peru. Alberto Fujimori (1990 - 2000). All of the instances mentioned before have been marked by systematic practices of political violence aimed at silencing dissident voices of a particular regime. The state's long and extensive practice of the use of censorship, exile of speech and silencing to counter difference is long and

extensive. In the history of humanity, not only in Latin America, we can find many examples, such as the following: the censorship to which the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova was subjected, who in 1946 was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers; censorship in literature, film and music during the Franco regime: in 1937, the State Technical Board decreed that books that were "communist, socialist, libertarian and, in general, dissolving" were illegal; in Nazi Germany in 1933, books written by Jews, liberal thinkers, leftists, among others, suffered an obliteration from all libraries.

Being forced to give up your right to speak in contexts of political violence implies the experience of emotions (Nussbaum, 2015) such as fear, anger, and disgust as a policy of exclusion that seeks to silence the marginalized, routed in the generation of political societies of fear where people are immobilized, silenced, and excluded from the public sphere. In this context, silences and distances become accomplices of intensified violence, of the violation of human rights, of the crudest acts of barbarism that humans commit in contexts of war. An example of this happened on 21 May 2021 in Colombia, 24 days after the social outburst, where there were 2905 cases of police violence (Temblores ONG, 2021). In this scenario, there is violent silencing that seeks to present itself in the public sphere as a set of instructive acts to prevent protest and social mobilization. The actions of political violence in the Colombian case are accompanied by strategic silences, as what is silenced or said has direct repercussions on the way we act or are, what we decide to do and how we shape society.

And therefore, just as fear, anger and disgust are political emotions that happen and take place in life, so do love, justice and hope; the latter opens a space for resistance, not as an act of retaliation, but as an exercise of political action that opposes silencing and violence. In the practices of resistance, there is a

conscious exercise of collective action that adds up to affirmative action. In the field of language, to resist the pillaging of the word, its violent dispossession, is a symbolic act, an act of dignity aimed at not allowing ideas to be imposed or disrespected because of difference. Therefore, the word that is plundered, silenced, and the strategic silences that occur in society, are countered with radio broadcasts, stories, songs, dances, paintings, graffiti, pamphlets, fanzines, shouting, and even whispers.

Resisting the dispossession of language puts tradition at stake, the resignation to a future that in theory cannot be modified becomes an act of dignity when from it we find the possibility, as Querrien proposes in the prologue to Guattari's book (2004), of <<being able to enunciate something different from what has to be said, to configure other sensibilities, to be able to listen, also, to different enunciations, to be invited to fantasize others' proposals.>> (p.35)

To think about the field of language as well as reading, writing and orality - LEO, according to its initials in Spanish- without a social context is simply meaningless. Today more than ever, language and the understanding of LEO as technologies of power lead us to propose ways of understanding things diversely and manners of appropriating language that contribute to the constitution of democratic societies that are not accomplices of cultural theft and human cruelty.

Conceptual Framework

By parting from the assertion that resisting the dispossession of language is a matter of dignity, we encounter three fundamental concepts: resistance, language, and dignity. Below I present the framework for their respective analysis in this exercise.

As outlined in the introduction, resistance involves highlighting the tension generated in relations of unequal power that are situated in violent contexts, where phenomena of oppression, censorship and domination are generally experienced in historically neglected and permanently subjugated populations. In this specific case, to speak of resistance in relation to language involves pondering about how the word as a technology of power becomes an artifact of resilience and civil disobedience that does not imply the use of excessive force or physical confrontation but the possibility of encounter, refuge, complaint, exclamation. The conscious use of language, a constitutive condition of our species, in the field of political violence can be understood as a common space for dialogue, a possibility to ask ourselves what happens to us as a society and how we could handle all situations. It is a fundamental right, with words we refuse to be accomplices of horror and pain, we unveil the dark and putrid sides of our species that constantly seems to forget about dignity.

To resist the plundering of this common space means that we must insist that it is possible in our world to create other ways to organize socially, that the common goods that we have as a society must be preserved and enhanced, and that the word, the one we utter, is our main tool defend life, freedom, and human rights. Social resistance in Guattari's perspective is a collective action that seeks to contribute to processes of emancipation, a counter-hegemonic action to the powers that seek to establish mechanisms of social control ignoring and evading the words of others except their own, just as their denunciations, their horrors, their inequalities.

This is how social resistance, although it takes place in different ways, in this case I am interested in presenting the one that occurs in the field of language and that materializes in civil resistance through words, as described below according to González, Colmenares and Ramírez (2011):

It is characterized as an option of modern societies to confront the possible arbitrariness of governments when they go beyond the limits established by the limits of the rights and real freedoms of citizens. Civil resistance materializes in the effective and conscious politicization of citizens. According to Useche, social resistance, as a potentiator of ethical reflections and creator of life in the subject, is functional to problematize, subvert and give an opinion and affirm actions that turn the tide on the injustices of a despotic State, which has forgotten its dependence on the interests of the citizen. This type of resistance overcomes individual dissent or disagreement, as it goes beyond particular interests, seeking to superimpose values of humanity favorable to the collective without, in any way, making systematic use of violence. (p.243)

It is through collective action that we seek to preserve and guarantee dignity, that important value of democratic states that refers to the minimum conditions that men, women, and children must have in order to fully develop in society, both as individuals and as part of a larger group. This is directly linked to the full enjoyment of human and constitutional rights, which should be inalienable, as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

The cruelty, horror, and rawness of war, especially the world wars, have made dignity an unavoidable issue that privileges the human condition and democratic values such as freedom and freedom of speech. Resisting the violent dispossession of the word becomes a matter of dignity, since it is language what makes us humans, it is the word that allows us to create and recreate society, organize ourselves and speak up about common goods that seem completely unknown or non-existing when the aim is to silence difference.

This way, when I assert resistance as a collective action that aims to maintain one's own voice amid difference, I consider it a matter of dignity, since language as a constitutive element of our species becomes a device that not only allows us to be and exist in society, but also fully develop individually and socially. In the case of the massive protests in Colombia, for example, it is evident in the permanent calls of those of us who walk the streets and insist on the possibility of seeking other ways of doing things that preserve and guarantee life. There is a conscious exercise of political culture that opposes silencing and calls for the dignity of life, this is when the word emerges in all possible scenarios.

The word that tried to be plundered, savaged, and silenced refuses to disappear and it happens in the middle of streets, on murals, via graffiti, photographs, because the resistance against violent dispossession of the word is taken one step at a time. I find literature a special means to think about the language that some have tried to take away from us, the people who disagree, a scenario to build bridges in a world on the verge of collapse. For this reason, we should not be horrified, impressed, or puzzled by the existence of gray men who want to take over the language.

Some examples of how the word resists being silenced occur in the following photographs. These were taken within the framework of the social outburst of 2021 in Colombia. The first three images correspond to graffiti made in two cities of the country (Bogotá and Valle del Guaméz), in the center and the South respectively.

The first makes a call to remember that the present is the time of the voice of the peoples that historically have been subordinated. A call to remember that the South is also Colombia. The second photograph shows a graffiti again alluding

to the South, located at the Portal de las Américas, station of the Transmilenio mass transit system. To insist on the South is to make a call to decentre the gaze of the hegemonic places.

And the last graffiti is a cry for one of the most recurrent acts of political violence in Colombia: forced disappearance. Asking oneself about figures implies insisting that every life is worth, that voices should not be silenced. Finally, a photograph is shared of a plant planted in a cartridge of the type of projectiles that the public forces in Colombia use to contain social protest. Again it is shown that in the midst of horror there is always room for life, to resist acts of barbarism.



#ValleDelGuamuezResiste
La Hormiga, Putumayo.

It is time for the peoples of the world to speak up!

The Guamuez Valley is located in the South of Colombia. Territory notably affected by political violence

Author: Santiago Quistial
Photograph: WillyTours



Portal de las Américas
Bogotá

Photo taken from facebook

Portal de las Americas is a Public transport station intervened in the framework of the social outburst. Located south of Bogotá, a place with precarious social conditions



We will re-exist! And through art and nature
we will heal!

Photograph taken in Bogotá, capital of the
country. Complaint of forced disappearances
in the country

Retrieved from:

[https://www.facebook.com/BOGOTAGRAF
FITI/photos/a.157075451039829/40054805
86199277/](https://www.facebook.com/BOGOTAGRAF
FITI/photos/a.157075451039829/40054805
86199277/)



We will re-exist! And through art and nature
we will heal!

Ammunition fired by Mobile Riot Squads
(ESMAD

by its Spanish inicial)

Turned into a pot to plant

Photograph: JorGe SErrAto_PORtaFolio

Retrieved from:

[https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=101
59645942813938&set=a.101539085437189
38](https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=101
59645942813938&set=a.101539085437189
38)

The examples above show how people resist and protest in the streets of Colombia, but there also are communal spaces and community events where people use literature to activate their memory. Here are two examples I would like to mention. Both linked to literature and the possibility that it offers to name horror. Both experiences were chosen after exploring which reading education programs work around political memory.

The first situated in the context of the last Argentine dictatorship and the second in relation to processes of memory pedagogy that seek to make it possible to talk about political violence in Colombia:

1. *Books that bite, literature, prohibitions and resistances* is a project of <<Colectivo La Grieta>> -Organization <<The Crevasse>>- that allows people to recover the literature banned during the military dictatorship, <<the dictatorship pretended to exercise censorship on the bodies and their ideas>>:

<<Books that bite -Libros que muerden-: a collection, an exhibition, a study group at <<La Grieta>>, the project Books that Bite (hereinafter LQM, according to its initials in Spanish) is an experience that emerged in 2006, 30 years after the civil-military coup in Argentina. Some years earlier, Gabriela Pesclevi had begun to gather children's books and books for young people that had been censored during the last dictatorship or had been labelled as inappropriate, banned or forgotten as a result of State terrorism in Argentina and specifically, of the so-called "Operation Clarity" (...) The project focused specifically on Children's and Young People's Literature (LIJ, according to its initials in Spanish) for several reasons: because there was a special effort in the control and oblivion of these books, because the LIJ was considered a potentially <<dangerous>> means for the transmission of ideologies contrary to the military regime, because through literature designed for children authoritarianism and cultural repression were introduced and reproduced in the educational sphere and in everyday life>> (Bossié, Posclevi and Salvador, 2015, p.3)

2. <<The Elephant Memory program>> -El programa Memoria de Elefante- is part of the Libraries on the Street Collective, which seeks to train librarians and mediators who teach reading, writing and orality -LEO, according to its initials in Spanish- who focus on memory and political violence through children's and young people's literature and unconventional devices, strategies and places to get people interested in reading, where what-cannot-be-named is named

nonetheless through the books and stories used by the <<Books that bite>> collection:

<<On page 298 of the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, it says that, in English, the expression ‘elephant in the room’ is a metaphorical expression applied to an obvious problem that no one wants to address. The gentle Wikipedia kindly expands on the matter referring to it as an obvious truth that is ignored or goes unnoticed. This expression, <<is based on the idea that it would be impossible to overlook the presence of an elephant in a room; then, the people in the room who pretend that the elephant is not there have chosen to avoid dealing with the huge problem it implies>>, says Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca in his column *The elephant in the room*, published in 2017 to talk about urgent political issues in Spain. Talking about *the elephant in the room*, or one of the hundreds of elephants we have in the room in the Colombian case, is a daily challenge. Each needs to be addressed carefully.>>

Therefore, this resistance to the dispossession of language sets the tone for the creation of narratives that allow us to visualize, hear, feel what we are socially. Language is the place where experiences occur, those that teach us how to live as a community.

The cultural savaging of Latin America: a plundering of the spoken word

As Alfredo Mires, general director of the Network of Rural Libraries of Cajamarca, narrates, referring to the processes of cultural plundering of Abya-Yala, books have been present in one of the most important historical incidents regarding the invasion of our peoples: <<books entered history invested with arrogance, because books contain the truth of the gods, contain the truth of the laws and contain the truths of science from an official point of view. We only had the existence and the Word>> (2001).

The plundering of the word was the technique of power used by the invaders to generate colonial processes since their arrival in Latin America. They established power relations and inequalities where the ones considered to be *the Other* became the dominated, not only power was exercised and the peoples were subjugated through the use of weapons, but also were made to forget their language and along with it their words, their stories, their knowledge. It was through the imposition of a language together with force that the ‘new world’ was carved. The <<Spanish Requirement of 1513>>, written by Palacio Rubios, is one of the examples that occurred in this context where a series of statements were read aloud and where the original peoples were left at the mercy of the barbarians. The reading aloud of this document was witnessed and validated by a notary. The colonial writing and the reading aloud of this document, the <<right>> to plunder, to colonize, is validated.

In the processes of colonization and plundering, the use of the master's language, the understanding of it, the comprehension of what documents such as the <<Spanish Requirement of 1513>> said implied the link with the condition of humanity, since stripped of a language there was no difference between being a human and being an animal; hence, resisting this dispossession turns the genesis of the processes of colonization into a matter of dignity. According to Harrinson (1994) <<many societies share this form of differentiation according to which the speaking group is considered to be human and all those who are not within it are thought of as ‘non-humans’>> (p.49).

And not only does this technique linked to the imposition and dispossession of the word date back to the 15th and 16th centuries. It is, in fact, a *modus operandi* that has been maintained and continues to generate processes of cultural depletion through the imposition of ways of thinking and censorship of difference. Although a process of sensitization and recovery of what is ours,

what was taken from us regarding native peoples, has been sought, such process is done from a multicultural perspective that has to do more with the spectacularization of practices, myths, rites, rituals, languages, than with a critical and conscious exercise where interculturality plays a greater part aiming at the assumption of a full citizenship, at the decoloniality of being through knowledge. These processes of emancipation try to fight coloniality directly utilizing language as well, since it is through language that we understand, inhabit, and establish ways of living and existing socially. It is also, without a doubt, a means through which we relate to and with others.

As a matter of fact, the pillaging of languages has led to the creation and reproduction of a single History that is always told by the victors and situated in a Judeo-Christian calendar that ignores subjugated memories and interred memories that happen alongside official memories. Once the word is taken away from a culture, a cultural accumulation takes place where a process of homogenization is generated. This way, thanks to the processes undertaken by the theologians of liberation in the 1960s, the single stories began to be questioned and a polyphony of voices started to speak up; plus, the work around collective actions where recognition and redistribution is discussed and implemented took place. Both liberation theology and social organizing are modelled after critical theory. Those of us who aspire to keep critical theory alive are challenged to adapt it to a world where status struggles proliferate amid increasing economic inequality, and the concept of recognition is a promising vehicle for reinterpreting this theory.

In Latin America, resisting the dispossession of the word and insisting on its inherent connection to the human condition is an assertion on social justice. It is an exercise of political awareness that motivates people to assume their own voice, making sure that demands, ideas, claims and complaints do not depend

only on a few people, a small circle of scholars and intellectuals. A two-dimensional conception of justice would not only consider distribution and recognition as different perspectives but also as two sides from the same coin, both contribute to dignity, because they place the subject first, the voice of all people, advocating for respect and equal opportunities.

However, assuming one's own voice is not an easy task, and one cannot be naïve when it comes to justifying a claim for recognition in the legitimate use of the voice. This is when civil disobedience happens in the context of social resistance. This does not mean that it should be effective and decide on the downtrodden's favor; conversely, it will be through dialogue and participatory argumentation that different positions will be publicly presented thusly enriching the public debate to reach a better consensus that favors both parties.

This way, public debates eliminate authoritarianism and give the voices that never had a chance to speak before the opportunity to finally present their point of view. At the same time, they allow us to publicly share our experiences and stories, giving the public sphere a dynamism that allows the generation of new ideas and perceptions of our reality, whether local or global, depending on the circumstances. This exercise in Latin America requires hard work that involves deconstructing the politics of fear and thinking about policies of redistribution and recognition, which, at the same time, implies tensing up the field of language, which is the place where life itself takes place, to problematize the struggles in favor of it.

The savaging and the dispossession of the word continues nowadays. It still is a systematic practice of elimination of difference. The only change is that, at present, more than ever before, we have advanced in terms of an acquisition of a political consciousness or, as Freire would say, we have moved decisively

towards the development of a critical literacy that allows us to generate processes of conscious resistance to counter the strategic silences that degrade the conditions of dignity of those of us who consciously make up society.

Resisting the dispossession of the word

As a community we have the responsibility to resist and preserve the word, because language is the symbolic field that allows us to, through communal interactions, live and do things collectively; it can be understood as:

...a group of people who not only live together, but who actively participate of the same vision regarding life and therefore share a scale of values (...) the community as a social space endowed with the following characteristics: ability to legitimize the acts of each one of its members; ability to define what is good or bad above personal criteria; presence of a common project that delimits goodness or badness. The community would be that space where private life and public life meet and merge. (Bertolo, 2017, 187).

Insofar as the community cares for, embraces, protects and safeguards the word, it becomes its guardian. More specifically in democratic states, this implies the defense of life and fundamental human rights. In the field of LEO, in addressing the cycles of political violence that we have experienced as a society, we have found that it is in small groups where the word is kept alive and comes back to life in diverse languages and textualities. It gains strength while being accompanied by a profound poetic reasoning linked to dignity.

Although a great number of diverse materials where the word is celebrated, and where it allows people to denounce, discuss justice and equality, can be traced in literature, the word takes the street, the walls, and turns into chants and harangues, more and more every time. The word becomes a performance and reminds us, indubitably, that language takes place in everyday life; plus, we

reaffirm that the word is not only written in traditional formats, but we have assumed the word in all its dimensions and, orality as the elder sister of writing, plays a magnificent part. In the case of Colombia and its social explosion, resistance to the silencing of the word has implied turning it into a performance, a work of art as proposed by Vich and Zabala (2004):

It is necessary to assert that all oral acts have meaning not only because of the images they contain but also because of the way in which they are produced, the circumstances in which they take place and the audience to whom they are addressed (p.11).

The production of performative acts, where the word is the main attraction, during a surge of political violence needs a conscious exercise of social resistance, dignity, and the demand for dignified life and justice. Here we remember that language exists because we can live in community thusly creating reality collectively. The narratives, stories, and texts that emerge socially derive from exercises of resistance that seek to become a way to produce collective memory that allows us to rethink our present, problematize the politics of fear, seek alternatives to organize ourselves as a society and examine the official or institutionalized memory.

In the Colombian case, music, graffiti and illustrations have taken center stage in these demonstrations of resistance. Here, the use of the illustrated and sung word is presented as a performance that is established not only in social networks, but also in the public sphere, bursting into the landscape that refuses to be stripped of dignity, that exercises violence to silence myriads of voices and that insists on forgetting and denying human rights.

Resisting the pillaging of language helps to demystify the hegemonic narratives and gives us an opportunity to understand society more broadly. Below I

present some examples taken from the Colombian case, these complement the ones presented above:



Peasant Resistance
Germania, Boyacá, Colombia

Graffiti alluding to the resistance of peasants
in Colombia



Juan Vega Photographer
Retrieved from:

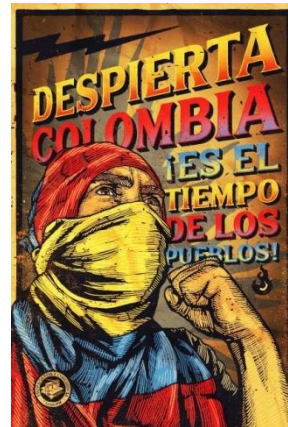
<https://www.facebook.com/juanangelvdph/posts/423190715597306>



Andrea Castañeda
Retrieved from:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10161016924844689&set=a.10153844702419689>

Poster alluding to the Colombian front line.
The objective of the first line was to repel
the ESMAD attacks in defense of the
protests in Colombia



Artist: Gran OM (MEX)

Poster made by Mexican artist. Called to a
social awakening



In [Ibagué](#).

City in western Colombia

Graffiti denouncing state violence



Genocidal State

Urban Artists from Barranquilla
Artists from Universidad del Atlántico
Graffiti denouncing state violence

The gentle word, a matter of dignity

<<What if we are delirious for a little while?

what if we look past shame and

better focus on envisioning another world possible?

The air will be clean of every poison that does not come
from human fears and human passions (...).>>

Utopia, by Eduardo Galeano

Although the word refuses to disappear and it has become clear that its presence is fundamental in the demand for human rights, it, in its multiple forms, provides comfort, it becomes a refuge. It not only gives us the opportunity to meet others halfway, but also otherness. The word that provides comfort amid violent situations turns itself into company, a companion, that helps to heal the pain and calm the distress.

Hope and peaceful resistance have taught us that the word that embraces necessarily requires attentive, loving listening as they both are required when communicating in order for language to be able to safeguard and preserve life.

They have also taught us that by using words we can also embrace difference and learn to live with it, more specifically, in violent contexts. It so might happen that although many people consider the use of language a transformative possibility that can be used to foster more humane contexts, the scenario thereof is disregarded nonetheless as a utopia, there also are many people, me being one of them, that thinks of the word as means that can act as a tremendous force of nonviolence to resist. It indubitably is a choice that brings along awareness to challenge the dispossession of our own humanity. Kind words can definitely counter the damage violent ones might inflict on people.

Notes

1. Abya Yala, is the name with which the Tuna community from Colombia and Panama baptized Latin America before the invasion.
2. Here I rely on Maria Zambrano's idea that regards the word <<human>> as a noun. The use of the term <<human condition>> proposes to place the subject first.

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