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Public Spaces and Global Listening Spaces: Poetic Resonances from the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity in Mexico

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When a poem is placed in public space, it is placed within the reach of other people. Often, this happens because the poet themselves or whoever else places the poem in public space, is looking to establish a connection to others: those who frequent such a space on a regular basis, those who come to it for the specific purpose of hearing or reading the poem, those who pass by accidentally and, touched by what they have heard or read, remain or walk away changed, and with a different awareness of themselves and their surroundings. In his study *Poetry's Touch*, William Waters has argued that often, poems do not even need to use the second person to enact this search for a 'You.' He argues that "it is context, rather than a vocative form or the pronoun *you*, which shows us that a stretch of language is addressed to someone" (Waters 2003: 5). In this article I will respond to a set of poems which were recited in public spaces, in Mexico, in 2011, during encounters organized in the context of the first *caravana* of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD). Poets and listeners together created what I will call with reference to Kate Lacey listening spaces and listening publics, at a moment of escalating physical and structural violence, when what then-president Felipe Calderón and his allies called the 'war on drugs' – also known as 'Calderón's war' – compounded the effects of the war between the drug cartels and of a long history of structural and physical violence, and added forms of state repression that were 'innovated' with a characteristically neoliberal lack of accountability, and with impunity.

¹I'm grateful to all those who put me in contact with participants of MPJD, and to all those who took the time to talk to me and share with me their experiences of the *caravanas* and the meetings. Two people in particular – a friend of many years who is a member of EmergenciaMX, and one person who took considerable time to talk to me in Mexico City in August 2013 – switched me on to the poems that form the backbone of this article.

I would also like to thank colleagues from several departments at Lancaster University for their feedback on an earlier version of this article at a Brown Bag session, and colleagues from the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium for their feedback on a lecture based on the same material.

Lacey develops the concepts of 'listening publics' and 'listening spaces' through a – profoundly critical – analysis of public speech and public listening practices in the Global North. She points out that

We normally think about agency in the public sphere as speaking up, or as finding a voice; in other words, to be listened to, rather than to listen. ... What is actually at stake here is the freedom of *shared* speech or, to put it another way, the freedom to be heard. But this formulation still puts the speaker centre stage; it is still formulated as the politics of *voice*. The presence of a listening public is simply assumed, (Lacey 165)

This assumption comes hand in hand with a 'straitjacketed version of reciprocity, where a listener has the opportunity to become a speaker whose voice will carry equally far and resonate in just the same space, and without any delay or distortion.' (Lacey 166) However, the agency that comes from public speech is only realized when speech is shared, as Lacey puts it. In the spaces we create for sharing speech, we can liberate ourselves from the straitjacket of prescribed assumptions and expectations, and we can expand the plethora of possible responses:

In fact, it is apposite to think of speech as *resonating* with the listener. Resonance is a property of acoustic space that is a form of causality, but not the linear causality associated with visual culture. Resonance is therefore about responsiveness, but it need not be responsiveness in kind, nor need to be immediate. A speech can resonate with a listener without the listener responding in speech. (Lacey 2013: 167)

Lacey's critique and reflections – which refer mainly to the Global North – resonate strongly with the Zapatista practice of 'speaking and listening.' For them, public speech needs to be carried out by 'speaking with the heart', which means to touch the heart of the other. 'Listening with the heart' means that the listeners let the words of the Other –the speaker(s) – touch their own heart.² For both, listening lies at the heart of any democratic practice; and the MPJD, strongly influenced by the Zapatistas but

²See, for example, EZLN 1995.

located mainly in Mexico's urban squares, embodies the resonance between such conceptions of listening from different locations of the planet.

In this article I explore the implications of such resonances by bringing together some of the poems recited during meetings organized by the MPJD, and analytical concepts that have informed global academic debates on violence since the late 1980s: the relationship between interiority and exteriority in publicly recited poetry, especially with regards to the unsayability of pain as theorized by Elaine Scarry; the conceptualization of precarious and grievable life proposed by Judith Butler in *Prekarious Life: The Politics of Mourning and of Violence* (2004), and developed with specific reference to situations of war in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2010); and the genderization of public space through necropolitics, as theorized by Melissa Wright with reference to Achille Mbembe. My point is that the poetic interventions into the public debate from the physically occupied public spaces in Mexico can, when listened and responded to, become starting points from which to construct global listening spaces, and global spaces of resonance. But before I turn to the poetry recitals, I need to outline the context in which these poems were recited.

Escalations of Violence, and the Passification of Public Space

The Movimiento por la paz con justicia y dignidad (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, MPJD) formed in March 2011, after the assassination of Juan Francisco Sicilia, son of the poet, writer and journalist Javier Sicilia. Since Felipe Calderón had declared his 'war on drugs' in December 2006, around 40.000 people had been killed violently and often, with extreme brutality. However, the immediately drug-related violence is only one piece in a wider puzzle of indirect and direct, of structural, physical and symbolic violence, that has been ravaging the country since the mid-1990s.³

This particular type of violence emerges shortly after the implementation of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January 1994. Since then, subsequent Mexican governments – often under pressure from, in collaboration with, and to the benefit of policy makers and governments from the Global North, local élites, and the transnational capitalist class – have continuously reduced the protective and regulatory functions of the State. Government now functions as a facilitator for

³Throughout this article, my definitions of different types of violence are based on the definitions provided by Johan Galtung (1969).

the activity of business and transnational corporations, and uses repressive measures when the interests of such actors are questioned or jeopardized by groups or individuals. At the same time, the redistribution and concentration of wealth and resources has led to a widening gap between rich and poor. All this taken together has created the *conditions* for unbridled and uncontrolled direct and indirect violence.⁴ Examples include – but are in no way limited to – the direct physical violence exercised by the army and by paramilitary groups against Zapatista communities in Chiapas and against communities which are friendly with the Zapatistas and develop their own models of autonomy, as well as the *feminicidios* in the North of the country. Examples of structural violence include policies that affect large sectors of the rural population by rendering subsistence and small-scale farming unviable. These populations then mass-emigrate to the United States, to the cities, or start to work for cartels. As a consequence, the social fabric in many rural areas is ruptured, communally based local cultures are deprived of the conditions for their existence, and the economic existence of many individuals and families is precarized or destroyed. Another example of structural violence is the aggressive implementation of mega-projects such as dams or touristic 'development', which lead to the dispossession of communities and consequently, to the annihilation of their cultures.⁵ As far as symbolic and discursive violence is concerned, more and more sectors of society are presented as a hindrance to the neoliberal model of success and development, or to the 'morals' that sustain society. Melissa Wright shows with regards to the intersection of the discourse deployed by the government and local and transnational elites on the femicides, with public discourse on the *narco*. She traces how the government posited the killed girls and women as 'public women' who engaged in activities beyond those permissible within the 'patriarchal notions of normality' (Wright 2011: 714), such as going to work or occupying public space. Government discourse then creates the impression that in doing so, they caused or inspired the violence that ended their lives. The public woman is thus considered the source of violence and consequently, 'her murder provides a means for ending it. Her removal performs a kind of urban cleansing' (Wright 2011: 715). This discourse, Wright argues, was then extended to narcoviolence. In a drawing published in the

⁴My emphasis on the creation of conditions draws on Butler.

⁵For an analysis of the impact of structural violence on Mexico, see the chapter on Mexico in Leech 2012.

daily newspaper *La Jornada* in March 2010, and re-printed in John Gibler's book *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from the Drug War* (2011), Antonio Helguera succinctly illustrates the incorporation of more and more groups in society into this discourse. The image shows a cemetery without mourners. The gravestones bear inscriptions such as “She/he must have been into something” (on the most ostentatious of the gravestones), “It was a gang feud”, “They murdered amongst themselves”, “What was s/he doing at that hour?”, “It was a settling of accounts”, “Who knows what s/he was getting into”, “She dressed provocatively”, “She was a whore” (on a makeshift wooden cross). These different types of violence place groups outside of the frames for empathy and grievability, and they can then be forcibly exposed to conditions in which they will almost certainly be killed, or perish, they are turned into what Judith Butler has defined as 'precarious life.'

Citizens' groups and social movements in Mexico courageously and persistently defend and exercise their democratic rights and fight for social justice, against impunity, and for radical democracy and its territorial manifestations in public space and communal land. Many citizens have acquired experiences of social organisation and politicized public debate in the context of the solidarity movements between urban populations and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Human Rights activism, anti-femicide activism, and independent media, to give only a few examples.⁶ To contain them, the public spaces they frequent are turned into 'passive zones' – to borrow a term from Kristin Ross – where decisions taken elsewhere are exercised, often through the use of physical, structural and symbolic violence.⁷ Town centres and central squares – locations with a long history of public protest by way of manifestations or long-term protest camps – are turned into tourist attractions, leased out to private business, and / or strictly regulated and policed – not to create a safe environment for the general population, but to control and repress dissent. When

⁶See John Gibler, *Mexico Unconquered: Chronicles of Power and Revolt*. The chronicles stop for obvious reasons in 2009. In his subsequent book *To Die in Mexico: Dispatches from the Drug War*, Gibler explores experiences of resistance and social organization in the specific context of the drug war and the war on drugs. For a more recent collection of chronicles on this subject matter, see Periodistas de a Pie, *Entre las cenizas*.

⁷Kristin Ross refers to 'active zones' and 'passive zones' in her seminal analysis of the relationship between poetry and space in *The Emergence of Social Space*. With reference to the re-organization of Paris in the 19th century, she writes that 'Class division is also the division of the city into active zones and passive zones, into privileged places where decisions are made in secret, and places where these decisions are executed afterward.' (Ross 41) In the contemporary context, social differentiation intersectionally draws on, and moves between, class, race, and gender.

inhabitants resist such a (mis-)use of public space, they are violently repressed.⁸

It is in this context that we have to consider the murder of Juan Francisco Sicilia. The 24-year-old was kidnapped and asphyxiated with a group of friends in Cuernavaca, Morelos. Like so many other bodies, theirs were turned into a message, and left to be found. A few days later, on 3rd April, Javier Sicilia published an 'Open Letter to Mexico's Politicians and Criminals' in the weekly journal *Proceso*. Sicilia addresses Mexico's politicians and criminals as equals in terms of their ethical depravity, and he then provides a comprehensive, sharp and poetic analysis of the interaction between structural, symbolic and physical violence in Mexico. The letter ends with a call to social mobilization, so that the citizens can 'break the fear and isolation that the incapacity of you, “señores” politicians, and the cruelty of you, “señores” criminals, want us to put in our bodies and souls' (Sicilia 2011b). At an initial meeting called by a coalition of social movements on the *zócalo* in Cuernavaca, Javier Sicilia recited his last poem; then, he and those who had assembled with him set out on a march to Mexico City, to demand peace with justice and dignity. Eventually, the MPJD went on a series of other *caravanas* which led first to the South of the country, then to the North, and then through the U.S. The marchers stopped on public squares where, together with local groups, they spoke of and listened to accounts of violent experiences. The meetings always began with a poetry reading. People then came forward to share their pain, their grief, or their anger, in whichever format they chose. Some of the speakers had lost loved ones, some had themselves been victims of direct personal violence, and many no longer wanted to be sympathetic, innocent and impotent bystanders to the destruction of human life and to the disintegration of the country's social fabric. What was articulated in these events were not so much demands that could be easily captured in the terms of political discourse; rather, the sharing of pain became a collectively articulated, ethically motivated critique of the dominant economic and political system and a denunciation of what it permits and encourages to be done to human beings.⁹

Cuernavaca, Morelos: Connectivity beyond Interiority/Exteriority

⁸ Examples include the repressions of citizens' movements in San Salvador Atenco and in Oaxaca in 2006, as well as the dismissal of the massive citizens mobilization against alleged election fraud and for a re-count of votes in Mexico City in the same year.

⁹ For a documentation of the first *caravana* see the documentary made by EmergenciaMX [INSERT LINK](#)

The symbolic and discursive violence that holds the victims responsible for their own death and posits them as not grievable, renders absent the pain and the grief generated by such deaths: the physical pain suffered by the dead as they were being killed, the emotional pain of the loved ones who have to live with the absence of the dead and with an awareness of what they must or could have suffered, the emotional pain suffered by all of us who are turned into apparently impotent bystanders to the grief and suffering of others. Such discourse also renders absent the possibility of justice, and it renders absent the possibility of a social consensus that no-one deserves to die in such ways, no matter what they have done; and that no-one should be willing to exercise such violence and brutality against another human being. Moreover, such discourse renders absent the responsibility of the State and of society to create the conditions for such a consensus. Such discourse signals that those who deploy it, do not want to hear about the pain caused to others and its direct or indirect relationship to the conditions that they have created through the decisions they have taken and the policies they have implemented. As a result, pain remains contained within what Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* described as 'the ironclad privacy of the body':

Beside the initial fact of pain, all further elaborations – that it violates this or that human principle, that it can be objectified in this or that way, that it is amplified here, that it is disguised there – all these seem trivializations, a missing of the point, a missing of the pain. But the result of this is that the moment it is lifted out of the ironclad privacy of the body into speech, it immediately falls back in. Nothing sustains its image in the world; nothing alerts us to the place it has vacated. (Scarry 1985: 61)

If this is so – and we will see that several of the poems about pain reinforce Scarry's point – then those who constituted themselves as listening publics during the encounters, not only heard out expressions of pain; they also responded to the challenge that the 'ironclad privacy of the body' sabotages the ways in which we usually connect through poetry; in particular, when we approach it as lyric poetry, which is meant to exteriorize the poet's interiority and which we will therefore try to connect with on the basis of apprehending elements of the poet's interior life.

Javier Sicilia's last poem draws on the difficulty of connecting interiorities, and explicates the impossibility of exteriorizing pain:

El mundo ya no es digno de la palabra word	The world is no longer dignified of the word
Nos la ahogaron adentro Como te (asfixiaron), Como te desgarraron a ti los pulmones	They drowned it inside us Just like they (asphyxiated you) Just like they ripped apart your lungs
Y el dolor no se me aparta sólo queda un mundo Por el silencio de los justos Sólo por tu silencio y por mi silencio, Juanelo	And pain no longer leaves me there only remains a world for the silence of the Just only for your silence and my silence, Juanelo

Juanelo.

Several times in this short, sparse poem do we touch on the ironclad privacy of the body, and on the impossibility to exteriorize what is inside. The first line suggests that words should not be placed in a world that is not dignified of them; the second line specifies that these words are no longer even alive because 'they drowned them inside us.' The third and fourth line metonymically connects Sicilia's 'adentro' that has been turned into the cemetery of words, with Juan Francisco's physical 'adentro' that was invaded to kill him physically, from the inside: 'as they asphyxiated you / as they ripped apart your lungs.' The insides of father and son have thus been turned into spaces of death: the father's, because words have been drowned; the son's, because his lungs were ripped apart. While their interiorities were not killed in the same way, they were both turned into a dead space by the same people; and it is this affinity which connects them with each other, and separates them from the outside world. In the second stanza Sicilia clarifies the nature of this separation: pain no longer leaves him. In its presence the only world that remains is that which can receive the silence of the just, Sicilia himself and his son. 'The world' from the first stanza – clearly defined by its article, as if it was well-known – is now 'a world', unknown and defined not by its words, but by its silences.

Those who came to the public meetings understood that the ironclad privacy of the body can still resonate and, in a spirit similar to that of Lacey's analysis, they expanded the plethora of possible responses to pain. The 'silence of the Just' is no

dead silence; instead, it is a silence where connectivities unfold through sharing speech by touch and motion, and where response may not be in kind, or immediate, as was the response of all those who spoke with their bodies and walked, or came to the encounters. The silence of the Just, when used wisely, is a space that does not oblige anyone to force the unsayable into inappropriate terminology, or to respond to the unsayable with speech.

Moreover, expressions of pain resonate across different forms of popular expression, such as art, images, and words, for example in the piece 'Estampaz'. 'Estampaz' is a combination of the word 'estampas' – stamps or stencils – with 'paz', 'peace.' The piece consists of a verbal element – a poem by an anonymous author –, an artistic element which is a stencil workshop on the *zócalo* in Cuernavaca, and a visual element, which is the recording and editing of both by the independent journalist collective EmergenciaMX.

INSERT ESTAMPAZ¹⁰

The poem's agent is (presumably emotional) pain; there is no subject or 'lyrical I'. The speakers refer to their body as occupied by pain, turned into pain's host, devoid of independent sensations or perceptions. Pain works passively; it kills sensations instead of intensifying them. It has an effect *because* it does not translate neither into

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Si al menos este dolor sirviera Si golpease las paredes Si abriera puertas Si cantase y despeinara mi cabello	If only this pain was good for something If it beat the walls If it opened doors If it sang and messed up my hair
Si al menos este dolor sirviera Si saltase de la garganta como un grito Si cayera por la ventana Si estallara Si muriése	If only this pain was good for something If it jumped from the throat like a scream If it fell from the window If it exploded If it died
Si el dolor fuera un pedazo de pan duro que uno pudiese tragar con fuerza y escupir despues out manchar la calle, los autos, el espacio, el Otro ese otro oscuro que pasa indiferente y que no sufre, que tiene derecho a no sufrir	If pain was a piece of hard bread that one could force down and spit back later stain the street, the cars, space, the Other that dark other who passes by indifferently and who does not suffer, who has the right to not suffer
Si el dolor fuera solo la carne del dedo que se frota en la pared de piedra para que duela, duela, duela visiblemente penosamente, con lágrimas	If pain would only be the flesh of the finger that rubs against a stone wall so that it hurts, hurts, hurts visibly painfully, tearfully
Si al menos este dolor sangrase	If only this pain bled to death

its own actions (servir, saltar, caer, estallar, morir / to be of use, to jump, to fall, to explode, to die) nor, in the second half of the poem, into metaphorical referents that could be dealt with. It cannot be exteriorized by being spat out to stain the street, the cars, space, the indifferent Other, and it does not even have an injured body that would visibilize it because the pain is located on the invisible inside: like blood it runs through the speaker's veins, invading every part of their body and occupying their aliveness for itself.

Alive, intact and functional is only the speaker's desire for peace, expressed in the 'if only', 'if at least', and in the metaphors of possibilities. This desire created a resonance in all those who responded with the stencil workshop, and in EmergenciaMX who brought together the poem and the artwork and placed it on the internet, as a starting point for wider resonance. In the video, the viewer's gaze is made to observe the hands of people as they create the brightly coloured stencils, paintings and *guirlandas*, and teach each other. We also see the completed works strung on a washing line across the *zócalo* of Cuernavaca, and pinned onto the pavement of the square and onto the walls of adjacent buildings. The camera shows us different takes on what 'peace' might look like: the skill-sharing during the stencil workshop, the concentration on a task of the imagination, the collective decoration of the *zócalo* under the auspices of a shared commitment, the bright colours, the sharing of speech as we listen to the slowly and carefully recited poem. In their combination, the poem and artwork create external referents for each other. The pain expressed in the poem ties the desire for peace to a concrete reality textured with experiences and commitments; and the desire for peace expressed in the artwork creates an external reference for the pain contained in the speaker's body and words.

Both poems speak of a pain that is contained within, or falls back into, the ironclad privacy of the body; but instead of responding with defeat and resignation because the mode of connection through exteriorization does not work, the listeners pick up on, and work with, the resonance. They respond to Sicilia's 'the world is no longer dignified of the word' by creating spaces – if not a world – that is dignified of the word. They respond to the isolation and disempowerment of the speaker of the poem in 'Estampaz' by respecting pain and creating a referent for a shared desire.

Monterrey, Nuevo León: Precarious Life, Frames, and Mirrors

When I draw, with reference to the poem 'Yo no soy el hijo de un poeta' / 'I'm not the

son of a poet', on Judith Butler's interconnected concepts of 'precarious life' and 'grievable life', then I depart to an extent from Sicilia's interpretation of the violence in Mexico. Sicilia writes that 'each citizen of this country has been reduced to what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben called, using a Greek word, "zoe": an unprotected life, the life of an animal, of a being that can be violated, kidnapped, molested and assassinated with impunity' (Sicilia 2011b). Butler points out that 'precarious life' differs in that

This [the compromising and suspending of the ontological status of a targeted population] is not the same as 'bare life,' since the lives in question are not cast outside the polis in a state of radical exposure, but bound and constrained by power relations in a situation of forcible exposure. It is not the withdrawal or absence of law that produces precariousness, but the very effects of illegitimate legal coercion itself, or the exercise of state power freed from the constraints of all law. (29)

Though she does not refer to the situation in Mexico specifically, she contextualizes both concepts within the context of 'new forms of state violence – especially those that seek to suspend legal constraints in the name of sovereignty, or which fabricate quasi-legal systems in the name of national security' (Butler 2010: 28). She points out that 'lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident', and that

[p]olitical orders, including economic and social institutions, are designed to address those very needs without which the risk of mortality is heightened. Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. (Butler 2010: 25)

Which lives are 'forcibly exposed' (Butler) to a precarious situation, is in part determined by the 'frames' through which lives are understood as such, as 'a life has to be intelligible *as a life*, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable' (Butler 2014: 7). Grievability is one such frame; only when a

life is considered grievable, is there the obligation to create conditions that ensure the continuity of this life. But when these conditions are not given, then populations who think of themselves as precarious enter into competition with each other, and this leads 'to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as “destructible” and “ungrievable.”’(Butler 2010: 31) Which populations are targeted depends on whether they can be framed as grievable or not; but when they are cast as threats to whatever ensures the survival of others, when their lives are lost they are not grievable, since, ...'their loss of such populations is necessary to protect the lives of “the living”’ (Butler 2014: 31).¹¹

In the poem 'Yo no soy el hijo de un poeta', 'I'm not the son of a poet', available here in a recording by EmergenciaMX of a performance on the *zócalo* in Monterrey, Nuevo León. The poet critiques the existing frames that places some lives into a state of forcible exposure, and proposes alternatives through which 'life' can be recognized.

INSERT YO NO SOY E HIJO DE UN POETA¹²

¹¹The analogy to the cases analysed by Butler with regards to the U.S. are a public discourse that posit 'progress' and 'growth' as absolute necessities for human life; thus, the populations that jeopardize either of these have to be sacrificed in order to protect the lives of the living.

¹² Yo no soy sólo el hijo de un poeta.	I'm not only the son of a poet.
Soy las lágrimas de las madres de San Luis, from San Luis,	I'm the tears of the mothers
de las abuelas de Zacatecas, de los hijos de Durango. of Zacatecas, the children of Durango.	the grandmothers
Soy el luto de Monterrey. Monterrey.	I'm the mourning of
 Yo no soy sólo el hijo de un poeta. poet.	 I'm not only the son of a
Soy el paramilitar que mata a su propia gente. kills his own people.	I'm a paramilitary who
Soy 140 y un chingo de cadáveres en una fosa. cadavers in a mass grave.	I'm 140 and a fuck load of
 Yo no soy sólo el hijo de un poeta. poet.	 I'm not only the son of a
Soy el alma de un encino en Cherán, y un arroyo en encino in Cherán, and a Huitzilac. stream in Huitzilac.	I'm the soul of an
Soy la sangre arrastrada de la tierra en San Javier.	I'm the blood ripped from

There is no doubt that 'the son of a poet' – innocent on top of this – constitutes not only life, but grievable life. All of us who are literate in the hegemonic logic understand that. But what if 'life' is defined in a manner that places it outside the frame of recognition deployed by those in power and accepted by the hegemonic logic?

The poet who is not the son of a poet puts his lyric I on the line when he identifies with individuals, collectives, and landscapes that, according to the notion of personhood that informs North-Western laws and politics, cannot be considered 'life': a person cannot be the expression – tears – of another person's grief, one man cannot be a group of grandmothers, one adult cannot be many children, a person cannot be the mourning of a city, which is in turn not a person and can therefore not mourn, and one speaking individual cannot be a fuck load of cadavers in a mass grave. And yet, the lyric I (who is also the speaker of the poem, as well as its author) enacts such an identification with collective entities: we hear it with our own ears and see it with our own eyes.

In the second section of the poem, the lyric I becomes part of landscapes and socialities. According to hegemonic notions of identity and personhood, the mountain crests of Cherán in Michoacán – a woodland region where logging destroys extensive forests and the landscapes and natural resources that define local cultures – do not have a soul because they are not human. The silver taken from the mines in San Javier in San Luis Potosí by Canadian mining companies through open air mining is not

the earth in San Javier.

Soy siete cadáveres encontrados en la cajuela de un coche. I'm seven cadavers that were found in the boot of a car.

Soy un jicorí que nunca más florecerá en Wirikuta.
longer blossoms in Wirikuta.

I'm a Peyote plant that no

Soy el mercado local que ahora se llama WalMart.
now called WalMart.

I'm the local market that is

Soy el grito de protesta ahogado en la gas en
Barcelona.

I'm the cry of protest drowned out by the gas in
Barcelona.

Soy los muertos en Vietnam, el Golfo Pérsico, los
Balkanes, Palestina, Iraq, Korea, Nagasaki,
Tlatelolco, Atenco, Chiapas, la Plaza de Mayo,
el Palacio de la Moneda, Ciudad Juárez,
Iran, Afghanistan

I'm the dead in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf,
the Balkans, Palestine, Iraq, Korea, Nagasaki,
Tlatelolco, Atenco, Chiapas, the Plaza de Mayo,
the Palacio de la Moneda, Ciudad Juárez, Iran,
Iran, Afghanistan

y 12.000 etcéteras que susurran a la historia.

and 12.000 etceteras that whisper to History.

Yo no soy el hijo de un poeta.

I'm not the son of a poet.

Soy el hijo de un país que agoniza.

I'm the son of a country in agony

Soy el dragón levantándose de las cenizas

I'm the dragon rising up from the ashes

Soy un grito de la esperanza

I'm a cry of hope

en medio del desierto

in the middle of the desert

blood because it is not organic material. A person cannot be the spiritualities in danger of destruction by neoliberal mega-projects, like the spirituality of the *huicholes* in Wirikuta, where open-air mining by a Canadian company threatens to destroy the topography of a sacred mountain of the *huichol* people. And a person cannot be the sociality of a local market that has been replaced by a mega-supermarket. And yet, the poet ties personhood to the places and the social spaces that we – ie., human beings – actively inhabit and connect with.¹³

The poet thus challenges the individualized, socially isolated and spatially dispossessed notion of personhood that is deployed by the neoliberal State. The poet does so by performing his unwillingness or inability to adjust his identity to the narrow hegemonic frame of recognition. Consequently, he and all those who constitute themselves in the same terms as he does, have placed themselves outside the frame and their destruction only actualizes that state. As Butler puts it, according to the logic of the state they are now "lose-able", or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited' (31) – and in this particular case, the government is not even to blame because those people have placed *themselves* outside the frame and have therefore constituted themselves as lose-able.

If we consider this wrong, we can try to change the frame, or we can argue that it is wrong to apprehend life through any frame. This is what the Zapatistas have done with their concept-metaphor of the mirror. The 'mirror' recurs throughout Zapatista writing and speeches, and it is usually deployed to create the visual equivalent of resonances. An example is the 'fourth mirror' from the 'Story of the Mirrors' (1995). The first three mirrors discussed in the story reflect different political actors in Mexico: those in Power, the opposition, and civil society or 'those without a party'. The fourth mirror is one that reaches out across space:

¹³The poetic discourse of this section resonates with Rimbaud's who, as Ross points out, conceived of space, and of people in space, in very different terms than the 'landscapism' that dominated notions of space at the time. Ross links landscapism to colonialism which, she argues, 'demands a certain construction of space (...): natural, which is to say, nonhistorical – and one where all alterity is absent' (Ross 87). Rimbaud, in contrast, 'peoples his landscapes' in such a way that people function 'neither as accessory nor as décor. Rimbaud's comprehension of space allows social relations to prevail: space as social space, not landscape' (Ross 90). Similarly, Butler suggests that place, like people, is grievable. As such, it is part of us and we are part of place, and of the social space that they produce; or, as Butler suggests in *Prekarious Life*, dispossession of a place and of a sociality causes a sense of loss and an experience of mourning that is akin to that experienced **when losing a person.**

Cuarto espejo

Que manda, a través del mar de oriente, un saludo a los hombres y mujeres que, en Europa, descubrieron que comparten con nosotros el mismo padecimiento: la enfermedad de la esperanza.

INSTRUCCIONES PARA VER EL CUARTO ESPEJO:

Busque un espejo cualquiera, colóquelo frente a usted y asuma una posición cómoda. Respire hondo. Cierre los ojos y repita tres veces:

«Soy lo que soy, un poco, lo que puedo ser. El espejo me muestra lo que soy, el cristal lo que puedo ser.»

Hecho lo anterior, abra los ojos y mire el espejo. No, no mire su reflejo.

Dirija su mirada hacia abajo, a la izquierda. ¿Ya? Bien, ponga atención y en unos instantes aparecerá otra imagen. Sí, es una marcha: hombres, mujeres, niños y ancianos que vienen del sureste. Sí, es una de las carreteras que llevan a la ciudad de México. ¿Ve usted lo que hay caminando al costado izquierdo de la caravana? ¿Dónde? ¡Ahí abajo, en el suelo! ¡Sí, eso pequeñito y negro! ¿Que qué es? ¡Un escarabajo! Ahora ponga atención, porque ese escarabajo es...

¡Durito IV! (. . .)

The mirror returns to us difference and similarity, ourselves and others, the present and the future. It expands our field of vision; it lets us see those who are behind us, and those who are outside of our peripheral vision. We can see how we are positioned in relation to them, and how they are positioned in relation to us. We can shift it, turn it, and tilt it. The mirror gives us an opportunity to increase self-knowledge and self-awareness (as distinct to narcissistic self-absorption), while it also opens up our visual perception and enables us to recognize others, who we can then seek out and connect with. The poet articulates this unequivocally in the last section of the poem, when he becomes a cry of protest, those killed in wars and massacres across the world, and the unknown who whisper to History. His poem picks up the resonances of these cries and whispers, and articulates and amplifies them on the *zócalo* in Monterrey. Through his solidarity, the Zapatista 'affliction of hope' can be shared and can become the starting point for a future even in these dark times: the son of a country in agony is

also the phoenix rising from the ashes, and a cry of hope in the middle of the desert.

Read through both theoretical concept-metaphors – the frame and the mirror – the poem takes us into an exploration of how people and spatialities are violently passified when lives are rendered precarious; and into an exploration of the possibility of an active global spatiality in solidarity, if we act on the wide-open, critical and connective potentialities of the mirror. It is up to us to tune into these whispers, and to respond to and become part of, the cry of hope – just as the poet has responded to, and has become part of, that drowned-out cry of protest.

Looking at the Image of Hell: Motion and Gesture in María Rivera's 'Los Muertos'

My last poetic response in this paper is articulated from a publicly intimate space created by two resonances coming together, one originating from Javier Sicilia's 'Open Letter' and one created by María Rivera with her performance of her long poem 'Los Muertos', 'The Dead', on the *zócalo* in Mexico City. In the previous section I slightly disagreed with Javier Sicilia when he establishes the non-ethical affinity between Mexico's politicians and criminals and the Nazis in his 'Open Letter' through Agamben's concept of bare life; but I would like to further explore this affinity with regards to the lack of ethical boundaries that permits sectors of the population to be rendered killable. After his reference to Agamben, Sicilia compares Mexico's criminals to the Nazi *Sonderkommandos*, and he imploers his readers to not engage in the complicity exposed by Martin Niemöller in a famous short poem. Hannah Arendt, in her essay 'The Image of Hell', addresses the same themes through a short review of two books. *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People* exposes the facts of the Holocaust; in *Hitler's Professors* Max Weinreich investigates the complicity of German scholars with the Nazi regime. According to Arendt, the verbally conveyed analysis of the writers fails 'to understand or make clear the nature of the facts confronting them' (Arendt 198). The facts are, with respect to *The Black Book*, that six million human beings were 'dragged to their deaths' (198) through the method of what Arendt calls 'accumulated terror': calculated neglect, deprivation, and shame; outright starvation combined with forced labour; and then the death factories, where 'they all died together..., like things that had neither body nor soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal' (Arendt 198). The *nature* of these facts is what Arendt calls 'this monstrous equality without fraternity or

humanity' in which we see 'as though mirrored, the image of hell' (Arendt 198). What Arendt describes here is the horror that transfixes people when they are confronted with modes of killing which purposefully create types of death and 'killer subjectivities' that exceed the language we have for either.¹⁴

One of the images of hell of our times is what we see mirrored in the dead bodies, or in their photos or descriptions, in Mexico. But whereas the Nazis cremated most of the dead bodies and annihilated the 'physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal', the dead bodies in Mexico are often displayed publicly, so that people may – and are often forced to – look at them.¹⁵ A dead body is then no longer the body of a killed person; the bodies are turned into a message over which the sender has complete control. John Gibler explicates this in *To Die In Mexico: Dispatches from the Drug War* (2011):

A death with no name. A death that extinguishes who you were along with who you are. A death that holds you before the world as a testament only to death itself. All that is left is your body destroyed in a vacant lot, hanging from a highway overpass, or locked into the trunk of a car. Your name is severed, cut off, and discarded. The only history that remains attached to your body is that of your particular death: bullet holes, burns, slashes, contusions, limbs removed. The executioners of this killing ground destroy each person twice. First they obliterate your world; if you are lucky, they do so with a spray of bullets. But then, once you are gone, they will turn your body from that of a person into that of a message. (. . .) You will lose your name. You will lose your past, the record of your loves and fears, triumphs and failures, and all the small things in between. Those who look upon you will see only death. (Gibler 2011: 14)

¹⁴Relevant is a comment by Claudio Lomitz, author of the study *Death and the Idea of Death in Mexico*, in a conversation with John Gibler, when Lomitz points out that ‘ “In analyzing the forms of narco violence, Mexican history is not irrelevant, but it is necessary to know where it is relevant. Narco violence is related to other forms of violence and also influences them; the narcos import, but they also export. There is a dimension that is in dialogue with a globalized culture.”’ (Gibler 2011: 58-59) Part of this 'globalized culture' is the global inheritance of fascism, of which the violence of coloniality forms part.

¹⁵During the final stages of work on this article, an extreme act of violence in Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero was carried out by the local police, possibly in collaboration with drug cartels: 43 students were victims of enforced disappearance and 3 others were killed. The body of Julio César Mondragón was found with his eyes gouged out and the skin of his face removed: his killers removed 'the physiognomy upon which death could stamp his seal', and then left his body to be found, turning it into a message.

Such messages – and even the sheer fact that a body can be objectified into a message – horrifies those who look upon the dead, and transfix them into the paralysis described by Adriana Cavarero in *Horrorism* with regards to people facing images of horror:

In contrast to what occurs with terror, in horror there is no instinctive movement of flight in order to survive, much less the contagious turmoil of panic. Rather, movement is blocked in total paralysis, and each victim is affected on its own. Gripped by revulsion in the face of a form of violence that appears more inadmissible than death, the body reacts as if nailed to the spot, hairs standing on end. (8)

When we see the image of hell mirrored in the facts, we are emotionally, intellectually and physically transfixed. We stare at it 'nailed to the spot, hairs standing on end', each of us on our own. We are unable to move sideways to face reality – whatever it may be – *and* resist it, to paraphrase Arendt's famous dictum from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Nothing resonates because nothing moves and everything feels frozen. But if we do not find a way to move, our paralysis becomes the final destination of our lives. Change becomes impossible and the *status quo* is forever perpetuated.

In the 'Open Letter', Sicilia invited people to move, 'to speak with our bodies', to accompany each other through walks and assemblies in public spaces. Physical movement can resonate with text-internal motion in poetry which is, as Hazard Adams points out in *The Offense of Poetry*, part of poetry's ethical offense. For him, motion is the excess of words; the body speaks where words no longer can. In poems, motion is manifest as gesture; gesture makes poems move, it translates verbal language into bodily movement and places bodily movement inside verbal language. Gesture signals the presence of 'what is ... unspoken but resident in ... or, perhaps projected from the language of the poem' (Adams 100). Because it renders present what cannot be said, it 'frustrates the desire for a summary interpretation'; and it is for this reason that gesture commits 'the poem's ultimate offense: its refusal to reveal itself fully to reason and interpretation, angering those who want the poem to behave as they believe language properly should' (Adams 111). Adams suggests that the

codification of poetry as part of the hegemonic order has excluded motion and gesture from poetic language; for this reason gesture is considered offensive. This is particularly true for women, whose bodies were banned from public space during early capitalism and colonialism, as Silvia Federici explicates in *Caliban and the Witch*.¹⁶ The presence of women's bodies in public space – let alone them speaking – was considered indecent. For women, this has meant that public speech increases one's sense of vulnerability; but also, that public speech can easily take us outside the confining rules of masculine-defined public discourse. Cixous makes this point in her aptly entitled essay 'Sorties', 'Ways Out':

In a way, feminine writing never stops reverberating from the wrench that the acquisition of speech, speaking out loud, is for her – 'acquisition' that is experienced as tearing away, dizzying flight and flinging oneself, diving. Listen to woman speak in a gathering (if she is not painfully out of breath): she doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body into the air, she lets herself go, she flies, she goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the 'logic' of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true. She exposes herself. Really she makes what she thinks materialise carnally, she conveys meaning with her body. She inscribes what she is saying because she does not deny unconscious drives the unmanageable part they play in speech. (Cixous 152)

However, when women place their bodies in public space and speak their presence and autonomy with their bodies, they offend the 'patriarchal notions of normality' referred to by Melissa Wright in her previously quoted essay. Women place themselves outside of the protection afforded by patriarchy and become intensely vulnerable, as Melissa Wright has demonstrated in her previously quoted analysis of governmental and activist discourse on the *femicidios* and the *narco*. When, in her performance of 'The Dead', Rivera responds to death and horror with bodily and text-internal movement from the platform afforded to her by her woman's body, she

¹⁶In *Noise: A Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali analyses with a focus on Europe how music and the public practice of listening were separated from poetry and circus arts during that same time period. Socially valued types of music were now reserved for those areas of society who could afford to be patrons of it and most practitioners lost their autonomy. It was only in those areas of popular culture that escaped the control of the emerging State, where the unity between motion, music, and poetry could be maintained.

approaches 'the dead' through a type of understanding that takes us to what Arendt called 'the nature of the facts', and that coheres in her ethical commitment and her identification as Woman. As part of this, she challenges her listeners into the construction of a new listening space in which publics no longer 'only listen in the masculine', as Cixous once put it.

The video inserted below shows Rivera on a podium on the crowded *zócalo*, surrounded by some of the male poets and actors who had joined the *caravana*. Rivera launches herself into the poem without any detailed introduction. At first – especially during the sections of the poem in which she compels her listeners to look at the image of hell – she stands quite still; but as the poem progresses through three sections structured around showing, naming, and locating, her voice and her body progressively give themselves to motion.

INSERT LINK YOUTUBE LOS MUERTOS

<<http://jacket2.org/commentary/speak-or-speak-what-cannot-be-spoken>>

So what do we see, what do we hear, and where do we go when Rivera takes us to look at the image of hell, so that we can get to the nature of the facts? Rivera first shows us a parade of the dead, reminiscent of a late medieval *danse macabre*, or of the final parade of dead bodies evoked by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. The individuals who were killed are distinguishable only by the modes of killing because the ways in which they were killed left them, to paraphrase Arendt, without a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal:

There they come
 the beheaded,
 the handless,
 the dismembered,
 the women whose coccyx were smashed,
 the men whose heads were crushed,
 the little children crying
 between dark walls
 of minerals and sand.

But if the physiognomy cannot reveal to us the nature of the facts, then we need to look for something else; for example, the circumstances of the killings:

Here comes the one who was forced to dig a grave for his brother,
the one they murdered after collecting four thousand dollars,
those who were kidnapped
with a woman they raped in front of her eight-year-old son
three times.

Rivera places care and compassion in her look upon the dead and expresses it verbally in her sparse but conscientious evocation of their relationships and attachments, of the actions that may have informed the last moments of their lives, of the betrayed hopes of survival, of what was done to them and to those who were forced to watch.

In contrast, the agents in this scenario – those who killed one brother and forced the other to dig his grave, those who murdered a person after collecting money, those who raped the woman and forced her child and those they eventually killed, to watch – are placed outside of Rivera's comprehension in a question that resonates with Arendt's statement '*Beyond the capacities of human comprehension* is the deformed wickedness of those who established such equality' (Arendt 198):

Where do they come from,
from which gangrene,
or lymph,
the bloodthirsty,
the soulless,
the butchers
murderers?

Rivera's question replaces the first part of Arendt's sentence in the statement in placing the perpetrators beyond Rivera's comprehension: she has to ask a question because *that* kind of understanding cannot come from the care and the compassion that define her look upon others. The distancing expressed in Rivera's question starkly contrasts with her search for connectivity in the beginning of the next stanza: 'There

they come / the dead—so lonely, so silent, so ours', when she connects the living with the dead through an understanding based on care and, at the same time, expresses through the terrible impotence of leaving them 'so lonely, so silent', even when they are 'so ours.'

The second section of the poem is structured around the gesture of 'naming', which restores to the dead not their first and last names but, to paraphrase Gibler, their names, their past, the record of their loves and fears, triumphs and failures, and all the small things in between:

They are called
 tiny sweater woven in a drawer of the soul,
 tiny t-shirt for a three-month-old,
 photograph of a toothless smile,
 they are called mamita,
 papito,
 they are called
 tiny kicks
 in the womb
 and the first cry,
 they are called four children,
 Petronia (2), Zacarías (3), Sabas (5), Glenda (6)
 and a widow (girl) who fell in love in elementary school,
 they are called wanting to dance at parties
 they are called reddening of flushed cheeks and sweaty palms,
 they are called boys,
 they are called wanting
 to build a house,
 to lay bricks,
 to give my children something to eat,
 they are called two dollars for cleaning beans,
 houses, haciendas, offices,
 they are called
 cries of children on dirt floors,
 light flying over birds,

flight of doves in the church,
 they are called
 kisses at the edge of the river
 they are called
 Gelder (17)
 Daniel (22)
 Filmar (24)
 Ismael (15)
 Augustín (20)
 José (16)
 Jacinta (21)
 Inés (28)
 Francisco (53)
 (...)

The body with the severed head is that of a person who created his or her mother's memory of tiny kicks in the womb and the first cry (we know *that* even if we will never know anything else about her or him); the woman who was raped and killed in front of her son, was addressed by her child as 'mamita'; one of those destroyed bodies is the father – 'papito' – of Petronia (2), Zacarías (3), Sabas (5), Glenda (6) and long-time beloved of their mother. Their deaths mean that those bricks will never be laid, those dances never danced; there will never be the complicitous smile that shares the memory of those kisses by the river, and Jacinta will never again answer when someone calls her name. The balance that Rivera maintains between intimate detail and what could be publicly known, keeps the memory of the dead in the public sphere without de-personalizing them. Even though the executioners destroyed the 'physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal', the dead are not 'like things that had neither body nor soul'.

In the last section of the poem, Rivera – whose body and voice are now completely given to movement – takes her listeners to those graveyards without mourners, where 'the dead' are kept in the 'monstrous equality without fraternity or humanity': 'There / with no flowers / with no gravestones, / with no age, / with no name, / with no tears, / they sleep in their cemetery.' She then lists some of the cities and regions of the cemetery, ending on 'it [the cemetery] is called México.' Ending a

poetic journey on a cemetery without mourners offends the expectation that poetry in public space makes the *status quo* more bearable and, through that offense, opens up new possibilities to think about poetry in public space. There is the possibility to face reality *and* resist it: to share an accompaniment with Rivera by giving us to the movement of her voice and by keeping our attentiveness with her as she throws her trembling body into the air, lets herself go, flies, goes into her voice, defends the logic of her discourse with her body, inscribes what she is saying. Staying with Rivera throughout the poem can become a chance to not stand transfixed in horror before the monstrousness of the victims' innocence, before the ideas that, once again, come from politicians who take power-politics seriously, before the techniques from mob-men who are not afraid of consistency, and before the 'scientificity' deployed by those who force the dead into summary interpretations like statistics and conceal the circumstances of killings with words like 'remains, cadavers, deceased'.¹⁷

Emergent Listening Spaces

About two or three years ago – it may have been 2011 or 2012 – I accidentally listened to a broadcast on a reputable British radio station on yet another killing in Northern Mexico. The first few minutes of the broadcast were full of shouting, wailing, and crying. No question was asked then or later as to who this person was, who killed them, or under what circumstances. There was only a brief mention of impunity. The reporter was then taken on a tour of the town by two friendly police officers who offered their views on the current situation. There was no critical engagement with anything the reporter was told by anyone, nor was there any indication that the reporter had researched the subject matter before arriving in a place that they were clearly ignorant about, or that the radio station had furnished the reporter with the conditions to do any research. The broadcast conveyed the clear subtextual message of 'Mexico is a violent country', which is the international equivalent of the 'She was a whore' on the makeshift wooden cross, and which is the journalistic and contemporary – surely inadvertent, unintentional, unaware – version of what Arendt described as one of the most monstrous elements of Nazism: identifying culture with nature and then assigning to nature the role that Marxism

¹⁷I'm paraphrasing the last part of Arendt's essay, in which she analyses the docility of scholars before the Nazi regime.

assigns to History.¹⁸ The broadcast appealed to the most passive version of sympathy; I remembered it years later, when I read Susan Sontag's reflections in *Regarding the Pain of Others*:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel that we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (Sontag 2003: 91-92)

That 'initial spark' is what I've referred to in this paper as resonance. The broadcast mobilized all sonic registers to negate any possibility of resonance. It isolated friends and family members in their desperate expressions of shock and grief, it applied an extremely narrow frame of recognition and did not highlight the precarization of lives, it transfixed listeners with horrific sounds of grief and loss, and it dulled sense and senses with sensationalist chatter. The type of sympathy it appealed to smashes the mirror and stamps on the glass that permit an encounter between differences on the basis of critical self-awareness and of solidarity. That broadcast was as a sonic, intellectual, and ethical assault on my own and everybody else's right to listening (to paraphrase Lacey).

The poems discussed in this paper open up very different possibilities of encounter and, with these encounters, of solidary, global, 'defiant publics.'¹⁹ They can

¹⁸In her analysis of the complicity of German scholars with Nazism by way of what Arendt terms 'scientificity', she draws parallels between the various totalitarian regimes of her time, arguing that the recourse to scientificity is one of their common features. Scientificity only serves to dress up 'purely man-made power... in the clothes of some superior, superhuman sanction from which it derives its absolute, not-to-be-questioned force' (Arendt 204). She points out that '[t]he Nazi brand of this kind of power is more thorough and more horrible than the Marxist or pseudo-Marxist, because it assigns to nature the role Marxism assigns to history' (Arendt 204). The culturalist affirmation of neoliberal power makes essentially the same argument, though it does identify culture with nature before putting nature in the place of history.

¹⁹The term 'defiant public' is taken from Daniel Drache. While I strongly disagree with his almost entirely positive assessment of the internet for the emergence of defiant publics, the term and the spirit in which it was coined point towards an important tactic of disobedience with the potential to

become the initial spark, the initial touch or sound that can set off a wider resonance and propose new ways of using public space: public squares are neither contemplated as landscape nor a made use of as a stage but instead, are turned into active zones. The poems oppose themselves to turning entire zones of the planet into death zones and dead zones, and they ask us to use our right to listening as an active right. How we nurture the spark and respond to the initial sound that creates resonance, and what kind of global social and listening space we can create, needs to be decided in the public spaces of our own geographies, as we share and build on the critical abilities and the ethical principles we have learnt from the experiences of deceit, killing, and resistance that have shaped our calendars.

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