

**Karen Rodriguez**  
Bard Early College Cleveland

**SOMEONE ELSE IS SINGING  
THROUGH YOUR THROAT:  
LANGUAGE, TRAUMA, AND  
BRACHA L. ETTINGER’S WIT(H)NESSING**

---

**Abstract:**

This essay asks how a language learner might effect a compassionate listening, in which migrations, colonizations, subjugations and other traumatic events embedded in the other language are both partially heard and partially transformed. Rodriguez refers to artist-psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger’s concept of wit(h)nessing, applying her work in the artistic arena here to the aural one. Drawing examples from Mexican Spanish, Rodriguez constructs a theoretical point of departure for imagining the linguistic encounter with another language as a psychically animated borderspace of links, compassion, and connection in which and through which trauma may be apprehended and reworked. Rodriguez argues that this way of viewing the language encounter offers learners an ethical means for transforming self-other relationships.

**Keywords:**

language acquisition ♦ trauma ♦ psychoanalysis ♦ Mexican Spanish ♦ alterity ♦ subjectivity ♦ compassion

---

**SOMEONE ELSE IS SINGING  
THROUGH YOUR THROAT:  
LANGUAGE, TRAUMA, AND  
BRACHA L. ETTINGER'S WIT(H)NESSING**

*Bird bird  
what are you singing  
someone else is singing  
through your throat.  
—Yona Wallach*

*But trauma, as psychic life in general, knows no tenses.  
—Griselda Pollock (2001, 130)*

The title of this article is taken from a phrase in a poem entitled “Bird,” written by Israeli poet Yona Wallach (1944–1985). These words offer an especially lyrical way to consider what it means to speak someone else’s language. Who, indeed, sings from our throat as we pronounce new words? What histories and traumas are we unconsciously voicing as these unknown sounds emerge from our bodies? At what point in the learning process do they mingle with our own emotions, histories and desires, and what might be happening as a result?

Traditional understandings of foreign language encounters tend to present the other language as a barrier that impedes understanding and connection or, alternatively, as a bridge of sameness once the learner shares enough to communicate. The idea of connecting *within* difference, of sharing without forgetting prior words or denying other identities, is often not considered. In much the same manner, scholarship on multilingualism in the psychoanalytical consulting room also tends to conceptualize language as a border that is difficult to traverse if the analyst does not speak the patient’s native tongue. Conversely, if the analyst and patient are both fluent in the same languages, language becomes a means to arrive at the multiple associations multilingualism makes possible—which then becomes, again, an encounter in sameness

(Amati-Mehler, Argentieri & Canestri, 1993); Hill, 2008). While sharing languages has its obvious benefits, viewing languages in this way—boxing them off from one another—is rather limiting. And if this strict binary model of barrier-if-different and tool-for-connection-if-shared plagues both psychoanalytic work and common schoolroom discourse, this mirrors at the larger level the polarized manner in which Western thought often tends to conceptualize *all* people, places and experiences as firmly either self or other.

However, this is not the only way to think about things. Following artist-psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger's provocative work on the matrixial borderspace produced in art (2006a), I posit the existence of this borderspace in language to ask: Can a language learner perceive multiple levels of otherness in the language she is only beginning to comprehend? How might she listen compassionately to the stories of colonial, post-colonial and other suffering embedded in everyday words and stories that native speakers may have forgotten or simply not know? How could a *joint listening* between the learner and her native/local interlocutor permit both a healing and co-processing of a range of global migrations, colonizations, subjugations and other traumatic events? How would this affect the usual ways one goes about learning, listening, speaking another's language?

While Ettinger works in the visual realm and posits art as a site in which to encounter the other in this manner, I underline the *aural* as a bordersite in which to apprehend the other and apply Ettinger's theory to this arena. Based on Ettinger's work and my personal communications with the theorist, I construct a theoretical point of departure for imagining the linguistic encounter with another language as a psychically animated borderspace of links, compassion, and connection. I argue that this encounter offers a highly charged space in which prior and present traumas of migration, language loss, and neocolonialism encounter one another. These traumas can be at least partially transformed, thus opening a way to avoid the repetition of trauma and the violent negation or destruction of otherness. As an example, I will refer to the case of Mexican Spanish not because it embodies more experiences of postcolonial, neocolonial or other trauma than other languages, but simply because it is the case I know best. I use the example of a hypothetical Anglophone learning Spanish in Mexico, although this could apply to a person of any age or origin, to suggest that viewing language through an Ettingerian framework could make language a site of encounter with tremendous political and ethical implications.

### **Bracha Ettinger and the Concept of Wit(h)nessing**

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger is a visual artist, psychoanalyst and theorist, who travels between Tel Aviv and Paris. She earned both a PhD in Aesthetics of Visual Arts and a DEA in Psychoanalysis at the University of Paris VII, and she holds an MA in Clinical Psychology from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as well. She is currently a professor at the European Graduate School. Her paintings, as well as her notebooks of drawings and notes from her psychoanalytic practice, have been exhibited in modern art museums around the world. She has made significant contributions to psychoanalytic and aesthetic theory, and she has also provided psychoanalytic counseling to Palestinians enmeshed in the current conflicts in Israel through work with Physicians for Human Rights.

In 2014–2015, Ettinger and I collaborated to show her work in Mexico, so that faculty and students at several universities and research institutes would be able to engage with both her theory and her artwork.<sup>1</sup> Across vast linguistic, cultural and historical differences, and in the shadow of both the August Gaza conflict and the September disappearance of 43 Mexican students, Ettinger presented her ideas (in English, with occasional words in Hebrew and French) to a public of native Spanish-speakers (who spoke anywhere from no English to fluent English). This brought linguistic considerations to the forefront of my own concern with her work, making me wonder what might be happening in the linguistic borderspace where these languages were encountering one another.

Ettinger's theoretical and artistic work takes up themes of family and collective memory, shared trauma and displacements, and the feminine. Her parents were Polish Jews who immigrated to Israel after Germany invaded Poland in 1939. Many of her relatives died in the Łódź ghetto and at Auschwitz. Ettinger herself was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1948, and was never taught Polish, the language her parents used among themselves but not with their two children. Her theoretical work employs a complex and challenging lexicon, including a multitude of terms she coins herself, and through this work which spans several decades now, she articulates a radically new perspective from which to consider self-other relations.

One of her most provocative concepts is that of *wit(h)nessing*. If witnessing implies having been present to see, Ettinger's wit(h)nessing is used for that which one only partially perceives and was not present to experience. She derives this concept from her

own upbringing in a post-Shoah family. In the words of Dori Laub, the Holocaust provoked “events without witnesses” (Laub and Felman 1992, xvii), but Ettinger focuses on the second generation whom she labels “witnesses without an event” (Ettinger 2006, 118). Amid her parents’ silence about the horrors left behind in Poland, the family thought they were avoiding communicating suffering. But, as Ettinger writes, “in this silence all was transmitted except the narrative” (1993, 85) and she thus became “a witness to witnesses” (84). Like other children of Holocaust survivors, she became a keeper of this unspoken pain and loss, thus conducting what she terms a *relationship-without-relation* to these past events. To wit(h)ness is, then, to be with and remember for the other who was present (Pollock 2010, 831).

Ettinger locates the ability to enter into this odd relationship with the trauma of the past, one based as much on absence as on presence, from within a more archaic relationship between the unborn child and the mother. While Freud and other psychoanalysts posit the prenatal moment as one of wholeness, fusion and continuity, Ettinger emphasizes the presence of difference before birth, which she refers to as the presence of an original *severality* (2006b, 219). The unborn baby, who is not yet a subject (who does not have the language to name an Other), picks up unvoiced affect from the unrecognized other of the mother, thus relating to the mother’s joys, traumas and specific experiences, without being able to fully comprehend or cognize this relationship. For Ettinger, these early relations with difference occur between the child who is not yet a subject and a non-I, the unrecognized other of the mother, and they occur in what she terms the *matrixial borderspace* of late pregnancy: “the psychic sphere which is trans-subjective and sub-subjective” (2006b, 218), meaning it is both more than and less than that presumed of the individual subject.

By imagining this border between the mother and child not as an impassable limit but as a threshold and a link in which affect is shared and exchanged, Ettinger’s work then has radical implications for rethinking how we relate to difference and conceive of self/other relations in the post-natal world. Traditional (phallogocentric) psychoanalysis establishes relationships of self/other and male/female based on oppositions characterized by loss, threat, castration and lack, as the child separates from the mother first in birth and then further with the acquisition of language (which tends to occur concurrently with weaning, learning to walk, see Amati et al. 1993, 126). For Freudians and Lacanians, the child forever mourns what once was and must struggle to assert an individual self in order to mature: in this process, what is emphasized are splits, cuts, castration and lack. Self and

other must necessarily emerge as opposites. To fall back into the longed-for/feared union with the mother would be to be assimilated, destroyed or devoured and, whether happy or not, to no longer exist: self and other must thus persist in a tension with one another. As we know, these early oppositions in the psychic realm have carried over into social and colonial terms such as *conqueror/vanquished*, *North/South*, *developed/underdeveloped* and the rest of these familiar, power-laden binaries.

Ettinger's model, however, elides such polarization in its emphasis on sharing, linking, and severality, which she bases squarely in the feminine. From this base of connection within difference before birth (experienced by babies of either sex), she argues that we carry within us an innate capacity for compassion for those whom we do not know. At birth, the baby will carry over traces of the mother's affect into the symbolic order. Separation still occurs (she is careful to posit her model as supplementary to Freud's, not as a substitution), but links to the maternal persist as well. Indeed, she refers to this as a *metra-* vs. *metamorphosis*; transformation *and* continuity occur at once (2006a, 65). In this understanding, therefore, an encounter with otherness causes both subjects to expand and transform, rather than lose, repress or diminish. Because of this exchanging and linking forward, she hypothesizes that the second generation may be able to carry forward and work through some (not all) of the trauma the first generation cannot bear to face, effectively bearing witness to the unbearable, the traumatic, without having been there.

In other words, as the infant does for the mother, then so can the subject do for other Others. We can carry parts of strangers' traumatic traces for them. Thus the *with* in her wit(h)nessing. Based in these ideas (influenced by Levinas, Deleuze and Guattari and others), Ettinger will imagine an entire ethics of compassion-without-knowing.<sup>2</sup> If those who experienced the trauma must "forget" enough to survive, those coming after can carry bits or traces of this trauma that are present, no matter how faintly. She writes, "Becoming responsible for traces of the other as if they were mine is a matrixial ethical move" (2006b, 221).

Given that her formative theory is premised on this notion of sharing without having experienced directly, perhaps several more quotidian examples are helpful. One might think of AIDS as an incidence of having intimate relations-without-relating, finding oneself bearing an unknown other's trauma/illness (see Dasgupta (2009) who does not reference AIDS specifically, but does apply Ettinger's theory to the practice of

barebacking and to queer theory). Similarly, a prior graduate student of mine suggested that Facebook friends create an analogous web of relationship-without-relating which can raise questions of responsibility to these unknown others. I read Ettinger to be positing a sort of psychic intertextuality, understanding that we, like texts, carry both conscious and unconscious traces of others' stories and traumas into our own ways of being or becoming. No matter which metaphor, in all cases we are implicated and involved with others we have never met. And our self-other links are framed not exclusively in terms of splits, abjection or rejection, but rather on connections within the arena or presence of difference as well. Across her work, Ettinger refers to these odd, paradoxical relationships as the existence of *absence-in-presence*, *distance-in-proximity* and the aforementioned *relations-without-relating*.

In the remainder of this article, I argue that language learners who travel to post-colonial sites enter into scenarios of recent or past collective trauma with which they may form similarly nuanced, semi-cognized relationships. And with whom they may enter into relationships of with(h)nessing.<sup>3</sup>

### **Mexican Spanish as a holder of trauma**

While language is that which is articulated, and trauma resists symbolic language and signification, one can, nonetheless, conceive of language as imbued with its own traces of trauma. Mexican Spanish, which is the example I will employ here, is rife with both historical and ongoing trauma, much of which has been covered up by the State and at least partially forgotten by the majority of the population. In its own way, but in common with the rest of Latin America, Mexico's Spanish has emerged from a long history of colonizations and migrations, loss and violence. In this next section, I will mention just a few salient examples to highlight this point.

The Spanish language developed after the Moorish Reconquista (700s to 1492). Eight hundred years of Arabic domination of the Iberian Peninsula left an indelible mark on European Spanish that differentiated it from the other emerging Romance languages. Some of Spanish's rhetorical and stylistic tendencies such as the employment of repetition and amplification, the use of digressions, a preference for coordinate versus subordinate clauses, and an emphasis on sound and poetic rhythm can be easily traced to Arabic. Spanish also incorporated an immense lexicon of Arabic-origin vocabulary that includes the "al" words (e.g. almohada, almacén, albóndiga) as well as many other

everyday words, such as *azafata*, *rubio*, *fulano*, as well as the hispanicized *ojalá* from *inshallah* (Allah willing).

Already full of Arabic otherness, Spanish is brought to the new world at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and in what will eventually become the Mexican nation, it encounters Nahuatl, one of the dominant indigenous languages and lingua francas of the Mesoamerican world. Like Spanish, Nahuatl has its own long history intertwined with relations both of trade and the domination of weaker or smaller indigenous groups. And like Arabic, Nahuatl will inject an enormous vocabulary into the Spanish language in Mexico. While only a small percentage of Mexicans now speak an indigenous language (statistics vary)<sup>4</sup>, this is due less to the Conquest of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and more to urbanization, state-building and migration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The influence of Nahuatl on contemporary Mexican Spanish is profound and permanent.

In everyday parlance we use Nahuatl words that never had a Spanish equivalent such as *achichinle*, *molcahete*, *izquinte*, *chiquihuite*. There are other Nahuatl-based words whose Spanish counterparts exist but which are never used in Mexican Spanish (e.g. *papalote*, *ejote*, *aguacate* instead of *volantina*, *vainita*, *palta*), which can confound visitors from other Latin American countries. One hears Nahuatl words that are used interchangeably with the Spanish option (*guajalote/pavo*, *chamaco/niño*, *tlapelería/ferretería*, *cuate/amigo*; this also occurs between Spanish words having both an Arabic-root version and a Latin-root synonym (*jaqueca/migraña*, *alacrán/escorpión*).

Mexican Spanish begins to emerge, then, over centuries of traumatic contact, and this turbulent development continues with Mexico's break from Spain in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century War of Independence, a story Mexico tells as one of strength and victory, but which, nonetheless, included some very real losses (Rodríguez 2012). The trauma of the split leaves its mark in the language: one finds in contemporary Mexican Spanish a substantial collection of colonial-era terms that gradually disappeared in Spain. These archaisms, as they are labeled by linguists, include such colloquial terms as *órale*, *ándale*, *híjole*, *luego luego*, *dizque*, *demorarse*, *dilatarse*, and constructions such as *qué tanto*, *mucho muy*, and *se me hace*, to name several. These aural traces of an ex-relation with Spain are not cognized by the majority of their speakers, who simply assume that words such as *ándale*, for example (popularized through the Speedy González character), are quintessentially Mexican—which of course they are, even as they are not. Thus the sounds and utterances of the past cannot be separated from the present, and nothing about



national linguistic identity is black-or-white. Traces from the past are carried forward even as their origins are partially or completely forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

To this, we can add both the neocolonial influences of migration, trade and the media in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. English is entering Mexican Spanish at a staggering rate, in a range of registers, accents and experiential variants. Migrants return to rural communities with new expressions and shades of Spanglish; urbanites use a class-based set of English words related to consumerism and the media to replace existing Spanish words (for example, *está muy nice*, or *muy fancy*—even before Iggy Azalea—, or *vamos al shopping*, *tomamos el cofebrek*, *vamos por un drink...*). These shifts thinly mask neoliberal economic policy, border politics, the dominance of English at the global level, and a host of other issues only semi-cognized by most speakers of Spanish. The last decade has also brought a new narco-lexicon to the sociolinguistic forefront, with terms such as *narcocorrido*, *narcomanta*, *narcomoda...*, as well as other new and violent word usages now appearing in dictionaries for words such as *ejecutar*, *plaza*, *encajuelado*, and *levantón*, among many others.

In this multi-textured and traumatic history, conflict is rampant. Some of the words spoken today are the survivors (for example, when indigenous words have endured over a Spanish equivalent, or Iberian words over those of the Independence, or techno-Spanish over English), while others are the perpetrators (where Nahuatl vanquished other indigenous languages, only then to lose words to Spanish, which in turn is encroached upon by English). In her personal notebooks, Ettinger writes about “Nomad-words: those that travel well and those that travel poorly between two tongues. ... These are others that suffer during the journey and hide out” (1993, 93). Without denying the neocolonial power constructs that surround Mexican Spanish today, the positions of conquerors and conquered, powerful and oppressed, cannot be placed in neat opposition. Just as we recognize that the border between the US and Mexico is not truly limited to or experienced as a chain-link fence, the lines between languages are also blurry. Trauma abounds and leaves its fallout scattered across languages, time and space to affect myriad speakers.

### **Transforming Trauma**

Mexican Spanish today speaks the history of these violent encounters while simultaneously covering it up. The semi-heard, semi-silenced voices of previously

vanquished and vanquishing languages hover at the aural borders of contemporary quotidian speech.

In her art, Ettinger frequently returns to the mythical figure of Eurydice to symbolize this blurry borderspace (whether dreamlike or nightmare like) of shared affect and trauma that we cannot quite remember. Eurydice, beloved of Orpheus, is bitten by a snake and dies, and she is taken to the underworld. The grief-stricken Orpheus convinces Hades, King of the Underworld, to allow him to bring her back. Hades agrees upon the condition that Orpheus not look back at Eurydice as they ascend from below. Orpheus complies at the outset; however, just before they emerge from Hades, he cannot resist looking back at Eurydice, at which point she disappears. He loses her in the act of seeing her. In Ettinger's understanding, our ability to get near and articulate trauma has this same close-but-not-quite aspect. Referring to her own relatives, lost at Auschwitz, she writes, "I lose them without having known them; without having known them, I find them again" (1993, 37). I would argue that this is what occurs in language as well: just as we start to pronounce the Nahuatl or Arabic in Spanish, we lose these languages again.<sup>6</sup>

By definition, those who experience trauma are unable to symbolize it and thus work through it, so it lingers and haunts (Frosh 2013). As art critic Griselda Pollock says, writing about Ettinger's work, "trauma, like psychic life, knows no tenses" (2001, 130).<sup>7</sup> Psychoanalysts open up and semi-access the past in the safety of the consulting room by encouraging the patient to remember and associate, and by catalyzing certain emotions via relations of counter-transference. As an artist, Ettinger attempts to reopen and make accessible this unexpressed, traumatic affect within her art practice as well. Indeed, her psychoanalytic theory stemmed from this practice, not the reverse, and she has commented that psychoanalysis simply provided her with language in which to express her concept of the matrixial (personal communication).<sup>8</sup>

For many years, Ettinger would begin with a base text or photograph and then use these images multiple times across different paintings and series; now she tends to use scans of bits of prior paintings and/or images that simply come to her (personal communication). These base documents include family photos and World War II photographs, as well as old maps of Palestine, bits of psychoanalytic textbooks, family photo albums, Hebrew and Latin writings or historical images of psychiatric patients. She places the document onto a photocopier and then, mid-copy, opens the lid, thus exposing the grain of the copy and permitting light in. The copy is then half-present. Onto this semi-visible base, she

paints this odd between-world of what can and can't be represented, of fading and emerging, of remembering and forgetting.

Ettinger has frequently used a famous Holocaust photograph of women and children being marched naked to a site where they will be shot.<sup>9</sup> She questions whether one of these women might be one of her relatives, if this is what happened to her relatives who died in the Holocaust violence. Her art thus attempts to open a passageway between what would be held in opposition: what happened to her family and what happened to someone else's, that which happened in the past and that which continues to plague her in the present, as well as the pain of the past and the compassion available in the present. Ettinger's is neither archival work nor Freud's compulsion to repeat; rather, as Brian Massumi writes, she "uses the photocopier to interrupt the line of descent between the original and its copy" (2006, 201-202) even as the resulting painting retains some memory and vestiges of the past. The image that is disappearing and the painting that is coming are both vulnerable and open at this moment.

By working this way, Ettinger also opens this space enough for others to associate in along their own pathways of experience. This is akin to what the analyst does in psychotherapy: she brings the past into the present in a partial way with enough opening that an intervention or reinterpretation becomes possible in a way that does not deny or erase what occurred in the past. What Ettinger accomplishes, therefore, is an unblocking of aesthetic and psychic space to form a new "borderspace" of encounter: a space of severality and links where traumatic traces might be accessed and reassembled, diffused and transformed, thus mirroring the shared space of exchange of the mother and unborn child of either sex.

Drawing from this process, I offer that listening and speaking another language can effect a similar holding and transformation in the aural sphere. Students of Spanish unconsciously hear—hold in their ears—these multiple histories of trauma and suffering. As they listen, there is contact with multiple unknown others "whose non-presence is not absence" (Pollock 2001, 115). And as they speak, these bits and traces of Nahuatl and Arabic are re-voiced without their speakers consciously knowing it. Notably, with respect to Nahuatl and probably also elsewhere in the colonial world, the Spanish language which was forced onto the colonial scene retained only its nouns: those objects, foods, place-names or instruments that were deemed useful enough to preserve but which could not be easily translated. If the grains and dust of Ettinger's semi-copied Holocaust

photographs resemble ashes, aren't these traces of other languages simply the *aural* remnants and ashes of traumatic contact (whether this involves pain, loss, guilt or shame)?

As students pronounce these words, they essentially carry the wounded sounds of the past and present on different frequencies modulated by their own pronunciations and physical presence with the language.<sup>10</sup> The possibility of re-knitting these sonorous remnants into something new and transformed that neither denies what happened before, nor repeats it, thus opens up. And this is not the only story at hand, as the encounter is not a one-way process. Language learners' own linguistic trauma, consciously or not, is also semi-articulated into the Spanish they speak. They bring with them their own personal, familial and national histories of migrations, of languages lost and gained, of stories they may or may not even have been told, but which often linger in their accents, turns of phrases, inflections.

For some this loss is still recent. Ettinger herself, in an interview conducted on a visit to her parents' native Poland, said:

I have a hole in my mother-language, a missing *mamalangue*. For my parents, Polish was a vessel that contains so much pain, so many stories, so many secrets; it was impossible for them to teach us—me and my brother—how to speak Polish. Polish was the language of the materials that were supposed to be hidden and unknown. Polish related to the death of my mother's parents in the Łódź ghetto, to the murder of my father's parents in the gas chamber, and of my mother's sister and brother, relatives, friends. (Kędziora 2011, n.p.)

This hole she refers to, not speaking Polish, is present, like a wound. Were she to learn Polish, she says, a whole universe would be opened, and it would contain not only trauma and loss, but also joy. For all of the trauma, Polish is also the language in which her parents fell in love and in which her mother had avidly read poetry and literature she was not able to share with Ettinger (personal communication).

While Ettinger did not study Spanish during her short time in Mexico, were she to take this on, she would bring her own language history into the process, just as US language learners studying in Mexico do. These learners might include the heritage speaker with the very recognizable US-Mexican immigrant accent who may not have experienced his parents' migration process. Or the Italian-American or German-American who, like Ettinger, was never taught her grandparents' languages, or the African American who

does not know which language(s) his ancestors might have spoken, the bilingual Vietnamese student majoring in Spanish, etc. Carnevale, writing on Italian immigrants' shift into English, cites poet Joseph Tusiani: "From the day when the son says 'mother' for '*mamma*' and 'sky' for '*cielo*,' between mother and son there is already a spiritual separation..." (Carnevale 2009, 4). For Ettinger, however, it would seem to be exactly the spiritual, the compassionate, the ethical that remains, through and beyond the trauma. Consciously or not, each learners will associate into Mexican Spanish along their own very specific threads and trajectories (which may be multiple), bringing into their utterings their own inflected, affect-full histories of migration, language loss, violence, etc., the traces of which are quietly articulated into the conversation.

In the ensuing encounters between learners and native speakers, it becomes possible to posit that everyone is speaking into an Ettingerian aural borderspace in which a co-wit(h)nessing may take place. In this space, learners aurally wit(h)ness the trauma of Mexico and enact Ettingerian relations-without-relating with parts of Mexico's trauma, just as their interlocutors, in turn, wit(h)ness the learners' own multi-stranded, contested histories. Prior conquests and migrations both appear and disappear (are heard and become silent) as learners and locals speak with one another. We become "responsible for traces of events in which we didn't participate, traces of events we didn't cause, engagements with the turning-into-life of sounds we didn't produce" (Ettinger, 2011, 18). This process of co-wit(h)nessing allows both parties to *reattune* their relations to both their own histories and each other. Understood this way, language can become a site of affective transmission, bringing back traces of the past but also fully immersed in and committed to life and the present as those speaking try to reach out and respond to one another. Therefore, as other birds sing from everyone's throats, to refer back to Wallach's poem, something new is created. In this space, passageways are opened, and linguistic traces of the past inter-mingle and become reattuned. The hole or wound in the speakers' linguistic histories, to which Ettinger referred, will not disappear, but it will heal enough for conversations to occur.

That said, Ettinger is quick to note that this sort of transformative and expanding encounter may not always happen. Nor will everyone interact with everything in an unbridled globalized, relativized frenzy. Rather, she is arguing for specific encounters in specific moments, and I would add in specific sites, meaning an encounter in Mexico City would be vastly distinct from one in another Mexican city or in Buenos Aires or in Seville. What we are presented with, she says, is an *invitation* and a possibility.

The invitation is there to make one's own borders fragile enough to register the being, pain or *jouissance* of the other and not attempt *to master it as an object*. (Pollock 2010, 859, my emphasis)

In the arena of language learning, this invitation to *not master* a language as an object offers a very different (feminine/matrixial) way to listen and speak. The other language does not need to be presented as something that must be assimilated, mastered, conquered or submitted to (whether metaphorically or literally). Quite the contrary: interlocutors must allow their vulnerabilities to come to the surface (which Ettinger calls an act of “self-fragilizing”), which again constitutes an invitation to think beyond both the usual fears second language speaking can bring up, as well as prior betrayals, abandonments, hopelessness, cruelty (Ettinger, 2011, 18). She argues that if both parties do so, we arrive at the possibility of *not* betraying, abandoning, being cruel, even “after colonial ambition, after post-colonial ideas, alongside and beyond brutal globalization and endless fragmentation and fluidity...” (20). In this way of thinking, speakers in such an encounter become primed to avoid repetitions of the past—from everyday discrimination to English-only politics to, perhaps, even larger violences.

As Griselda Pollock observes, while there is an established language for protesting domination, “the means of imagining and articulating other models of encounter between subjects, between social groups, between forms of difference hardly exist” (2001, 117). Our terminology gets stuck within the phallic paradigm of binaries of love/hate, self/other, assimilation/exclusion, and so on, just as languages themselves get corralled into similar positions. From an Ettingerian standpoint, however, we arrive at something distinct. Language's subjectivity become less (falsely) fixed and singular, as students hear traces of other languages within the supposed One of Spanish, and the very binary oppositions we draw between languages are dismantled. Spanish  $\neq$  Arabic, or Spanish  $\neq$  Nahuatl or English,  $L1 \neq L2$  is no longer the formula.

Ettinger posits this less strict division in terms of a non-I instead of a not-I, which Pollock explains:

In English, ‘*I* and *non-I*’ allows for a distinction between not and non: the former is an adamant Otherness, the latter a minimal, constantly mobile, and shaping differentiation between subjects who are in a constant play of mutual affecting that can be as solacing as it may be traumatizing. (Pollock, 2006, 11)

Instead of “adamant Otherness,” which learners take as something to be feared, conquered, or embraced in the other language, here the barrier is removed, even as difference remains. In other words, the borders between Spanish and English (or Spanish and Arabic, or Spanish and Nahuatl), as well as those between English and students’ individual other or past languages, become open thresholds: a more fluid space in which the threads of multiple pasts can co-mingle.

Self and other are correspondingly de-opposed without disappearing, and a language’s identity is no longer based on a rejection of the other to define itself; rather, it expands thanks to pieces of the other it encounters en route. We know this to be linguistically true anyway; yet it is rarely discussed in the learning process and, in my opinion, consequently constricts how many people approach language learning. For Ettinger, in this space of encounter, “this silent overwhelmedness allows for some apprehension of the shared space and continuity, not the cut, between I and non-I...” (Ettinger 2011, 3). If new learners find themselves, indeed, often overwhelmed, here is the possibility of an affective register of overwhelmed-ness not based on fear or aggression.

As an analyst and an artist, Ettinger aspires to “make affect transmissible” (Massumi 2006, 23). Following her theory and artwork, we find here in the language encounter a space in which to make the inaudible audible and carry-able to a new encounter with different meanings. The notion of wit(h)nessing, of carrying each other’s past traumas, consciously or not, points to the possibility of a language pedagogy that puts us at the aural threshold and invites both interlocutors to bring their multiple histories and traumas to the meeting. In encounters framed like this, language learners can access the complexity, singularity and trauma present in contemporary language to extend compassion towards the speaking strangers they meet. Such a position supports Alison Phipps’ call in this Journal to find “restorative and non-extractive methodologies such as those which have been elaborated by unmoored subjectivities” (2013, 103). She continues, “This move to sharing the world does indeed require us to be enlanguaged, opening us out to all kinds of different and even contradictory subjectivities, and symbolic forms” (110). Ettinger’s formulation of subjectivity as shared (unmoored from Freudian-Lacanian models which concentrate on splits and cuts) and the corresponding implications for thinking about language encounters in a restorative/healing manner fit well into this conceptualization. In this way of listening and speaking, the polarized conceptualizations of language as barrier-if-different, link-if-same, are at least partially deconstructed. And thresholds for transformation of self-other relationships are opened.

While this article constitutes a theoretical thinking-through on my side—not a proposal for specific pedagogical applications and activities, as I am not a language professor—what I would advocate for is sharing theories like these with language learners to make the language learning process larger and to bring these simple everyday acts of communication back into the ethical arena. What I see in this conceptualization is the potential for us to amplify the importance of language learning, much in same the way we do with other landscapes of otherness that are similarly imbued with memory and forgetting, trauma and the possibility of working through. We can also read here the possibility for recognizing and negotiating differences to facilitate collaboration, cooperation and more joyful encounters. Given the tremendous number of language learners studying in post-colonial sites and coming from their own familial experiences of migration, a pedagogy which asks learners to consider the traumatic resonances embodied within language learning processes and which can link them to their local interlocutors in more compassionate ways would seem worth considering—and perhaps more political than one might first think.

**Author's Note:** The author would like to warmly acknowledge Ana Rita Díaz-Muñoz, Nuria Pena, and Ana Laura Lobo (all from the School for International Training in Buenos Aires) and Dr. Elizabeth Jelin at the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social (IDES), also in Buenos Aires, who collectively made possible an earlier presentation and lively discussion of this piece in Spanish at IDES.

## References

- Amati-Mehler, Jacqueline, Simona Argentieri, and Jorge Canestri. 1993. *The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.
- Carnevale, Nancy C. 2009. *A New Language, a New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ettinger, Bracha L. 2001 “Uncanny Compassion and Uncanny Awe.” *French Literature Series*, XXXVIII: 1-30.
- . 2006a. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press.



- . 2006b. “Matrixial Trans-subjectivity.” *Theory, Culture & Society*. 23(2-3): 218-222.
- . 1993. *Matrix Halal(a): lapsus: notes on painting*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art.
- . 2007. “Diotima and the Matrixial Transference: Psychoanalytical Encounter-Event as Pregnancy in Beauty.” In *Across the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, edited by Chris N. Van der Merwe and Hein Viljoen, 105-132. New York: Peter Lang & Potchefstroom.
- Dasgupta, Sudeep. 2009. “Resonances and Disjunctions: Matrixial Subjectivity and Queer Theory.” *Studies in the Maternal*, 1(2): 1-5.
- Frosh, Stephen. 2013. *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hill, Sarah. 2008. “Language and Intersubjectivity: Multiplicity in a Bilingual Treatment.” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*. 18: 437-455.
- Kędziora, M. 2011. “...language, a missing Mamalangué. Interview of Bracha L. Ettinger.” *Wolę oko*, no. 1.
- Laub, Dori and Shoshanna. Felman. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Massumi, Brian. 2006. “Afterword. Painting: the Voice of the Grain.” In *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited by Bracha L. Ettinger, 201-214. University of Minnesota Press: London, Minneapolis.
- Phipps, Alison. 2013. “Unmoored: Language Pain, Porosity, and Poisonwood.” *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 1(2): 96-118.
- Pollock, Griselda. 2001. “Abandoned at the mouth of hell or a Second Look that does not kill: the uncanny coming to matrixial memory.” In *Looking Back to the Future. Essays on Art, Life, and Death*, edited by Griselda Pollock, 113-174. Amsterdam: G&B Arts Press.
- Pollock, Griselda. 1996. “Gleaning in History: or coming after/behind the reapers: the feminine, the stranger and the matrix in the work and theory of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger.” In *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, edited by Griselda Pollock, 266-288. London/New York: Routledge.

Pollock, Griselda. 2010. "Aesthetic Witnessing in the Era of Trauma." *Euramerica*, 40(4): 829-886.

Rodríguez, Karen. 2012. *Small City on a Big Couch: a Psychoanalysis of a Small Mexican City*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ettinger showed her work and gave lectures at the Museo Leopoldo Flores of the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México in Toluca, and at the Galería Polivalente of the Universidad de Guanajuato, in the city of Guanajuato. The exhibition, entitled *Medusa, Eurydice: Painting, Drawing, Video*, was in Mexico from November 2014–March 2015. This experience was conceived of and realized in partnership with Dr. Sheila Cavanagh of York University.

<sup>2</sup> Ettinger does not deny the Oedipal relations and understandings (about the shift into language coinciding with individuation) that underwrite Lacanian and Freudian theory; rather, she posits her ideas as a *supplementary* or additional path of becoming (2006b).

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for questioning whether travel is necessary toward this end. I suspect it may not be—the paintings which Bracha offers as an invitation to the matrixial can be exhibited in galleries located anywhere, in theory. However, that said, the resonances of trauma in a physical site where the language is spoken will compound or support the opportunities to hear more and, perhaps, pull the learner into a more multi-stranded/multi-sensorial connection, if the practice of hearing is not isolated out from the rest of the sensory landscape.

<sup>4</sup>The CIA World Factbook guide for Mexico states that 6.5% of the population speaks an indigenous language. This is probably low, as it does not include data related to migrants who no longer reside in Mexico. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>

<sup>5</sup> We see this happen in the case of supposedly indigenous clothing which often have elements that date back to the colonial-era costumes of the Spanish, or to indigenous artisan traditions, which may have roots in crafts taught by the Jesuit priests, and so on. We know that pinpointing strict divisions between indigenous and mestizo or colonial culture is not easy, whether we are talking about clothing, craft, race, or language.

<sup>6</sup> Even Auschwitz exists as the Germanized version of the Polish site "Oświęcim," attesting again to language's ability to paper over trauma without fully losing or erasing the memory (Pollock 2001, 145).

<sup>7</sup> One can observe this in Ettinger's videos in particular, which merge photos from different eras of her life and her parents' lives, creating a sort of open space in which time is blended, layered, multiple.

---

<sup>8</sup> For Ettinger analyzing and art-making are also not distinct processes. Just as she works with trauma in her art, when she is with her analysands she is often painting and drawing as well, and these notebooks have also been exhibited around the world, including at the recent Mexico exhibitions. As she writes, “painting carried me into a borderspace” (Ettinger 1993), meaning that her own experiences creating art led her to rethink subjectivity and self-other relations in this same in-between space.

<sup>9</sup> The base photograph for the *Eurydice Series* is “Women and children before an execution by German soldiers,” Mizocz, Rovno, Ukraine, 14 October 1942.

<sup>10</sup> This is very different, then, from the abject of Julia Kristeva’s accent which comes back to interrupt her French, see *Strangers to Ourselves* 1991, 9). As a longtime second language speaker I believe Kristeva is on the mark with her observation, but this does not negate what I am arguing here. Again, one must remember that Ettinger’s model is supplemental, not substitutive.