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SILENT DEATH KNELL: MEMORIALIZING RURAL NEW MEXICO IN NASARIO GARCÍA'S POEMS

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For over thirty years, Nasario García has recorded the oral histories associated with New Mexico's Río Puerco valley. Located southeast of the Chaco Canyon, this valley had

sustained a few small villages until draughts, overgrazing, government regulations, and two wars depleted its resources and inhabitants.[1] By the mid-1940s, most of the inhabitants left their land, forced to learn how to persevere in cities including Albuquerque.[2] García's many books transcribe their anecdotes and folklore so they are not lost within a history of transitions. His work has been featured in the documentary *Nasario Remembers the Río Puerco* (2017), the indexicality of which aids his preservation efforts by offering a visual trace of presence, of those who lived in the valley and what they left behind.[3] García, though, has also turned to poetry, publishing *Bolitas de Oro* (2010) and *Tiempos Lejanos: Poetic Images from the Past* (2004). Although García's writing narrates a moment in this country's history that would otherwise go unrecorded, he turns to poetry not to overcome loss by clinging to the traces of presence (through photographic indexicality, the collection of artifacts, and the transcription of oral histories). García's poems, I argue, fill a void by creating the conditions for silence to become meaningful, and for a reading public to understand this silence's import.

García's poems could be seen as participating in a tradition that variously associates poetry with loss. Within American literary history, this association (thematized in Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman's poems), has played a foundational role.[4] His writing forces us to expand our literary historical boundaries and trace transnational influences: specifically, García situates his work within a Spanish cultural tradition. By foregrounding this tradition, however, he unintentionally highlights the silencing of indigenous populations. The way of life García references had only been possible because of Spanish colonization and land grants, which, he writes, "opened the gates to two [Hispano] settlements." The first of these settlements was short-lived because of indigenous resistance, while the second lasted "almost a century" because "The Navajo Reservation was established in 1868, helping stabilize relationships between Hispanics and Navajos." "Stability" for the Hispanos was the product of displacement and the eventual containment of resistance. Although García teaches us how to listen to New Mexican silence and hear within it a history of Spanish influence, we might also hear within his work another, equally significant form of silence that itself resounds.

El Silencio

The opening of García's *Tiempos Lejanos* establishes silence as a key term through a series of prefatory materials. The book begins with an epigraph by Federico García Lorca, the short poem titled "El Silencio," in which an older speaker asks someone younger to listen to the silence.[5] This silence is so powerful, notes Lorca's speaker, that it resonates throughout the hills and induces the listener's reverence. Following the epigraph, García includes his own poem that serves as an opening note to his readers: "From a silent world / spring these words," writes García, "from my past that tremble first / and then explode" (ix). The silence of Lorca's poem is re-signified in García's by being historically situated: the "silent world" comprises the Río Puerco valley, the inhabitants of which have moved out or passed away. And by placing Lorca's poem first, García indicates the

cultural heritage out of which his own practice emerges, a movement "out" of Lorca's invoked "silence" that is highlighted by the title of the collection's first poem, "Tiempos lejanos." The poem "Tiempos Lejanos" follows Lorca's "El silencio," just as the book *Tiempos Lejanos* emerges out of Lorca's influence.

"Tiempos lejanos" registers its debt to the Spanish language, its ability to enable a way of life, while demonstrating a transition to English. García offers side-by-side translations, "Tiempos Lejanos" on the left page and "Remote Times" on the right. Whereas the Spanish version states "de mi desierto / donde hoy día / todo está muerto," the English version instead offers, "of my desert / where today / every thing is silent" (2-3). The "death" signified in Spanish becomes the "silence" signified in English, linguistically demonstrating not only how silence follows in death's wake but also how death in one language could lead to silence in another.

Even as they demonstrate the potential ensuing silence of cultural transitions, García's poems counteract silence's dominance by re-signifying its import. The elegiac poem "Don Cayetano," for example, describes how "The church / bell is silent" because Don Cayetano, "who once rang / and tolled the bell / [...] has died" (83). Cayetano was responsible for announcing death's arrival with the meaningful tolling of the church's bell, which would have been understood by those within its vicinity.[6] His death is thus representative of the waning rural way of life. Unless we record and thereby learn about the once resonant practices, they will simply disappear.[7] The poem "Don Cayetano" counteracts the ensuing silence of Cayetano's death by creating a reading public as only the printed word can.[8] The poem replaces the valley's inhabitants (those who could listen to the death knell and understand its meaning) with its readers (those who know how to listen and understand the silence). García, then, connects the silence of the Río Puerco valley to the silence invoked in Lorca's poem, thereby converting Lorca's paradoxical request to someone younger (to "listen" to "silence") into a historically significant exhortation to memorialize the New Mexican inhabitants and their silenced way of life.

Listening

García's poems thus perform a similar function as the hymns of praise, alabados, which he describes his grandmother singing during funerals in New Mexico. He recounts how a "profound silence" would "set in" during the traditional funeral rituals when, "as if out of nowhere," the voice of his grandmother singing the traditional alabados "exploded and pierced my eardrum" (*Hoe, Heaven, and Hell* 325). Like his poems (which "explode" out of the "silent world"), the alabados help to memorialize the dead by filling the silence they leave behind. García connects her singing to Spain, noting how she comes from Andalucia, "where the gypsy sings / his wailing saeta" (*Tiempos* 36).[9] When García visited Granada in 1964, he experienced a shock of familiarity when listening to the

Andalusian gypsies' mournful singing of the cante jondo, deep song, which sounded to him like alabados.[10]

García's connection to Lorca deepens when we consider how Lorca responded to what he perceived as a death knell that warned of cante jondo's erasure. The "musical soul of our people is in great danger" Lorca warned during the 1920s, as "old men carry off to the grave priceless treasures of past generations" (Deep 23). Lorca sought to preserve the Spanish folk songs that would vanish. His first major work *Poema del cante jondo*—in which he published "El silencio"— pays tribute to cante jondo by poetically enshrining its importance in his reader's memory.

But even as Lorca's call to preserve the cante jondo was explicitly *regional*—glorifying the Andalusian culture that threatens to be diluted by commercialism— he nevertheless invokes the "historical events" that "influenced our songs."[11] When Lorca listens to the cante jondo, he hears the violence and strife of history that is linguistically captured in "the extraordinary number of Gypsy words in the texts of the songs" (*Deep* 26). Lorca's celebration of a supposedly "purely Andalusian chant" (*Deep* 26) includes an acknowledgment of its Gypsy, Arabic, and Jewish influence.[12]

Encountering García's poetry could similarly entail the recognition of the multilayered indigenous history that extends beyond a strictly Spanish heritage. The poems, notes García, make use of several "words from Nahuatl" and "Indianisms of New Mexican origin" (*Tiempos* 121). The poems, tellingly, include only one Zuni word. According to the linguist Rubén Cobos, New Mexican Spanish includes far fewer words of the "Río Grande Indians" because of "the lack of an extended social contact between the Spaniards and their Indian neighbors."[13] When we listen to *Tiempos Lejanos*, we can hear the limited but evident "contact" as well as the history of violent containment.[14]

García's second collection, *Bolitas de Oro*, demonstrates the importance of recognizing such points of contact. Its final poem, titled "Mí valle" ("My Valley"), bookends García's poetic project by echoing the opening of *Tiempos Lejanos*. The poem describes the valley as a trunk that, when closed, appears as a "desierto / muerto," translated as "silent, / desert" (103). The rhyme connecting "desierto" to "muerto" is lost in translation, yet Garcia again creates a productive dynamic out of this linguistic disjuncture. It is only when we consider the Spanish and English poems *together* that their historical import becomes evident. "Mí valle" ends with a rhyming parenthetical stanza: "(No hay puerta / muerta que se abra / sin bisagra"). The non-rhyming English version simply offers: "(There's not a dead door / that can open / without hinges.)" Notice how Garcia's poetry books function *as* hinges, connecting side-by-side translations often separated by the pages' seam. These hinges ensure a functioning "door" that leads the reader to the valley within, a history that is neither dead nor silent if we learn how to listen.

NOTES

1. For a brief account of the valley's history, see Nasario García's memoir, *Hoe, Heaven, and Hell: My Boyhood in Rural New Mexico*. García describes how "in the eighteenth century the Navajos roamed and ruled the regions until Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín approved several land grants" (3). For a history of the Spanish colonization of what is now New Mexico, see George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, *Don Juan de Oñate: Colonizer of New Mexico, 1595-1628*. For a history that centers on the perspectives of the Great Basin Indians, including the Ute, Paiute, and Shoshone Blackhawk, see Ned Blackwater's *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West*.

2. Such a traumatic transition has been the subject of works of Chicanx literature. See Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Heart of Aztlan* for an example. Similar to García, Anaya understood his literary texts as reinforcing a land-based culture for those who were forced to move to cities.

3. See Charles Sanders Pierce's influential taxonomy of signs in *The Essential Pierce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, in which he describes an index as a sign that shares a physical relation to its object. Photographs, understood as indices, capture a trace of their objects, which leave their imprints on the photographic medium.

4. In the essay "The Philosophy of Composition," an account of the formal mechanics of his most famous poem "The Raven," Edgar Allan Poe identifies "Melancholy" as the most "legitimate of all the poetical tones" and "death" as the "most melancholy" of topics. For Poe, "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (1600-1602). Walt Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" responds to Poe, as Walter Benn Michaels argues in *The Beauty of a Social Problem*. By depicting how "poetry... is produced by loss" and how poems thus become the persistent "reenactment both of the loss and of the poet's effort to overcome it" (4).

5. Lorca's line reads "Oye, hijo mío, el silencio," quoted in García, *Tiempos Lejanos: Poetic Images from the Past* (vii). Subsequent references to *Tiempos Lejanos* are cited in parentheses in the text.

6. In *Hoe, Heaven, and Hell*, García describes the distinctive death knell, "the slow double sound of dong, dong, as opposed to the more rapid one of ding-dong, ding-dong" (322).

7. An oral tradition, as Jim Sagal writes in the preface to García's *Tata: A Voice from the Río Puerco*, "is always at risk" because "it relies upon the ears of each new generation. If unheard, the spoken word vanishes in the wind" (xv).

8. See Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* in which he describes "the public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (50).

9. In the poem "La Petaquilla"("The Coffer"), the speaker describes how his grandmother's coffer, which "safeguards many / things of patrimony... from Andalucia" holds her comb "that came from Granada / where the gypsy sings / his wailing saeta" (*Tiempos* 36).

10. "In the Albaicín, the old Moorish section of Granada where we resided, I heard a *cante jondo*, a deep song. It sounded sorrowful and poignant, like the *alabados* that were sung in the Río Puerco Valley when someone had died." García, "Ghosts of the Río Puerco."

11. Lorca mentions the "the Spanish Church's adoption of the Byzantine liturgical chant, the Saracen invasion, and the arrival in Spain of numerous bands of Gypsies" (*Deep* 26).

12. "Ten years later, after new studies had been published in Spain, Lorca would speak of the Sephardic influence on the deep song. Most students of Spanish folk music believe that an antecedent to deep song—combining native Andalusian, Arab and Hebrew elements— existed prior to the arrival of the Gypsies from India in 1477. What they maintain is that each succeeding immigration—especially Jew, Moor and Gypsy—grated onto the primitive Andalusian folk songs parts of their own musical traditions" (Mauer i).

13. See Rubén Cobos, *A Dictionary of New Mexico and Southern Colorado Spanish* (xii). Cobos's folkloric research could be developed productively to identify points of contact between Spanish-speaking New Mexicans and their indigenous neighbors. In an interview with García, Cobos describes his studies of the folk songs specific to New Mexico called "inditas." For Cobos, inditas importantly differ from Spanish ballads and Mexican corridos by offering the first-person perspective of the victims of violence. Although the term *inditas* implies that the victims in question are indigenous women, the example Cobos provides narrates how Spanish-speaking New Mexicans suffer at the hands of Navajos. Indeed, what characterizes inditas, states Cobos, is the "imitative Indian chanting... an imitation of what the Spaniards or what the New Mexicans gathered that the Indian songs are really about." See García, *An Indelible Imprint: Rubén Cobos, a Multi-Talented Personality*. Even though the represented perspective Cobos mentions is decidedly not of the indigenous, he reverses—if only momentarily— the direction of influence studied by his predecessors, including Aurelio Espinosa, who studied the "Spanish influences on the folklore of the Pueblo Indians." See J. Manuel Espinosa, "Spanish Folklore in the Southwest" (220). See also Aurelio Espinosa's *Estudios Sobre El español De Nuevo Méjico*.

14. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" would productively describe what I mean here by "points of contact." She refers to the "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today" (34).

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