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The Poetics of Silence: (Re)memory through Poetry of the Mexican Diaspora

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Abstract: A close reading of poems by Eduardo Corral, Laurie Ann Guerrero and Lorna Dee Cervantes to identify distinct possibilities for silences in the poetry of the Mexican diaspora: adopting, enforcing, and, ultimately, straddling both. Silence is unique to the language of poetry—as relative to a story, a poem is silent because it does not have the words a story does. Poetry, then, functions as (re)memory, a vehicle moving towards creation within the menacing silence of the (re)inscription of the border.

Poetry is one function of language, a form that is familiar to Mexican families through declamación—the art of reciting certain poems from a repertoire—a known and commonly agreed to collection of poetry. Unlike many other cultural practices, such as the festivity of quinceañeras, today’s youth or even second generation Mexican-Americans often do not have this tradition rooted in their cultural practices. What is to happen as this cultural practice ceases to exist? The method for keeping poetry alive shifts into a new paradigm; often it is the paradigm of the English language. In the United States, there is no true equivalent cultural practice to that of declamación. Once the border is crossed, declamación is lost, and along with it a nationalistic homeland for poetry. The loss of this type of poetry as a cultural expression is an exhibit of fatalism in the Mexican diaspora to the United States. The border becomes a text that poets simply move through instead of reacting against. “Border” is this huge, overarching idea that theorists apply to the poetics of Mexican-Americans, but what distinguishes poetics of the Mexican diaspora from border poetics is that these poets cannot escape the diaspora. While the border can be crossed, over and again, diaspora is inescapable. I argue that it is because of this diaspora that a silence courses through Mexican-American poetics.

According to Clifford, “borderlands are distinct in that they presuppose a territory defined by a geopolitical line: two sides arbitrarily separated and policed, but also joined by legal and illegal practices of crossing and communication” (304). Juxtaposing the idea of borderlands to that of diasporas, he claims that diasporas may signal “longer distances and a separation more like exile,” and that they are “a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future” (304). To define migration as a diaspora necessitates that the homeland be lost. So, rather than look at the Mexican migration as diasporic, one can view it through the lens of border studies. Furthermore, Diaspora as a critical designation is not generally used or considered in terms of Mexican-origin people. Using “diaspora” as a concept (in contrast to border studies), is not the norm; yet one can examine the numerous ways diasporas are imagined and enacted. Differentiating an occurrence of the Border from Diaspora speaks to the unattainability of return to the homeland even considering the geographic proximity of the borderlands.

In this context though, much is lost to the idea of the border, as the border is never able to subvert its geopolitical status. Yet, “border theorists have recently argued for the critical centrality of formerly marginal histories and cultures of crossing” (Clifford, 304). As the U.S./Mexico border becomes more militarized, the peoples who cross this border are seeing Mexico as a place that they may not be able to reach again—making for a creation of the imaginary of the homeland, a México lindo. Because of this shift, instead of reading these texts through a border studies framework, it is more useful to use the theoretical framework of the diaspora—as the homeland, for the Mexican immigrant crossing the border, cannot be achieved again, and is truly lost to them. The poets working through the silence that the border inscribes are shifting the geopolitical understanding of the border.

Silences have two major functions in poetics: one is empowering—to adopt silence is an act purposefully implemented by the poet. To tell without telling, to use...
language without speaking it, through purposeful negation to make visible what once would have been invisible. Poets do this through prosody, architecture, caesura, enjambment—overall, the way the poems themselves function in their poetics.

The other function of silence is to mute: this is a disenfranchising act of violence against poetic possibility. This more nuanced silence typically goes unnoticed, because it is difficult to know what is not being talked about. This form of silencing necessitates that whatever is being invoked remain quieted in the poem. Implied through what is present, antagonizing that which cannot be talked about, this is evident in the diasporic community, especially by shared sayings such as “de eso no se habla,” or “en boca cerrada no entran moscas.” This praxis is able to mute the voice of certain minorities within the Mexican diaspora: homosexuals, women and Indigenous peoples. Censorship-in-practice is an inherent violence specifically geared toward non-dominant voices present in the community at large. Manifesting through the poetic devices of metonymy, apostrophe, languages and epigraphs: in not talking about something, it is made invisible.

Implicit in this dialogue as engaged by diasporic poets is the bilingual nature of the Mexican-American community, and the silence that occurs when neither language can fully account for the shared “experience of forgetting” (Damon, 489). This is when the language of poetry itself steps in; poetry functions as (re)memory: a vehicle moving toward creating within the menacing silence of the (re)inscription of the border. The following exemplify how silence is adopted or enforced: Lorna Dee Cervantes’ *Emplumada*, Eduardo Corral’s *Slow Lightning*, and Laurie Ann Guerrero’s *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*. These works render silence in its opposite forms.

Aside from the content of the poem, which is noteworthy in and of itself because of the substitutions for sexuality implied through the use of hunger, what is more imperative is the way the poem functions on the page. From the section reproduced here, the poem can already be seen as adopting silence. Even with just a cursory glance, one can see the way the negative space is functioning both within and outside of the poem. On the page, the poem is formatted to be a rectangle. With the rectangular poem left justified the way it is, one can see the negative effect it has on the space to the right of the poem. This allows the reader to imply a sense of loss or longing for what is not there. This same sentiment works in micro by the caesura within the poem. By creating a blank space inside the lines that literally has to be crossed to continue to read the poem, silence is given voice. The border is thus not (re)scribed, but rather (re)defined. The reader’s crossing here also echoes the speaker’s crossing of the desert, and the speaker’s voice crossing himself as he performs a homosexual act: all of which are not things that are frequently talked about in the Chicano community; thus the poet is using silence as a tool to give voice to two marginalized communities within the diasporic Mexican-American community—undocumented immigrants and queer men.

The third day, he picked up
a rock, killed a blue lizard
with a single strike he tore it
apart, shoved guts & bones
into his mouth the first
time I knelt for a man, my
lips pressed to his zipper,
I suffered such hunger. (10-17)
Also, employing the caesura on the page allows a visual binary to be situated within the line: us/them, self/other, normative/non-normative, father/son. But because the reader, in reading through the narrative, encounters both sides of the visual border, “Want” is a “protest of binaries” (Damon, 491). This border becomes manifest because in looking for something else, the reader arrives there, at the border. In (re)telling a family history through his own understanding, the speaker of the poem is attempting to historically and generationally validate his personhood. The form becomes an outward expression of inner meaning. In attempting to cultivate an understanding of himself, the relationship of self to self results in the inability of the speaker to rectify his culturally invalidated self with his intrinsic self. The silence occurs in the middle of the line, as the speaker has to pause, even with himself; to have an entirely unbroken line would not speak to the truth of either the father or the son.

Even though the silence is seen as empowering in this context, the entire experience is boxed in by the rectangular form of the poem, leading to the idea of an unseen force applying pressure on understanding the lived experience. The poem cannot escape itself by taking up the entire page, but rather has a clearly defined space within which it must exist. The physical rectangular demarcation of the poem reflects the silencing of the greater community.

The silence in Corral’s work also appears in Laurie Ann Guerrero’s A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying. Even the title of this collection implies muteness, as those who are dying often cannot speak. So to be a tongue, the tool for language—in the mouth of a person who is dying—is to be a tongue that has limited language, is to be displaced. However, because there is a speaker who is recounting the events of the tongue, giving voice to the voiceless, there is also an implied duality: a collective silence that only the speaker and the muted tongue share, a marked silence where one speaks when the other no longer can.

This idea carries through to the opening poem in the collection, “Preparing the Tongue,” as the speaker relates the domestic task of preparing a delicacy in Mexican cuisine, cow tongue, for a meal:

Shrouded in plastic, I unwind its gauze,
mummy-like, rub my wrist blue against the cactus of its buds. Were it still cradled inside the clammy cow mouth, I should want to enchant it:
let it taste the oil in my skin, lick the lash of my eye. What I do instead is lacerate the frozen muscle, tear … (2-8)

As the epigraph to the collection, it serves as an inscription, a framing of the way the poems in each of the sections will not only be “shrouded in plastic,” they will have the reader, “mak[ing] carnage/ of [your] own mouth” (Guerrero, 13-14).

This purposeful obfuscation is a way of making readers aware of their position as meta-outsider to the outsider/insider duality that is present within the poems themselves. For example, in “Preparing the Tongue,” the speaker of the poem is not the cow whose tongue has been removed, but the person who is now interacting with this disembodied tongue. As a reader, one is neither of the actors in the scene just described; instead, one is tasked with validating the silence experienced by both the animal and the cook by virtue of being witness.

Upon identifying this silence, it becomes “enchant[ed],” and able to speak. It communicates literally through the words of the speaker of the poem, and by extension, through the tongue of the cow being handled (Guerrero, 5). Interestingly, the language chosen to express this silence is English and the poem is in sonnet form. Such facts are significant because the action being described (of preparando lengua) is one that would be familiar to a Mexican-American community, and one whose actions are recognized as a definitively feminine domestic scene. Added to this the traditional poetic form of the sonnet as evidenced by the fourteen-line schema and the volta of “add[ing] garlic” at the end of the poem, and you see that the form is deliberately degraded through the revelation of silence (Guerrero, 14).

The poem signals that it is a generationally, linguistically assimilated Mexican-American action/creation through the use of English instead of Spanish, and through the use of the traditional fourteen line sonnet form. Yet, the poem’s Mexican-American persona has a sense of cultural practices of the Mexican homeland, as evidenced by the content of the poem: in doing this, a shadow is created—presence through absence. The tongue, then, inhabits another meaning of tongue—language. Here,
“the function of the tongue is not to facilitate language, but to deny it” (Damon, 60). The language is denied, but by invoking a silence surrounding the Spanish language, the erasure facilitated by the diaspora becomes visible. It is not a complete erasure, but one that leaves remnants.

The assimilated Mexican-American persona has suffered through the trauma of using English over Spanish in order to participate in U.S. society. When the speaker of the poem moves toward the violence of “tear[ing] and lacerat[ing]” the tongue, language is mute. The literal tongue, then, cannot exist in the head of the cow (as traditional preparation of lengua would require), but rather it is isolated and relegated to the kitchen where a woman would prepare the meat. As Clifford points out, women of the diaspora “are caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts and futures” (314). He continues, “they connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways” (314). The woman preparing the meal, then, simultaneously embodies a liminal and non-liminal position—she both adopts silence to negotiate conquest while inscribing muteness through her domestic actions with the cow tongue. This leaves her to espouse the “unique beauty in straddling her positionality” (Flores, Yúdice, 60). This embrace, this act of desperation, seems impossible, but such is the lived experience of adopting and enforcing silence: not just an “either/or,” but an “also/and.” A diasporic community resides on the hyphen where no one is choosing because the embrace is wide, and holds both opposites integrated within a sense of community. The silenced condition of the diasporic subject is also a concern for another poet whose work speaks to the silencing of the community.

In Lorna Dee Cervantes’ collection, Emplumada, this community is visualized particularly in “Poema para los Californios Muertos.” This poem shares the speaker’s story of viewing a brass plaque memorializing “a refuge for Mexican Californios” (epigraph), and from there moves toward introspection on what that means to the speaker:

Now at this restaurant nothing remains
but this old oak and an ill-placed plaque.
Is it true that you still live here
in the shadows of these white, high-class houses?
Soy la hija pobrecita

This poem is part of the community of the hyphen, not just in content, but also in form—the way it functions on the page, particularly when looking at the enjambment. Cervantes masterfully chooses the words that will end each line: “remains,” “here,” and “pobrecita” are all words that can have multiple meanings, and because they occur at the end of the line, there is space for the reader to meditate on them (21, 23, 25). In enacting the silence and pause that naturally occurs at the line breaks, the enjambments work to create an echo of existence for those memorialized by the plaque. In essence, they are given breath again. Nearly erased, these people live on as ghosts in the poem.

In giving these disappeared people a “silence [through enjambment,] it makes room for language” (Ziarek, 245). And in this instance, that language is Spanish, the selfsame language of the people who are being memorialized by the plaque. When Spanish is included in a work that is primarily published in English, the accepted literary convention is to italicize it and visually mark it as “other.” Yet, the Spanish that exists in this poem is not italicized. It is legitimized in a visual way and thus the poet allows the Californios to speak through the poem itself.

Even though they are dead, and have been silenced by “stretches of freeway” (the new progress of California), the Californios still exist by virtue of being memorialized on a plaque. Much like the border, they become (re)inscribed ghosts, present even in absence.

The speaker of the poem is not pleased with the plaque existing as simply a plaque because she feels that “nothing remains” but an “ill-placed plaque” and offers the poem itself as a way of memorializing the physical and linguistic conquest of the Californios (Cervantes, 21-22). However, the speaker is not offering a hopeful outlook for future generations as there is nothing left of the Californios—no “bitter antiques” or even “yanqui remnants” (Cervantes, 30-31). The speaker is “of rage” (36) as the poem closes. This speaks more truly to the diasporic community of the hyphen, using oppositions as a singular way of living. By ending the poem in this way, the poet offers no ascendance to a dialogue between
the Californios and the speaker. There is only enough language to remember an experience without offering a forward-look towards healing.

Ziarek’s contention that “an interest in temporality […] leads poetry to attempt to perform experience in language, and thus to experience language itself as an event, with its silences, gaps and lacunae” (246) permits for a reading of this poem as one that situates the diasporic subject in time. Through poems, silence is seen for its oppositional nature: the ability to adopt it or the force required to mandate it. It is not until this binary is uncovered that one is able to see how the poetics of the hyphen community of the Mexican diaspora are able to disrupt this oppositional nature.

Again, Clifford is useful as he claims that “Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension” (312). In many ways, being able to see the silence for what it is (and what it is not) allows for hope that this hyphenated community of the diaspora realized a future. These poets are creating a reaction against the imperturbability of silence, as embodied by the border, and moving toward a community that can hold all these silences, and not reflect them back. Much in the way that the border is both here and there, these poets write not about here or there, but rather here and there through the silences they employ.

WORKS CITED