Finding Resonance, Finding María Lugones

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Abstract

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/hzebp-b2w98 I am always listening for María: I find her most in the traces of words. Trained as a literary scholar, I relish in the contours of stories; I savor the nuances found between crevices of language and the shades of implication when those languages are strung together.

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Music (Subfield), Article, Caribbean Studies, Elder Issues, Feminism, Gender



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I am always listening for María: I find her most in the traces of words.

Trained as a literary scholar, I relish in the contours of stories; I savor the nuances found between crevices of language and the shades of implication when those languages are strung together. It is no surprise, then, that since the death of my friend and mentor María Lugones, I have turned to many books, particularly her book, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppression*, to feel connected to her. I have struggled, though, to write about her, talk about her, even think about her for many years. It wasn't until I found a passage about spirits and hauntings in Cuban-American writer and artist Ana Menéndez's novel *The Apartment* that I found language to describe a way through the grief of the last five years.



Menéndez's novel follows many characters that all, at some point in time, come to live in apartment 2B in Miami Beach. While each person is seemingly disconnected from the next, they all leaves sonic traces of themselves for the next person's arrival. Each new tenant leaves behind the creak of a dented floorboard, or the rumbling of the air conditioner, the faint melody of a piano, or the swish of spirits looking for a place to sit down. The climax of the novel revolves around Lenin García, a young Cuban migrant who commits suicide in the Miami apartment shortly after arriving. Anna, a journalist who migrated to the US from the Czech Republic during their communist regime, prepares the apartment for rental after the suicide. When looking through Lenin's belongings she explains that the "Spirits pressed down on her, and again and again she rejects them. Sends them packing, back to the pre-rational past. Not a haunting, but an echo. The boy's life a gesture pointing back to her own. A dream of a thousand iterations" (131). These spirits that surround her, that remind her of her own life's ghosts, provide a particularly sonic connection; the tethers that connect one migration tragedy to another is an echo of commonality that creates a kin experience.

The three years I learned with and from María are overshadowed by the physical distance the pandemic required of me in her final moments. When I try to write about her, my hair stands on end, my eyes water, my nose drips, and I stretch out my hand toward a presence I feel, just out of

reach. I know it's her, I just can't seem to touch her. I have described María's death as a haunting—as something that haunts me. I defined this haunting as a physical presence that I could not see, but I could feel, sense. But what if, like Anna, I am feeling, not a haunting, but an echo; or more accurately, the resonances of María that echo around me constantly? What Menéndez's passage provides is the necessity of reinterpreting my awareness of María from one of general sensing to one of specific aural attunement. If I am listening for her, how, then do I keep her with me?



Lenin, from *The Apartment*, provides a potential answer: when meeting with a curandera in Cuba, she tells him "The ancestors speak to you from the home of your inner life. When your inner life is spare, there is nowhere for the ghosts to sit. When you furnish your spirit, the ancestors will once again find rest in you" (143). Echoes become an analytic that provide furnishings 'in the soul' for sustained company of those who have passed. The reverberation of echoes—reverberations as a prolonged sense of resonance that stretches the meeting of two energies—can, quite literally, allow a reader to connect back to people across space and time. My tether to María is a resonance that simultaneously locates and disperses spatially and temporally. I hear this connection as my harmony to her melody. To further the metaphor, that resonance is the strumming of a guitar, where I am the guitar and she is the musician, and that moment where we both hear for each other, even when we do not know the other exists, is the note.

What happens when I use literary methods of analysis to find people in the interstices of sound? To search for María in what she calls the "enclosures and openings of our praxis" as a reader of

her text? Now that I had to search the histories of her echo, I turned to her book, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*.

When María recommends "to women of color in the United States that we learn to love each other by learning to travel to each other's 'worlds'," (78) I imagine our first few encounters; encounters that were strange, difficult, and lessons in learning to listen to her on her terms. I had been invited to her home in Binghamton, New York for a meeting of a political-intellectual group she hosted, and was nervous to meet the woman I had written my Master's thesis on, and who was the reason I applied to Binghamton for a PhD program. Her voice rang through the room, slow and clear; her mouth pursed a bit as she thought through her next sentence, her finger pointed as she spoke her next idea. In trying to stay out of her way, I became a barrier when she moved backward; she bumped into me and said simply 'you must be careful not to trip me' and moved along. I was mortified.

Our next few encounters were similarly odd, and lead me to think that, maybe, María was not the right choice for my mentoring needs. A few months into this first year in graduate school—where tenured male professors were violent toward me, and I was not sure I should stay in academia—I confessed to a friend in the same political-intellectual group that I was not sure María liked me or that I should work with her. Her response changed everything: this friend, who had worked with María many, many years said: "don't do that. Don't make her mother you. It's not who she is. Travel to her, learn her." I finally understood that traveling to María's world meant listening to her from her perspective, not my own. That shift in me "from being one person to being a different person" (89) is how I first found María in the haptic world. I learned to listening to her: I learned the catch in her throat meant she wanted tea; I learned the increase in sighs meant she was in more pain that usual; I learned the shuffling of papers probably meant she was looking for her handkerchief to wipe her forehead as she had a hot flash. Each of these sonic gestures, I could respond to—could show up for her.

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But with María's death, this kind of listening is no longer available to me; I could not listen for *hem* or *hmm* or *tchps*. I had to learn to listen differently. In re-reading *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* I learn that it does not just contain her philosophical interventions for liberatory futures. It is a series of stories; her stories of the echoes that resonate inside of her; stories that she weaves together that happen to name philosophical practices of relationality. It is through the coerced placement of her by her father in an asylum that she finds other woman who teach her to resist; this resistance is sonic: a woman repeating over and over "I am busy, I am busy" as they electroshock her (i). It is through wanting desperately to love her mother that she finds ways her mother taught her to listen differently in order to name the capacity of 'world'-traveling. What I had felt when I first read her work over a decade ago was a resonance; a sonic reverberation across space and time that connected my to her before our physical meeting, during our time as friends and mentor/mentee, and now after her physical death.

Connecting to María through echoes feels effortless now that I have the language. I hear now María's warning against the dangers in the primacy of the visual. In "Hablando Cara a Cara/ Speaking Face to Face: An Exploration of Ethnocentric Racism," she explains:

> *I exercise this playful practice. The appreciation of my playfulness and its meaning may be realized when the possibility of becoming playful in this way has been collectively realized, when it has become realized by us. It is here to be appreciated or missed and both the appreciation and the missing are significant. The more fully this playfulness is appreciated, the less broken I am to you, the more dimensional I am to you. But I want to exercise my multidimensionality even if you do not appreciate it. To do otherwise would be to engage in self-mutilation, to come to be just the person that you see. To play in this way is then an act of resistance as well as an act of self- affirmation (41).*

What she taught me here is that being herself meant a practice that was more than being seen. To be what others could only see was an act of mutilation to her multidimensionality. That reminder was crucial to becoming her friend during my time at Binghamton, but even more crucial now that she is gone from this world.



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I'll leave you with the most important story she left behind: she provided a method of learning that was based on the senses and focused primarily on the sonic—what she called "tantear." This tantear has become instrumental in my own research. It is a fumbling around in the dark, a feeling around tactically that focuses on searching "for meaning, for the limits of possibility; putting our hands to our ears to hear better, to hear the meaning in the enclosures and openings of our praxis" (1). The embodied experience of stumbling, of careful and intense feeling for and with others, requires a capacity of listening deeply. It is listening that undergirds the learning. The language of the sonic provides the understanding of the feelings within the body. Listening becomes a profound practice of relationality; echoes become a mechanism of connection; and resonance becomes the confirmation that I can still be with María.

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Images courtesy of the author, except where noted.

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