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DOSSIER: Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text

Estranged Intimacies: An Anticolonial Poetics of Silence
in the Poetry of Raquel Salas Rivera and Ana-Maurine Lara

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes two recent poetry collections by queer Caribbean writers and probes them for what they can reveal about silence as a combined affective, aesthetic and political strategy. Both *Kohnjehr Woman* by Ana-Maurine Lara and *While They Sleep* by Raquel Salas Rivera encourage embodied reading practices that resist traditional literary analysis, understood as focused on achieving “mastery” and intellectual domination of a text, by engaging the reading body queerly and tangentially, and they ask what opportunities are presented by illegibility and untranslatability. I argue that these poems employ silence as a strategy either by creating visual/aural space on the page, refusing translation, or by requiring words to be vocalized in order to be cognitively understood. Following Doris Sommer and Édouard Glissant, this strategic refusal can be understood as a response to the lived experience of disaster within the postcolonial Caribbean and its diaspora that maintains opacity by refusing straightforward legibility, and at the same time allows for a fuller form of solidarity that centers embodied knowledge.

KEYWORDS: coloniality, opacity, poetry/poetics, queer, Latine/x, diaspora, translation, embodiment

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza dos colecciones de poesía recientes escritas por autores “queer,” e investiga lo que pueden revelar sobre el silencio como una estrategia afectiva, estética, y política. Tanto “Kohnjehr Woman” de Ana-Maurine Lara como “While They Sleep” de Raquel Salas Rivera animan prácticas encarnadas de lectura que resisten el análisis literario tradicional, entendido como algo enfocado en lograr dominio y control intelectual sobre el texto. Por el contrario, estas obras involucran al cuerpo del lector de manera “queer” y tangencial, y se cuestionan las oportunidades que nos presentan la ilegibilidad y la intraducibilidad. Argumento que estos poemas emplean el silencio como una estrategia o bien creando espacio visual/aural en la página, o bien negando traducción, o requiriendo que las palabras se vocalicen para ser entendidas cognitivamente. Siguiendo a Doris Sommer y Édouard Glissant, esta negación estratégica se puede entender como una respuesta a la experiencia vivida del desastre dentro del caribe poscolonial y su diáspora que mantiene su opacidad a través del rechazo de la legibilidad directa, lo que al mismo tiempo permite una forma más amplia de solidaridad que centraliza el conocimiento encarnado.

PALABRAS CLAVES: colonialidad, opacidad, poesía/poética, queer/cuir, Latine/x, diáspora, traducción, encarnación

Audre Lorde famously critiqued the essentializing gestures of a heterosexual, white feminism that perpetuates the patriarchal and racist structures that oppress all women, noting that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” and therefore difference (of class, race, nationality, sexuality, etc.) must be embraced and proclaimed as a source of power to effect political change. In the Caribbean, colonial languages were “cannibalized” and used to curse the “master” oppressors, grounded in colonial difference as *mestizaje*, as Roberto Fernández Retamar and others have noted. Yet, even these modes of reclaiming visibility can be subject to capture and assimilation on the part of hegemonic institutions such as the field of Latinx studies, most often to the detriment of Black, queer, and transgender artists and scholars. There are those for whom legibility of their difference is not always socially or politically desirable, and one must ask what purpose legibility serves, and who benefits. For oppressed groups, is there something in between rebellious speech proclaiming difference and mute negation of the master’s tools? Perhaps there is a more fugitive form of refusal that hides in plain sight, a silent resistance that pulses within language, muting certain readings but encouraging others. In what ways might this silence become a political and aesthetic strategy against the totalizing impulses of patriarchy and colonialism? And how might poetic forms reorient the reader to listen otherwise, creating oblique encounters between the poem-body and the reader-body that facilitate solidarity?

For queer,¹ Afro-descendent, and Latinx subjectivities in particular, silence has so often been a tool through which power exerts itself, casting certain bodies to the margins of the knowable and the categorizable. This function of power is rooted in Western and colonial notions of possession and conquest which require the essentializing of individuals and communities according to the colonizer’s episteme, which erases those who cannot be rendered entirely transparent according to this logic. Édouard Glissant argues against what he sees as a reduction effected through this making-transparent and advocates for the right of different groups to maintain “opacity,” a refusal to be categorized and rendered entirely knowable and therefore able to be possessed (190). Glissant’s conception of opacity can be linked to strategic silence, a notion developed by scholar Doris Sommer, who argues that certain texts employ a calculated “invitation to exclusion” that stops readers short from overstepping the boundary between subject positions and forces us to recognize the uneven power dynamics between a privileged readership and a marginalized authorship (412). These kinds of opaque texts (her central examples are Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial narrative *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*) mobilize a rhetoric of silence in order to maintain their readers at a distance by first provoking a desire to possess, then refusing the reader complete access to the text. Following Glissant and Sommer, I consider how silence operates as a strategy for maintaining opacity within two poetry collections by queer poets of Caribbean origin, *While They Sleep/Under the Bed in Another Country* by Raquel

Salas Rivera (2019) and *Kohnjehr Woman* by Ana-Maurine Lara (2017). In these works, Salas Rivera and Lara demonstrate a restriction of hermeneutic mastery, but they also go further to prod the reader into reading differently, in a manner that induces a sense of bodily discomfort and displacement. The complex sensorial interplay between the textual body and the reader’s body is in both works informed by the colonial history of the Caribbean that has positioned brown and Black subjects as irrevocably bound to their physical bodies, and therefore as “primitive” and inferior. However, rather than deny the materiality of the body in order to claim validity under the colonizer’s episteme, in these texts the body is firmly claimed as a valuable site of knowledge production against colonial and heteronormative logics.

Salas Rivera and Lara are both queer Latinx authors writing in the aftermath of disaster: for the former, the natural disaster of Hurricane María is metonymically linked to the broader disaster of ongoing colonial oppression, and for the latter, the historical disaster of the transatlantic slave trade has continued implications in the present. I posit that strategic silence in these poetry collections is a response to the unspeakable and illegible reverberations of disaster in the Caribbean and its diaspora, the violent mutilation of tongues; it is a searching for ways to say the unsayable that nevertheless hold a space for the “not-telling.” Writing about and to the site of disaster, in both English and Spanish, important themes that emerge from Salas Rivera’s work are the notion of the impossibility of speaking about crisis, the untranslatability of the colonized subject’s experience, and the often-frustrated desire to confront and subvert binaries. These themes are also at the forefront for Lara, an Afro-Dominican American queer poet, performance artist and scholar. *Kohnjehr Woman* is a series of poems that tells the story of the character “Shee,” an enslaved woman who has her tongue cut from her mouth. Lara confronts the failure of historicity to account for queer Black stories, and she invests in the creation of an “archive of the imagination” to (re)create a history, a present, and a future that embraces what is incomplete, what is unsaid. Lara posits that

the ‘not-telling’ of a severed tongue reveals the violence of the dominant discourse. And yet it also serves as a piece of evidence, proof that the imagination has given us something specific: possibility, memory, a seam, an anchor that exists outside of dominant order, logic or rationality; that exists inside a completely different way of knowing, inside another logic of meaning. (“I Wanted” 13)

This essay will utilize a comparative methodology to analyze these two collections, and argue that both texts, although they engage with different linguistic and cultural traditions, employ what I will term a poetics of silence, which exceeds the narrow confines of dominant logocentric colonial discourse. Here I understand silence in two ways: first as a refusal to translate, confronting linguistic

domination with incommensurability, and second as a metaphorical untethering from normative practices of reading which interpellates the feeling body foremost. From very different perspectives and through different means, both poets work in the space of the “not-telling”: for Salas Rivera, the pain of speaking and writing two languages that are not equal is understood as a “tongue forked by cutting” (*Puerto Rico* xiv), while for Lara, speaking with a “broken tongue” allows the past to enter the present other than by reenacting the violence of slavery, colonialism, and the heteropatriarchy; silence thus creates the potential for other ways of knowing, grounded in embodied knowledge.²

While They Sleep: Raquel Salas Rivera’s Opaque Translations

In September of 2017, Hurricane María hit the island of Puerto Rico, causing a humanitarian crisis under which the island’s inhabitants are still suffering as of this writing. The U.S. government’s response to the disaster was slow and widely criticized: much of the island remained without water, electricity, and limited food and supplies for weeks and in some places, months, leading many activists and journalists to point to the discrepancy between the government’s rapid response to the hurricanes that had previously hit the mainland (like Katrina and Sandy) and the tepid response to Puerto Rico. Part of what this event underscored is the subjugate nature of the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S., and the silences that this disaster made painfully visible: the lack of Puerto Rican political representation in Washington D.C., the silencing of the word “colony” by the word “commonwealth” (Puerto Rico’s official status), the suppression of information about the actual death toll caused by the hurricane and its aftermath (the official body count from the Puerto Rican government was 64, but a Harvard study concluded that the actual death toll caused both directly and indirectly by the hurricane was 4,645). For Puerto Ricans, the number 4,645 became a rallying cry for mobilizations to confront profound inequality. Raquel Salas Rivera, a trans poet who originates from Mayagüez, takes up this cry in his poetry collection titled *While They Sleep/Under the Bed is Another Country*, published in 2019 while he was the Poet Laureate of Philadelphia. Salas Rivera’s poetry collection begins with two epigraphs: the first is a line from the song “Pa’lante” by the band Hurray for the Riff Raff, which is fronted by a New Orleans-based singer named Alynda Segarra who has Puerto Rican origins. The line reads “I look for you, my friend/but do you look for me?” and ends with a superscript number “1”. In the bottom left-hand corner, formatted as a footnote beginning with a superscript number “2” there is a line from the song “Soy Peor” by Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny, which reads “sigue tu camino que sin ti me va mejor” (be on your way because I’m better off without you; my translation). The page that follows contains an image of the number 4,645 in large font, centered within a big black box. From the beginning of the collection Salas Rivera thus establishes that his work is an intervention into a discourse that includes Puerto Rican artistic production on both the is-

land and the mainland. He also calls upon a political history that extends from the 1960s to the present by indirectly invoking the term “pa’lante,” which was the rallying cry of the radical activist group formed by Puerto Ricans in New York City called The Young Lords (a political history he also makes reference to in other works). Multiple elements of Puerto Rican art and politics are brought together in an intertextual constellation just within the first page, yet not in a way that would be immediately obvious to any reader. While Salas Rivera is very invested in calling community into being, the poems in this book also practice a rhetoric of silence that makes felt the colonial wound, a wound that divides and alienates the speaking voices from their own languages, bodies, and histories. The above cited lines themselves indicate a sense of separation and disconnection, of questioning and attempting to move beyond a relationship of interdependence, while simultaneously referentially calling upon a shared history between Puerto Ricans on both sides of the water. What immediately emerges is a sense of deep unresolvable tension, exacerbated by disaster, between two subjects perpetually attempting but failing to reach one another, failing to move across geographical space but also to be moved on the other’s behalf.

The poems in this collection explicitly address the aftermath of Hurricane Maria from an anticolonial stance that recognizes the linguistic dominance of English and denies it exclusive access to understanding. The title is double: “while they sleep” and “under the bed is another country” establishes a troubling dichotomy in which a comfortable, sleeping entity is located above an Other that is separate and unknown or undetected; the clear implication being that the United States can sleep in peace while Puerto Rico struggles against the former’s ignorance and complacency. The format of the footnote is used to structure an uneasy bilingual “dialogue” in English and Spanish wherein the languages do not translate one another, and the voices are responding to one another peripherally, across the wide distance of the page, not seeming to really “hear” one another. A few lines of text appear in the top right-hand corner in English, followed by a footnote, and the corresponding text appears at the bottom left of the page in Spanish. However, the relationship between the texts is not clear, and indeed, it is difficult even to locate the poem itself—is each set of lines in different languages its own poem? Or is the poem itself everything on the page, even though there is a linguistic and spatial gap that divides two groupings of text on most of the pages (see Fig. 1)?

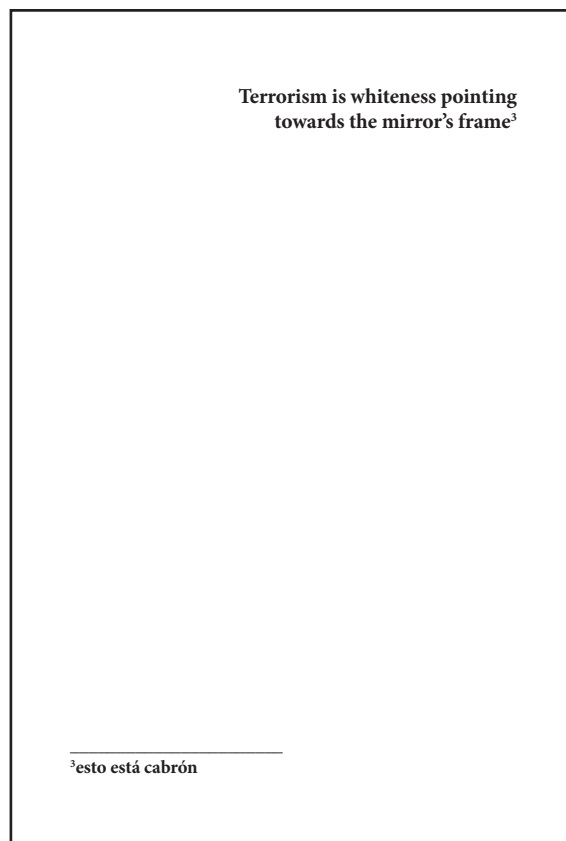


Fig. 1. Raquel Salas Rivera, *While They Sleep/Under the Bed is Another Country*.

Through its very structure this work exemplifies what Michael Dowdy describes as a refusal of Cartesian principles within post-1952 Puerto Rican poetry: he states that poetic representations of space constitute a form of “embodied knowledge” for Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the U.S., and that this “affective spatial imagination rejects linear historical narratives that perpetuate the philosophical binaries that invalidate feeling and emotion as forms of knowledge” (45). There is also an orality to Spanish lines such as “esto está cabrón” (Salas Rivera, note 3) that recalls the common vernacular of Puerto Rico, juxtaposing the immediately emotive street jargon with the metaphorical and abstract language of the preceding English line. The use of footnotes is associated with formal, academic, or journalistic writing, but implemented in a book of poetry the reference takes on a meaning that destabilizes both the traditional understanding of the role of the footnote (to provide further context to elucidate an author’s claim) and the traditional hermeneutical approach to poetry in which a poem’s formal characteristics are interpreted for what they “mean” and how they express ideas and emotions. The reader is thus confronted with a barrier to interpretation even if they speak both languages because of the disorienting structure of the footnote, while the wide space on the page also calls for a silent pause or breath. Opacity is employed here as an impediment to the impulse to essentialize the po-

ems as “straightforward” (pun intended) translations. Instead, the reader is prompted to feel with the words, even if they cannot be fully understood.³

Having destabilized notions related to poetic form, the linguistic choices further reinforce the notion of the precariousness of language itself as the ultimate vessel for the transmission of knowledge, as well as of translation to smoothly transport that knowledge from one language to another. The appearance on the page of the poem-as-footnote leads one to the expectation that the English will be translated into Spanish, but that assumption is quickly abolished. Instead, it becomes clear that this is not a translation, nor a conversation, nor a bifurcated declaration. There is a bewildering and disorienting silence in the pause between the English and the Spanish text, as well as in the disruption of expectations—the footnote does not provide an explanation or clarification for the English lines, but instead presents us with an emotional counter-current. The lines in English often adopt a formal, distanced, rational and even bureaucratic tone: “citizenship as prerequisite / for empathy” (note 4), while the lines in Spanish are often informal, making references to emotions and embodied responses through popular vernacular idioms: “*como con hambre vieja*” (note 4), “*se me está partiendo el corazón*” (note 5).⁴ Salas Rivera ironically remaps the hemisphere with the U.S. as the bed, and Puerto Rico as what lies in the darkness underneath it: the rational calm above, the emotional chaos below. Colonialism is revealed as framing a linguistic and cultural oppositional relationship between these two entities, as well as an opposition of hegemonic, logocentric power-knowledge and felt, embodied knowledge. Yet, while acknowledging this constricting binary, the text also refuses it, by including prose-poems in Spanish with “translations” into English, translations which recognize the impossibility of translations:

to translate is to be the illegible witness of oneself. it is to explain things enough so that they think they understand, but to know that in the end they won’t understand our (hi)stories. (note 52)

True understanding of an Other, then, eludes what can be gleaned *only* from linguistic expression, from traditional reading practices—it exists between and beyond languages. History, for Salas Rivera, is a series of estranged intimacies: estranged because language does not suffice for speaking to one another, and intimate because feeling one another is the recourse we are left with.

Linguistically, Salas Rivera’s maneuvering of Spanish, English, and Spanglish participates in “hysterically [decentering] U.S. hemispheric illusions of grandeur” and requires bilingual reading/listening as “sensorial solidarity with the anticolonial forms, shapes, and imaginaries” the poems call forth (Neyra 43). As Diana Taylor has pointed out, since the time of the conquest of the Americas, written expression has been legitimized to an extreme degree over embodied knowledge (18), devaluing the oral and nonverbal practices that

have always been central to non-Western cultures. Taylor's distinction between discursive "archive" and embodied "repertoire" also resonates within Salas Rivera's work in the way that he conceptualizes the epistemological split between "their" (the colonizers) and "our" (the colonized) histories: what rings throughout the collection is a cry for the acknowledgement of real collective pain that cannot be described in words. Instead, pain and loss emerge through the consistent failures of language, a failure made felt through untranslatability and visual emptiness that metaphorically conjures silence. In an insightful reading of Salas Rivera's more recent collection *X/EX/EXIS* (2020), Christina León identifies the poet's resistance to

the pressure to translate for the pleasure and consumption of monolingual English speakers, his poetry keenly alert to how translation into English can operate as extraction—a marketing of Puerto Rican difference rendered fully translated—with diminishing returns. This is an indebted landscape where Salas Rivera steals back from English in the poetic decisions to withhold, or hold onto, loss as itself incommensurable or untranslatable. (112)

Yet this loss is not mere absence or lack, it is a palpable presence that is not always legible but that nevertheless demands acknowledgment. Salas Rivera's poetics of silence accords primacy to affect, to forms of listening-with and feeling-with that leave room for opacity without the extractivism that consumer-oriented translation implies.

After Hurricane María, Raquel Salas Rivera, together with a group of other poets (Carina del Valle Schorske, Ricardo Maldonado, and Erica Mena), decided to commission a series of handmade broadsides (later compiled into an anthology) from poets on the island and in the U.S. to sell as a way of raising funds for the disaster recovery as well as to "participate in the vast ecosystem of care that calls our community into being" (*Puerto Rico* xiii). Read alongside Salas Rivera's poetry collection that I analyze here, it becomes clear that a larger concern in Salas Rivera's work is to intentionally animate a sense of collectivity among Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the diaspora, in rejection of what is seen to be the individualistic attitude characteristic of the United States. At the same time, this interpellation of a multilingual community of care does not erase the original wound; it does not attempt to obfuscate the irrevocable damage caused by centuries of colonialism. As is stated in the introduction to the anthology:

When we decided our project would have to be bilingual, we were not declaring the 'equality' of English and Spanish or initiating a 'cross-cultural' exchange. Ours is one culture whose bleeding edges cannot be bandaged. Ours is a tongue forked by cutting. (xiv)

Yet despite this wounding, "these voices make an ensemble whose chorus is yes" (xiv). In *While They Sleep*, though the poetic voices alternate between English and Spanish, and at first the former appears to be cold and calculating and the latter feeling and empathetic, this dichotomy begins to dissolve, and it quickly becomes uncertain who is speaking and from what subject-position. What emerges is the impossibility of reading another's lived experience, of the insufficiency of translation as well as of language itself to articulate reality. The materiality of the world, however, is what these poems return to again and again: the disaster is a lived, embodied experience, and to survive it depends in part on the transmission of affective resonances. The acknowledgement of incommensurability between language and experience does not negate what is potentially generative about circulating painful utterances.

This insufficiency of language also manifests throughout the collection as an attunement to fractures and lacunae. One poem-fragment reads (in English):

every word you read
kills me
kill/s/u/s (note 18)

Here, the positionality of "you" "me" and "us" ambiguous and unstable. Given the context of the aftermath of the hurricane, and the cognitive dissonance created by the lackluster government response juxtaposed with an overwhelming number of reports, photos, and videos documenting immense suffering in the media, the poem is a shocking accusation against those who are content to listen and absorb the disaster without acting to provide aid. These three short lines subvert any notion of reading as passive or apolitical knowledge-gathering, and of lyric poetry as a high art form distanced from quotidian ugliness. Instead, they turn leisure into violence, and bring into sharp relief the structures of power that enable some to read about utter destruction from a position of relative safety, while others must endure bodily suffering. The slashes in the last line, "kill/s/u/s" indicate the breakdown of a cohesive body or state, a "U.S." not legible as "us" and associated with violence above all. "Read" here is a verb that, within the broader context I am discussing, stands in opposition to "feel," but what this poem demonstrates in part is that reading can and should be feeling, should involve the body as well as the mind, even if (or especially if) it is to feel another's pain, and that there is even a kind of violence in the *negation* of feeling. These lines are attuned to the tension between what can be seen/read, and what words make felt. By erecting a barrier of sharp slashes through the words "kill/s/u/s," what can be cognitively gleaned from the words becomes subordinated to their visceral impact, a mark of woundedness that interrupts the stable transference of invisible emotions into visible signs.

This call to make felt another kind of knowledge is also at work in Ana-Maurine Lara's poetry collection. Here too, the language is affective, it requires an engagement through the body. In both

works, untranslatability and illegibility function as a kind of refusal, or wall, that physically deviates the reader's trajectory, and in this way, they call for a form of queer reading. If a normative reading presupposes a straight line connecting author, text, and reader (and Sommer elucidates some of the heteronormative sexual connotations contained in notions of "penetrating" the text and putting "one's finger on the mechanisms that produce pleasure and pain, and then to call it ours" (407) then Lara's and Salas Rivera's work promotes a queer relationality with the text precisely through this mode of deviation. If, following Sara Ahmed, "to make things queer is to disturb the order of things" (565) such that heteronormative forms of spatial and social organization become disoriented by the presence of queerness, then writing from a queer positionality can have the effect of making "the 'familiar' strange, or even to allow what has been overlooked...to dance with renewed life" (569). Accustomed modes of reading wherein any reader can interpret any text given sufficient technical prowess are foreclosed in these textually and aurally deviant works, which emphasize instead discomfort, strangeness, and obliqueness. Queer orientation to and through both texts requires a muting of normative reading, and a listening/feeling through other affective channels.

Here, J. Logan Smilge's work on queer rhetoric is also instructive. Observing that the casual association of speech with visibility often "denies the presence of the body" (83), Smilge follows other scholars (such as Cheryl Glenn) who contend that silence itself is a rhetorical act. They go on to argue that

a queer rhetorical approach to silence reveals a speech-silence continuum, which offers a framework for understanding the rhetorical action of queer bodies. Rather than defining queer rhetoric within a speech-silence binary, the continuum model allows us to explore the effects of queer rhetorical practices, such as rhetorical quieting, that both reveal and conceal, speak and remain silent. (85)

This framework does not require a visible "coming-out", a protest march, or a manifesto. If we consider Smilge's speech-silence continuum alongside Neyra's poetic listening as sensorial solidarity, we can begin to understand how a poetics of silence allows for an attunement to lived experience that exceeds and eludes dominant, "masterful" readings and widens the possibilities for solidarity.

Kohnjehr Woman: Ana-Maurine Lara's Mute Conjuring

While Salas Rivera's poems emphasize estrangement, leaving the feeling body as the only recourse with which to respond to the disorienting linguistic declarations, Ana-Maurine Lara's *Kohnjehr Woman* operates in a different order: the reader's body is engaged first, but it is prevented from achieving a full rational grasp of the poems' meanings. The story of Shee unfolds through poems writ-

ten in the voices of many different characters living on a plantation in Virginia. The historical period is never specified, which removes a layer of distance between the reader and the poetic voices. These stories and characters exist in the present as well as the past of the imagination. We learn that the protagonist, Shee, is from Guinea, and spent time in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), where her tongue was cut off as punishment for inciting a rebellion, before being sold to a Virginia plantation. The book is divided into three sections: the Book of Samuel, the Book of Sarah, and the Book of Rebecca. Shee's presence weaves in and out of the poems, her voice appearing either as complete poems or as lines within poems written from the perspective of another character, marked by a different font, and in italics. She appears to heal, counsel, teach, and love the other enslaved characters, and ultimately kills the plantation owner and helps the other characters find their way to freedom. The lines written in Shee's voice uniquely resist a certain kind of reading while inviting another. As the note prefacing the book states: "The voice of Shee, the kohnjehr woman, is connected to your own. Her words are intended to be read out loud, to pass through your body, to invoke. They are not a dialect. They are the sounds of a broken tongue" (*Kohnjehr Woman*). Shee's poetic voice is written phonetically, but in a strange way that compels her reader to read it aloud in order to glean the meaning of the words: the reader's body becomes the medium, or the conduit, for Shee's knowledge *before* the mind can interpret the language. At the same time, much of the language is unrecognizable, even when read aloud, and thus prevents a completely competent readership. The sonic textures of language are insisted upon in a strangely forceful conjoining of reading and voicing to create meaning, in a gesture almost opposite to Salas Rivera's project of underscoring the lacunae between text and sense-ability. Yet central for both poets is the questioning of language, whether written or spoken, as a stable foundation for knowledge. Whereas Salas Rivera stages a hostile encounter between two colonial languages and underscores their failures to account for material realities in the aftermath of a natural disaster, Lara demonstrates the limits of logocentric, Cartesian rationality; the nonsensical sounds of Shee's broken tongue become the only thing sense-able for bodies ensnared by violent colonial objectification.

For Sommer, it is important to note the markings of a text that aims to construct an "incompetent" readership, and not presume that every text exists for any reader to simply possess it. Embracing one's incompetence as a reader, then, requires reading on a "tangent" which "provides a vantage point for rereading more than subaltern silence" and "promises to get beyond our habitual interpretive strategies by pointing to another ground, a ground that we cannot, or may not, occupy and that remains other" (Sommer 421). In the case of the kohnjehr woman, her broken tongue symbolizes the violent silencing of slavery, but also creates a way of speaking and listening that "remains other" and opaque, that makes the reader uncomfortable, and that privileges embodiment as a form of knowledge. This is illustrated in the following lines:

Shee stood, shadowing my face...
Shee eyes searching. *Yu*

hent gawt nawt gud awlteh
for yu sanj kunzo.
Shee wrinkled her nose. (14)

Here, the lines in italics are understood to be the words spoken by Shee. There is a scant 11-word glossary at the end of the book for Shee's language, but it is not specified whether these are words that evolved from an African language, or if they belong only to Shee. According to this glossary, "sanj kunzo" means "blood and bone" and from context and reading the words aloud one can glean that the lines might translate to "you don't have a good altar for your ancestors." But Shee's italicized words on the page obstinately remain almost unintelligible unless spoken out loud, and thus any attempt to voicelessly decipher their meaning misses the point entirely. Shee fixes her reader within certain limits and compels her reader to speak with her brokenness.

Not only does Shee's particular kind of silence rupture traditional reading and translation practices, but her physical presence itself as an Afro-Latinx and queer body in the text disrupts "assumptions of racialized heteronormative identities/practices/performances/expectations" in order to "reshape new futures" (Lara, "I Wanted" 8). Shee is not an ephemeral spiritual presence who can do things like turn people into trees, as does the "conjure woman" figure of African American folktales (although she is clearly related to this figure).⁵ Rather, and importantly, she is a flesh-and-blood woman who loves physically, whose queerness manifests as a *being otherwise* that is not purely metaphorical. Her broken tongue is material evidence of indelible colonial trauma, her hands provide sustenance for the other slaves in the form of food, medicine, and love, and her "magic" that is feared by the overseer is rooted in her physical capabilities: "Shee catch rabbits with Shee hands/Starts fires with Shee toes" (*Kohnjehr Woman* 62). Perhaps most importantly, her bodily presence is what allows for the creation of a collectivity on the plantation as well as a strengthened sense of continuity between the generations of Afro-descendants within the text, as well as between the text and its implied audience of Afro-descendant readers. This further affirms the relationship between silence (as untranslatability or unintelligibility) and the potential of embodied knowledge and affective experience: a broken tongue is neither a broken self nor a broken connection to others. On the contrary, in a Glissantian sense it is Shee's unrepenting opacity (understood as an uncategorizable alterity) that allows for Relation to exist in the context of the plantation; her illegibility as an agentic queer Black woman is precisely what allows her to rebel. At the same time, the disaster of slavery is never erased. It is present in Shee's wounded body, but also in the violent historical erasure of articulations of the enslaved; the gaps in the archive which necessitate this weaving together of fact and fiction, this reshaping of past and future.

Shee's queer Afro embodiment and the text's revitalization of

the role of the body in cultivating meaning is also important in the context of contemporary Afro-Dominican poetry. Since the Trujillo era which fomented a sense of alienation for Afro-Dominicans from their African heritage, opposing the Dominican Republic as a nation of white European Hispanics against Haiti as a nation of Afro-descendants, Dominicans have struggled to reassert the centrality of African heritage within Dominican identity. Lara's rewriting of violent colonial history through the wounded body of an Afro-descendent queer woman, through her poetics of silence, reaffirms the importance of the physicality of the Afro, queer body in the face of official narratives of erasure. Shee speaks to those that need to hear her, and both her speech acts and acts of desire elude the essentializing impulses of colonial objectification. Her sensuality also exceeds and disrupts the racist and heteronormative boundaries imposed by coloniality as she enters into a romantic relationship with Rebecca and has a nonreproductive encounter with Rebecca's body, which "has not / carried life, nor chattel" (65). This encounter engenders instead a "sweetness" when Shee touches Rebecca with "her hands a salve made / of this bitter root" (65).

Speaking to/through the reader in a new language, Shee's words would seem to be an apt illustration of what Jacques Rancière refers to as "mute speech," or silent speech. Rather than view art and literature as expressive modes that aim to overcome their inability to perfectly represent embodied experience, Rancière argues that works of literature are already characterized by language that gestures toward its own insufficiency of articulation. Words make things visible through narration and description, and at the same time "words make seen what does not pertain to the visible... by making the strength or control of an emotion felt" (12). In other words, there is "a way in which things themselves speak and are silent" (13). That silence has a particular kind of affective power and potency; it is a "making felt" that operates alongside the making known or legible. Silence in this sense is not the absence of sound, but the operation through which words *transmit* a resonance to the reader, something that cannot be described verbally, but can only be felt. When Shee the kohnjehr woman says "*Yu / hent gawt nawt gud awlteh*" the reader is forced to read the lines aloud and in so doing, accords primacy to the body, reviving the sensuousness of language even if the exact meaning of the words remains unclear. Silence then also creates a potential for returning language, knowledge and meaning to the body; it allows for a "being otherwise" wherein the opacity of language does not inhibit, but in fact encourages, an affective relationship between reader and text.

Shee's geographic movements (from Africa, to the Caribbean, and finally to Virginia) as well as the physical mutilation she undergoes serve to both underscore the dislocation and violent fragmentation of Black colonial subjectivity, and posit an alternative form of collectivity not based on shared nationality or language, but on shared affects and care: the mute speech of her "broken tongue" becomes the shared form of understanding among the enslaved. Despite having been uprooted from her native land, Shee seems

to understand the ecology of the region in which she finds herself and shares that knowledge with Samuel, Sarah, and Rebecca (other enslaved characters on the Virginia plantation) for the purposes of healing and feeding them, and although she is enslaved, she is not devoid of agency: she kills the slaveowner, freeing herself and the others. Despite not speaking in a recognizable language, she makes herself understood to the other enslaved people on the plantation who might speak multiple different languages and have varying cultural backgrounds. In a poem spoken by Shee, she speaks of her past, of moments where she attempted to escape but was restrained by an unnamed man, prevented from speaking and acting, but she insists that this version of events is “heestohree” whereas in “meestohree” things occur differently—she escapes and is free: “meestohree / hent nawtstohree / fowund ehn / heestohree” (68), her story is not to be found in the dominant narrative. The masculine, violent, patriarchal forces that would dictate a narrative of victimhood, in other words, are not allowed to have the final say; Shee controls the story and strives for it to be otherwise. This echoes Salas Rivera’s dichotomy between “their” and “our” histories, and similarly illustrates a striving to evade colonial taxonomizing by emphasizing the alternative epistemologies of the colonized, ways of knowing grounding in Caribbean embodied experience.

This distinction between “heestohree” and “meestohree” also illustrates what Lara terms the practice of creating an “archive of the imagination,” or what Saidiya Hartman refers to as “critical fabulation”: the necessity for Black diasporic subjects to reckon with the erasures and discrepancies of the archive through a blending of historical evidence with memory, embodied knowledge, and creative conjuring. Centering imagination in this way resists a linear conception of history based on an essentialized archive and reconceives identity as “a dynamic process that is informed by multiple bodies” (Lara, “I Wanted to Be” 2). At the same time, the opacity of Shee’s language does not allow for the erasure of the wound. The poetic text refuses to enable a competent reader, a reader that might painlessly absorb Shee’s story into “heestohree,” and instead retains an element of muteness that nevertheless “speaks.”

Lara and Salas Rivera: A Queer Anticolonial Poetics

Both Salas Rivera and Lara are interested in employing silence as a refusal to translate and make fully intelligible experiences that are unique to colonial subjects in the Caribbean and its diaspora. At the same time, their writing works to disrupt heteronormative and colonial logics and emphasize a corporeal dimension of experience, prompting the reader to read/listen in a way that foregrounds feeling and orality above reading for mastery. Ren Ellis Neyra emphasizes the different and related concept of “the cry” offered by Glissant in their analysis of contemporary Puerto Rican performance, attending to the “elusive materialities of cries, ad libs, riotous disruptions of apocalyptic joy, performative refusals of forced compliance, onomatopoeiae, silence, ideological hiccups, and to Spanglish...all

sonic eruptions of sensing...” in order to understand the “ethical and imaginary possibilities of *besideness* and *sensorially errant solidarity* in the Caribbean Americas” (42, emphasis in original). This sensorially errant solidarity is a form of listening and feeling that is a “counterattack” to U.S. hegemony and “illusions of grandeur” (43), and it is another way of considering what I am positing here as oblique or tangential reading of Salas Rivera and Lara’s poetics of silence: a listening-with that embraces the irrational and the woundedness of language, without capture or forced linguistic hierarchy, leaving room for what words alone cannot carry.

In *While They Sleep*, the plurality of voices in English and Spanish—the forked tongues—strive against being fixed in one pole or another: the voices are neither north nor south, neither recognizably male nor female, neither purely rational nor purely emotional. They are neither—and both. By encompassing the neither-and-both the poems work to displace established notions of place, identity, and language. The last page of the book contains the line in English “not a single blue tarp in heaven” followed by the line “pero sobran cielos plásticos en el paraíso” (but plastic skies are abundant in paradise) (note 86, my translation), which both make reference to the homes destroyed by the hurricane. The two lines display remarkably subtle yet important differences in perspective on futurity and death. The first identifies the blue tarp as an object with negative connotations, i.e., in heaven, there are no blue tarps because presumably there are no hurricanes, or because heaven is a place with no need for tarps. The line in Spanish, however, positions tarps as desirable objects that one hopes will be plentiful in heaven. In English, the tarps symbolize destruction, while in Spanish, the tarps symbolize hope and security. Whereas throughout the collection the Spanish and the English voices seem to be talking past one another, never in dialogue, here on the last page they are almost saying the same thing, but they fall tragically short, and the silence between the lines yawns into a gaping, uncrossable abyss. Although this untranslatability would seem to be hopeless, there is still a way in which the silence speaks: the voices are still there, the poetry is being written, being read, as a “piece of evidence” that exhorts us to conceive differently of disaster and of colonial logic. In addition, the final word of the collection is given to poet Gaddiel Francisco Ruiz Rivera, who writes an epilogue with the lines:

La parte de abajo, donde nos ocultamos cuando la
pesadilla de que nos visitan desde arriba vuelve, pero nos
toca ser la peor pesadilla en la vigilia de los colonizadores.
No deja de intrigarme que tantas personas les teman a las
medidas de autopreservación. Un dragón bajo la cama es
una forma de traducir cuchillos bajo la almohada.

(The underside, where we hide when the nightmare
that those from above will visit us returns, but it’s our
turn to be the worst nightmare of the colonizers’ vigil. It
doesn’t cease to intrigue me that so many people fear the

methods of self-preservation. A dragon under the bed is a way of translating knives under the pillow.)

Poetry thus serves to illuminate places of safety and collective care, and in the hands of those “dragons under the bed” it can become a powerful weapon to resist oppression. The realm of dreams and imagination becomes a method for ensuring a future, in the same way that it does for Shee, whose strange “magical” abilities, disorienting language, and queer desire become not only the means for liberation, but the avenue for connecting the past to the future.

Lara’s voicing of Shee deliberately centers the aural aspect of language as a means to move beyond the confines of the written text, embracing the dissonance and destabilization of the “broken tongue” as a way of drawing the reader into a new kind of relationality. This relationality preserves the specificity of Shee’s opacity (as colonized, Black, queer, female body with a unique language born of physical trauma) while inviting the reader into a coalitional relationship. As Lara states in her critical essay,

it is then no surprise that Shee *calls us* into being, and through her body, existence and practices, allows for the possibility of a [Afro] [Latinx] [Queer]’ subjectivity that specifically engages in love acts and speech acts outside the narrow confines of a policed heterosexuality. It is this subjectivity itself which allows for a new re-imagining of liberation, resistance and rebellion within the violent context of slavery. It is Shee, calling out to memory, who *calls us* back into languages no longer, but also deeply, *our own*. (10, emphasis mine)

Shee’s language is definitively *not* a dialect (not a creole, pidgin, or Spanglish hybrid) that Lara’s implied audience of Afro-Latinx queer-identifying readers might speak or recognize, yet it is precisely in the language’s very opacity, its untranslatability, its not-speech, that this reader might be able to recognize him/her/their self. This recognition makes possible not only a new idea of the future of this subject-position (Afro-Latinx-Queer), but a renewed understanding of the historical past. In other words, not only does this reimagining make thinkable an Afro-Latinx-Queer futurity, but also a past in which these acts of speech and bodily desires can emerge within the violent context of slavery. It is a re-creation of the past through the present, and vice-versa, that Shee’s mute, embodied “call” enables.

A focus on corporeality and materiality has become a hallmark of contemporary poetry post-1990s, according to scholar Heather Milne (5). Both Raquel Salas Rivera’s and Ana-Maurine Lara’s projects are aligned with the work of other contemporary Caribbean poets such as Safiya Sinclair, Claudia Rankine, Urayoán Noel, Yara Liceaga Rojas, Nancy Morejón, and many others who embrace a poetics that explores the political dimensions of affect, engage with issues of democracy and citizenship, ecosystems and geographies,

and critically reflect on the impact of capitalism and colonialism on queer, racialized, and female bodies. By placing these two poets with two such radically different projects in conversation, my goal is not to elide their differences or paint them broadly as “Latinx” poets. Salas Rivera divides his time between Puerto Rico and the U.S. while Lara lives in the U.S., and Lara’s work has a particular focus on Afro-descendants. However, their work shares important commitments that, when read in conjunction, can bring forth questions and insights regarding the perspectives of queer bilingual poets in the Caribbean and its diaspora. In particular, the poetics of silence that emerges as an alternative mode of knowing and that destabilizes accepted norms of reading, writing, and speaking. Both authors share an awareness of the importance of collective oppositional forms of resistance, as well as of the intimate estrangement that language enables, which is both profoundly personal and explicitly political. Both *While They Sleep/Under the Bed is Another Country* and *Kohnjehr Woman* are texts that elude and refuse an understanding of identity as fixed, either within language or within colonial and heterosexual epistemological frameworks (what Maria Lugones refers to as the “categorical logic” of coloniality (742)). If for Doris Sommer, certain texts require a “tangential” reading wherein the reader is interpellated at certain moments, and refused entry at others, this way of reading is perhaps also what is already operating in and through queer bodies, which orient themselves at an oblique angle in relation to heteronormative straight lines. For these two poets, strategic silences operate as a kind of unmooring, in which the sense of disturbance provoked by their poems places barriers before the reader and forces one to read otherwise. This queer orientation recenters the sensorium as a primary vehicle for understanding and diminishes mastery over language as the pinnacle of knowledge. For bodies experiencing the aftershocks of colonial violence (including the violence of neglect), this poetics of silence allows for a reconsideration of the limits of language and translation to transmit lived experience, and opens affective channels that acknowledge opacity while encouraging the emergence of “an ensemble whose chorus is yes.”

NOTAS

¹Following scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, and others, I use “queer” throughout this article to refer to non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative genders and sexualities.

²Christina León theorizes a similar mode of impeding an audience’s ability to frame a performance of racialized subjectivity that she terms “opaque aesthetics” (372). Whereas for León, this aesthetic strategy forces the audience to become “stuck” with a performance, to wrestle cognitively with nuance, my conceptualization of a “poetics of silence” is as a strategy that defers hermeneutic interpretation in favor of embodied and affective responses.

³Here my analysis owes much to what Ren Ellis Neyra identifies as “multisensorial poetic listening,” a methodology that “critiques the regime of reason and disperses affect into sense” (9).

⁴“as with an ancient hunger”; “my heart is breaking” (translation mine).

⁵See Chesnutt, Charles Waddell, and Richard H. Brodhead, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993. A collection of African American folktales was originally published by Chesnutt in 1899, and the figure who connects the stories is a woman who lives off the plantation, in a settlement of free African Americans, and who deals in roots, herbs and spells. This “conjure woman” can turn men into trees, babies into birds, or masters into slaves.

⁶My translation.

⁷Brackets in original.

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