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ARTICLES

- Wilson, Mac J. The Mesh and the Abyss: Juan L. Ortiz's Eco-poetics 2
- Estrada Orozco, Luis Miguel. Escritura documental, zozobra e intersubjetividades en *Había mucha neblina o humo o no sé qué*, de Cristina Rivera Garza 13
- Gitlin, Daniella. The Mechanics of Uncertainty in Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación Masacre* 24
- Cupic, Tijana. Las soberanías yuxtapuestas: los piratas y los narcotraficantes en la literatura latinoamericana y su relación con el estado 38

DOSSIER: Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text. Charlie D. Hankin, editor.

- Hankin, Charlie D. Introduction to Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text 48
- Campbell, Corinna. Moving Beyond Words: Awasa and Apinti in a Suriname Maroon Communicative Matrix 51
- Carter, Sam. Making Sense of a Corpus: Berta Singerman, Rhythm, and Recitation 64
- Fleites Lear, Marena. Estranged Intimacies: An Anticolonial Poetics of Silence in the Poetry of Raquel Salas Rivera and Ana-Maurine Lara 76
- Kassavin, Jane. Underwritten Voices: Resonant Spaces and Unsound Silences in Dani Zelko, Soraya Maicoño, and Daniela Catrileo 86
- Plevka-Jones, Helen. Resonantly Reading Borderlands Narratives in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* 100
- Vergara C., Isabella. Archivos vivientes: vistas, sonidos y cantos en *Border cantos* de Guillermo Galindo y Richard Misrach 109
- Milone, Gabriela. Ficciones fónicas. Insistencias en la materia de la voz 123
- Díaz Frene, Jaddiel. The Two Voices of Porfirio Díaz: State, Audible Fictions, and a Letter to Edison (Mexico-United States, 1907-1910) 135
- Piazza, Sarah Maria. El poder de la voz y del acto de narrar en *La amante de Gardel* de Mayra Santos-Febres 148
- Velarde, Malena. Escucha hospitalaria en el arroyo entubado Medrano en Buenos Aires 159

TRANSLATIONS

- "Lolo," a short story by Luis Arriola Ayala. Translated from Spanish by Megan Saltzman. 169
- The "Primitive" Cecilia Valdés. A short story by Cirilio Villaverde
A translation and introduction by Thomas Genova. 172

BOOK REVIEWS

- REVIEW ARTICLE. Más allá de la voz. Texturas (ultra)sonoras del poder, la resistencia y el deseo
Portable Postsocialisms: New Cuban Mediascapes after the End of History. By Paloma Duong.
Transatlantic Radio Dramas: Antônio Callado and the BBC Latin American Service during and after World War II.
By Daniel Mandur Thomaz
Playlist: Música y sexualidad. Por Esteban Buch.
Reseñados por Ricardo Andrade Fernández 186
- Espejismos reales Imágenes y política en la literatura rioplatense*.
Por Diego Alonso
Reseñado por Rodrigo del Río 190
- Unexpected Routes: Refugee Writers in Mexico*.
By Tabea Alexa Linhard
Reviewed by Mauro Lazarovich 192
- Holocaust Consciousness and Cold War Violence in Latin America*.
By Estelle Tarica
Reviewed by Marilyn Miller 194
- Un presente abierto las 24h. (Escrituras de este siglo desde Latinoamérica)*.
Por Mónica Velásquez Guzmán
Reseñado por Emanuela Jossa 196
- El retorno del monstruo. Figuras de lo monstruoso en la literatura latinoamericana contemporánea*.
Por Adriana López-Labourdette
Reviewed by Manuela Crivelli 198

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DOSSIER: Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text**Making Sense of a Corpus: Berta Singerman, Rhythm, and Recitation**

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ABSTRACT: In the 1920s, *declamadora* Berta Singerman was frequently criticized by the Argentine avant-garde because her popular performances never included their poems. Dismissed as an embodiment of *cursilería* ever since, she was in fact a key component of international poetry circuits who developed relationships with Alfonsina Storni, Federico García Lorca, and Gabriela Mistral, among others. In correspondence with Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban writer counseled her on capturing the dynamics of declamation onscreen, suggesting that she could emphasize the rhythms of her performances through close-ups on her moving hands accompanying the poem—a technique Singerman employed in a 1942 film. No stranger to working across media, Carpentier recognized rhythm as the crucial connection between declamation's two types of corpus: the collection of poems and the body. In conversation with Carpentier's observations, this piece focuses on how rhythm shaped production and reception alike as Singerman attracted large crowds across the Americas. It argues that Singerman, who would call herself the "libertadora de poesía," accented rhythm in her performances so that audiences could make sense of the recited poems—and this process involved not only allowing those poems to be heard and felt but also creating a space for them to perform ideological work.

KEYWORDS: Berta Singerman, Alejo Carpentier, declamation, poetry, cinema, media studies, body, rhythm

RESUMEN: En la década de 1920, Berta Singerman fue criticada varias veces por las vanguardias argentinas porque los recitales de la declamadora no incluían sus poemas. Desde entonces frecuentemente ha sido desestimada como un ejemplo de la cursilería, pero Singerman formaba parte de importantes circuitos internacionales de poesía y se relacionó con Alfonsina Storni, Federico García Lorca y Gabriela Mistral, entre otros. En su correspondencia con Alejo Carpentier, el escritor cubano le ofreció a Singerman sugerencias sobre cómo captar las dinámicas de la declamación en el cine, proponiendo estrategias como el uso de primeros planos para mostrar el movimiento de sus manos acompañando un poema—una técnica que Singerman luego empleó en una película de 1942. Carpentier, quien manejaba una variedad de medios, identificó el ritmo como la conexión crucial entre los dos tipos de corpus que aparecen en la declamación: la colección de poemas y el cuerpo. Este artículo trabaja con las observaciones de Carpentier para pensar el modo en el cual el ritmo influía tanto en la producción como en la recepción de la declamación durante el período en que Singerman atraía a grandes públicos en las Américas y Europa. Arguye que Singerman, quien se autodenominaba la "libertadora de poesía", acentuaba el ritmo en sus recitales para que los públicos pudieran encontrar sentido a los poemas recitados. Ese proceso implicaba la creación de un espacio no solo para escuchar y sentir los poemas sino también donde los mismos generaban efectos ideológicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Berta Singerman, Alejo Carpentier, declamación, cine, estudios de medios, cuerpo, ritmo

In the February 1942 issue of *Sur*, a review of Editorial Sudamericana's *Antología poética argentina*, which had been published the year before, appeared in the famously influential and cosmopolitan journal run by Victoria Ocampo. She was the sister of one of the anthology's editors (Silvina Ocampo) and consequently the sister-in-law of another (Adolfo Bioy Casares), and *Sur* had also featured pieces by the remaining editor (Jorge Luis Borges). The review was even authored by a contributor to the anthology, Eduardo González Lanuza, yet accusations of nepotism or expectations of favorable coverage would be misplaced because his assessment was less than enthusiastic. Envisioning the anthology as a social gathering and thereby corporealizing this corpus of texts, he outlines his objections to the guest list—one that had been carefully assembled to avoid both slights and oversights, as Borges describes in his prologue. González Lanuza disapproves, for instance, of the attendance of a poet writing in French, and he criticizes the absence of poems by figures he holds in high esteem, like Borges and Macedonio Fernández. Yet perhaps the most strident objection comes when deprecating work by a *declamadora*, or reciter of poetry:

¿Habría, acaso, un hombre tan de salón que encuentre la fórmula cortés y eficaz para darle a entender a la Sra. Wally Zenner que, a fin de mantener su prestigio de enemiga pública No. 2 de la poesía, no es imprescindible que publique sus versos, que basta con sus recitales? ¿Cómo hacer para no molestarla con esa ubicación en el segundo puesto, si no puedo, en conciencia, regatearlo el primero a la Sra. Berta Singerman? (68-69)

While Zenner's two poems in the anthology offer little of note, González Lanuza sees no reason to explain his disdain for Singerman's *declamaciones*. It is likely because by that point an introduction was no longer required for the *declamadora*, who was born in what is now Belarus and whose first exposure to poetry and its recitation occurred not in Spanish but in Yiddish. Well-known on both sides of the Atlantic and capable of attracting crowds of thousands in her open-air recitals, Singerman also already had an anthology of her own. By 1941, the same year that the *Antología poética argentina* appeared, Singerman's *Las mejores poesías para la declamación*, which was based on her performance repertoire, was already in its fifth edition.³ While Singerman's name appears just once in the anthology edited by Bioy, Borges, and Ocampo—in the brief biographical note for contributor César Tiempo, who, in another testament to Singerman's fame, had already written a book-length biography of her—friends and frequent collaborators including Conrado Nalé Roxlo, Córdoba Iturburu, and Alfonsina Storni populate its pages. No matter how much González Lanuza might protest her performance techniques, Singerman was an active and influential participant in the poetic field.

González Lanuza's criticisms were not without precedent. Years earlier, in the penultimate issue of the avant-garde publica-

tion *Martín Fierro*, an unsigned note accompanying a caricature of Singerman revealed a similar attitude as the writer criticized her selection of poems:

Aparte Poe, Whitman, algunos romances, ninguna cosa que pudiera interesarnos. Aparte Sábat Ercasty, Parra del Riego, ningún poeta moderno. De los nuestros, ninguno. De los jóvenes, de los nuevos, mucho menos: todavía no han llegado a convencer a Berta de sus condiciones líricas, de su virtud cantable, de sus cualidades para el virtuosismo-Singermaniano. ("Berta Singerman")

Little more than a month later, Mário de Andrade echoed this sentiment when remarking that while Singerman "escapa da vulgaridade das recitadoras, que infestam atualmente toda a América Latina" he did hope that, in the future, in her repertoire "se vejamos dessas forças verdadeiramente vivas da literatura hispano-americana, os Borges, os Girondos, os Güiraldes, os Huidobros" (qtd. in *A aventura* 7). Even as she later established connections with Neruda and began reciting the work of García Lorca, Singerman frequently faced such criticisms about the poems she performed as well as others about her techniques, meaning that her widespread success could be met with scorn.

Singerman, who grew up in a family of modest means, was no stranger to such obstacles. In McGee Deutsch's apt characterization of the overall arc of the performer's career, "Singerman moved from the margins to the center of society, yet she transferred poetry from the center to the margins" (98). Her father, who had brought his family to Argentina from what was then Russia, encouraged his daughter to perform early on and would briefly manage her career, which initially included a stint in his Yiddish theater company. Later, when the family faced financial difficulties, Singerman had to stop her studies, but a fortuitous scholarship allowed her to continue at the Consejo de Mujeres. She then met her husband, Rubén Stolek, who became her manager and whose connections led her to interact with members of the Grupo Anaconda as well as with figures such as Gabriela Mistral, Rafael Alberti, and Juan Ramón Jiménez, among others. She was also, as she proudly notes in her autobiography, the first Argentine soloist to perform at the prestigious Teatro Colón. In the United States, she not only performed at the similarly esteemed Carnegie Hall but also summoned an impressive guest list in California: for a performance at the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles, as reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, "Charles Chaplin will have ten guests. Reservations have also been made for Maurice Chevalier, Marlene Dietrich, Thelma Todd and Ernst Lubitsch" ("Recital"). Her popularity would attract the attention of Hollywood studios, but the few films she made were never successful enough to warrant much work in that medium. And while she would also act in theatrical productions—ranging from Cocteau's *La voix humaine* to a piece about the life of Sarah Bernhardt, who had been her idol as a young woman—declamation would remain her constant con-

nection to audiences throughout the Americas and across the Atlantic for much of the twentieth century.

Labeling her a “transnational leftist performer,” McGee Deutsch notes that Singerman “recited works whose main themes were mass suffering and liberation from injustice,” which would have resonated with the socialist beliefs of her father that had prompted political persecution and the decision to flee to Argentina (98). Her politics, in other words, were anything but conservative; it was the constitution of her repertoire that would sometimes be labeled as traditional given that it did not always incorporate the newest voices. The differences with the avant-garde could therefore be portrayed as a clash of diverging conceptions regarding who the new protagonists of poetry should be: for many in those avant-garde circles, it was the voices of contemporary poets; for Singerman, what instead took precedence was establishing a new relationship between poetry and a broader range of publics, regardless of the repertoire used to do so.

González Lanuza’s criticism of Singerman in his review could strike readers as particularly puzzling given that one of his three poems included in the *Antología poética argentina* demanded a form of recitation: “Poema para ser grabado en un disco de fonógrafo.” Focused on the phonograph’s reproduction of sounds from those no longer alive, the poem, unlike some of González Lanuza’s other works regarding sound technologies, offers a relatively banal meditation on the affordances of phonography as it begins with lines like “¿Sabes que acaso te está hablando un muerto? / Eco callado soi que resucito.” More striking still is the fact that in those years the only voice recording companies regularly entrusted to release recordings of poems was that of Singerman, as advertisements in publications like *Caras y Caretas* readily indicate. The voice with the best chance of placing his poem on a disc was thus the one he most objected to. Even if we assume González Lanuza is speaking about a different moment of sound reproduction—one when, for instance, one could record at home onto a wax cylinder—we cannot ignore that Singerman’s voice was becoming synonymous with the voice of poetry.

Others who had reviled declamation would similarly sometimes recognize the possibilities posed by recitation. Rather than rely on a *declamadora* to disseminate their poetry, for instance, the *martinferristas* turned to another means of reproduction, with a front-page note on another issue of *Martín Fierro* advertising a series of four *audiciones radiotelefónicas* featuring twenty new poets—including González Lanuza—reciting their own work. Still others, with González Lanuza once again among them, later organized the *Revista Oral* that was “published” on Saturday nights in the spring of 1926 in the Royal Keller café, where contributors read their pieces aloud and a gramophone recording announced the table of contents of what one critic has called “una versión parlante de *Martín Fierro*” (Gasió 16). Clearly, González Lanuza and his fellow *martinferristas* did not object to poetry recitation but instead opposed a specific voice and its corresponding corpus—understood

here to encompass both the texts and the body. Even though the *martinferristas* dismissed Singerman, in other words, they did not fail to perceive the power of a performed anthology.

This article begins by outlining the tension between avant-garde poets and one of poetry’s most popular promoters precisely because—both then and since—Singerman has been so frequently dismissed as a figure of *cursilería* or subjected to other forms of derision. While we could understand that dynamic as reflecting what Christine Ehrick has usefully termed the era’s gendered soundscape, male *declamadores* like Alemany Villa received similar criticisms, as Sarah Goldberg explains, and it would also make it hard to account for the widespread success of Singerman and other *declamadoras*. On the one hand, the dynamic could be explained by the differences between the corpus that was the *Antología poética argentina*, which featured 70 poets across some 300 pages, and the corpus that Singerman recited (contemporary press accounts regularly put the number of poems she had memorized at any one time at 400). On the other, there is the way that Singerman simultaneously performed another kind of connection between a corpus, or body, and poetry through the practice of declamation, which emphasized corporeal expression. If the former concerns the repertoire, the latter demands attention to what is made possible by moving beyond the page, particularly with respect to rhythm and other practices that would allow a poem to reach new audiences.

In order to understand that relationship between poetry and new publics we must consider the corpus as both body and collection as well as what emerges when working across both conceptions. Doing so requires attending to what makes Singerman’s performances distinctive as well as to what they make possible. The first of these questions has often received more attention—prompting both imitation and mockery—and frequently allowed for simple disregard or outright dismissal. Despite being deeply imbricated with the first, the second question has been discussed less often. With few exceptions, such as briefly appearing in key works by Sandra McGee Deutsch and Jill Kuhnheim, Singerman has rarely been addressed in recent scholarship, consistently summoning a sense of faint recognition while only rarely commanding critical attention. But in order to locate the potential in her performances, there might be no better method than returning to how a writer who was living on the other side of the Atlantic—and making a living through work in various media—grasped not only the specificity of her techniques but also the possibility of capturing their distinctiveness through cinema.

Receiving Counsel from a Cuban in Paris

Although the *martinferristas* dabbled with radio performances and produced an oral version of a magazine, and González Lanuza wrote a poem about a phonograph, in Paris another Latin American writer was actually becoming well-versed in the professional operation of a range of sound reproduction technologies. Alejo Carpentier was

not only directing a daily radio broadcast but also supervising the pressing of fifty records a week for a French label, and he additionally served as a technician in the Société d'Enregistrement Sonore. Cinema was another area of both interest and expertise, with all scripts at Gaumont passing through his hands and with all advertising for that same studio the result of his efforts.

Carpentier laid out this extensive experience in a letter, which is simply dated "Paris, 30 de Octubre [sic]" but whose contents suggest it is from 1934, to Singerman, who had sought the Cuban writer's counsel about how to make the most of her time onscreen.² The idea evidently enthused Carpentier so much that the first third of the letter, which consists of ten typescript pages, exhaustively establishes his bona fides. Boasting that "[e]l micrófono y la film no tienen secretos para mí actualmente," he indicated that "[e]l cine y la radio constituyen actualmente mis máximas preocupaciones prácticas." Yet such pursuits were hardly separate from his writing, for, as he explained, he had formulated a principle for himself: "un escritor de nuestros días no puede ser completo si ignora cómo 'pasa' el sonido por un micrófono y desconoce cómo puede y debe impresionarse una imagen cinematográfica."³ For Carpentier, being a writer thus meant becoming attuned to the affordances of other technologies in order to better understand the specificity of his own medium. It also made him well suited to perceive the distinctiveness of a practice like declamation and its possible portrayal in other media.

In the letter's first part, as he outlines his experience, Carpentier describes his work on *Vaudou*, a documentary that premiered the same day that a letter from his mother reached him—a letter in which she also told him about Singerman's most recent work in cinema. Although he initially deems his contribution to the project "simple trabajo de laboratorio y estudio," the scale of the work suggests otherwise. One of the directors of the Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert had assigned him to edit a kilometer of film, which ultimately entailed the following steps: "Corté trescientos metros de film. Impuse transiciones ... Luego, la sonorización: reuní una orquesta de antillanos ... Reconstituimos los ritmos de la brujería; reconstituimos esas percusiones, casi arborescentes, en que vive el espíritu de los más viejos ritos del hombre." Carpentier therefore had an ear for rhythm as well as for cinema's distinctive possibilities for capturing it, whether through sound or image, and later in the letter he addresses both when offering advice to Singerman.

It is only after going on for some three and a half pages about his own projects that Carpentier shifts to Singerman's new career in cinema. In a brief aside, he admits a certain apprehension about others who might misapprehend the specificity of Singerman's performances. The reason is that "en materia de cine, el argumento no es lo más importante. La realización es lo esencial."⁴ Having established this centrality of cinematic techniques, he proceeds to propose a few "postulados esenciales" that he would follow if he were ever given the chance to collaborate on a film with Singerman. The first postulate states that "Berta es eminentemente plástica,"

by which Carpentier refers to the range of expressions in her every gesture. "Solo en sus recitales, tiene veinte y tantas maneras de cruzar los brazos," he notes, before adding that "muchas veces no es necesario observar su rostro, para saber lo que dicen los brazos." To better capture these essential elements that contribute to the rhythm of the performance, Carpentier proposes using cinematic techniques to accent them—to foreground them, in other words, within the rhythm of the film. As he writes, "esos gestos deben ponerse en valor; debe llamarse la atención sobre ellos, por medio del close-up, o de ángulos fotográficos que aislen, momentáneamente, el gesto esencial en toda su elocuencia." Given that he had already cut a film partly about rhythm—*Vaudou*—it is hardly surprising that he suggests cinematic rhythms capable of emphasizing these features, and he offers a concrete example: "Yo veo fácilmente una escena en que solo se vean sus manos y se oiga su voz. Veo la cámara, en constante travelling, dando vueltas a su alrededor, como un satélite a su planeta, para captar esa plasticidad total de sus expresiones faciales y físicas." Such a close framing of the hands not only underscores the specificity of cinema—after all, achieving a similar effect in live performances of the time would be impossible—but Carpentier's remark also insists on rhythm as it asserts periodicity by referencing the relationship between a planet and its satellite. One form of rhythm—the cinematic—could therefore help amplify that of another—declamation. This concern with rhythm was hardly casual: in an unpublished piece on cinema that is roughly contemporaneous with the letter and that includes references to Singerman despite being about the medium more generally, Carpentier, who is thinking about the duration of scenes and shots, emphasizes that "esta cuestión del ritmo, tan ignorada por los profanos, constituye uno de los problemas capitales que se plantean ante un director de películas" (qtd. in Raggi Rodríguez n.p.).

After sharing other postulates, which focus on the style of props, the construction of sets, and even the filming of Singerman's shadows to better capture her plasticity, Carpentier's letter finally turns to her voice. It is also a return to the question of rhythm, for here he considers a longstanding issue for Singerman, namely how her declamation might interact with music. Acknowledging that Singerman's voice can stand on its own, he nevertheless notes that cinema offers new possibilities for accompanying or otherwise complementing declamation. Carpentier mentions, for instance, the older concept of a "coro hablado" but quickly notes its fundamental problem: "exige la observación de una anotación rítmica, extremadamente precisa, que le quitaría toda la libertad en la dicción." Crucially, Carpentier recognizes the need for Singerman to perform her own rhythm and then have other sonic elements follow her—anything else would rob the self-proclaimed *libertadora* of her *libertad*. Yet, as he notes, techniques for mixing sound in cinema have now made it possible to once again have Singerman as the planet and those other elements as her satellites.

In *Vaudou*, he explains, the three primary sonic elements were the voice-over commentary, the drums he had recorded, and back-

ground music. All three were recorded separately and, as he elaborates, “echando a rodar las tres cintas sobre un aparato rigurosamente sincronizado, logramos obtener una cinta definitiva, en que los tres elementos aparecían fundidos, sin el error de un décimo de segundo. La mecánica permite esos milagros.” When considered from the perspective of contemporary sound reproduction, this technique is not necessarily revolutionary, but Carpentier’s experience with it allows him to identify how Singerman could have some accompaniment while simultaneously respecting the necessary primacy and perhaps even autonomy of her performance. He does not, in other words, want to subject her performance to that of someone else—to make her rhythm sync up with that of someone else when it should in fact be the reverse. In a brief aside about Singerman in the unpublished chronicle on cinema, he puts it even more plainly: “Todos los poemas que declama esta artista incomparable están sometidos a un ritmo interior que responde a la periodicidad de acentos e inflexiones. Sería absurdo imponerle un ritmo, ya que es ella la que nos lo impone. Ritmo libre, pero existente” (qtd. in Raggi Rodríguez n.p.).

In the letter, Carpentier then cites the example of one of Singerman’s well-known pieces, “El soldadito de plomo,” from Hans Christian Andersen. Working from memory, he cites two of the verses before annotating their rhythm in $\frac{3}{4}$ time and marking the accents. “No importa que esta anotación entrañe o no un error,” he explains. “Lo interesante está en demostrar que cada declamación de Berta puede anotarse, rítmicamente, como una línea de percusión.” He then offers a rhythmic transcription of two drum parts that could accompany those verses before explaining the process of putting it all together:

Si quisiéramos colocar dichos versos, sonorizados de esta manera, en una film, solo tendríamos que realizar el trabajo siguiente: a - Tomar la voz de Berta sobre una cinta; b - anotar el ritmo exacto de su declamación; c - impresionar la parte de batería sobre una segunda cinta; d - echar a rodar las dos cintas sobre un aparato sincronizado, y recoger la cinta definitiva, que será la fusión exacta, sin error posible, de la voz sobre la batería.

Again, Carpentier realizes cinema can ensure that Singerman’s rhythms need not be subjected to those of others; they can instead be subordinated to hers. As he clarifies, “sus poemas pueden verse acompañados por un coro, por una orquesta, por una sinfonía, expresamente escritos para usted, que sigan las menores inflexiones de su recitación.”⁵ He then emphasizes the point even more forcefully by employing a problematic metaphor: “A partir de ese instante, deja usted de ser esclava de la música, como lo sería si intentara llevar a cabo ese experimento en una sala de concierto.” Even though he might have framed the process in different terms, the point remains: by introducing the possibility of splitting up performer and accompaniment, cinema creates new sonic possibilities

rather than merely capturing what happens when declamation occurs in person.

In Carpentier’s reading, cinema could produce two key forms of understanding the rhythms that partly constitute Singerman’s performances. On the one hand, it could accent her rhythms through a range of techniques, such as by focusing on the moving hands that accompanied her voice. And, on the other, it could allow for new interactions between the rhythms of her performance and those of other performers by ensuring that Singerman could declaim without worrying about synchronization, which would now be left to a device. The silver screen would thus not supplant the live performance of declamation but signal to audiences just how much this performance practice entailed.

Cinema, Declamation, and Liberation

Carpentier’s enthusiasm—perhaps an early manifestation of the love that, according to Singerman’s autobiography, he would confess for her years later in Venezuela—evidently inspired Singerman, for his suggestion concerning close-ups on her hands during declamation seems to have been followed almost to the letter in *Ceniza al viento*, the 1942 Luis Saslavsky film in which Singerman played a *declamadora* named Franca Valenti. In an early scene, Valenti arrives at a recording studio. In front of the crowd that has gathered to watch her perform from behind a glass partition, she remarks to reporters that it is her first time recording and admits that the microphone intimidates her: “me da miedo pensar que mi voz quedará encerrada en unos discos, esas lunas negras que quizás vivirán más que yo” (*Ceniza*). Yet not all aspects of her performance will be captured by the phonographic equipment that appears in a series of close-ups; indeed, the film itself proves capable of conveying more of the many elements that comprise her performance practice. Just as Carpentier envisioned, while Valenti records Juana de Ibarbourou’s “El dulce milagro”—a poem mentioning roses bursting forth from fingers that Singerman herself would later refer to as “uno de mis caballitos de batalla” (*Mis dos vidas* 49)—close-ups featuring Singerman’s moving hands accompany the rhythms of her voice. The recited poem overlaps with and perhaps even overdetermines the concerns expressed by Singerman’s character, for Ibarbourou’s piece ends with two stanzas recounting the lyric subject’s disregard for those who dismiss her beliefs. Even if they dismiss her or imprison her in a cell with seven locks, she claims, “cantaré lo mismo” (233). Just as Valenti expresses trepidation about her voice being imprisoned on discs, here she performs a poem asserting that another form of imprisonment would never affect her.

Even as she records for a phonograph that cannot capture her gestures, Valenti still employs them—partly for the benefit of the audience behind the glass, and partly because they have already been thoroughly incorporated into an embodied performance practice. The rhythms of the poem and of the body performing that poem have become inseparable, which leads to an ostensible paradox: the

body is on full display and fully a part of the performance, but at the same time the technologies of sound reproduction that the film has shown to viewers are intended to render the presence of that same body unnecessary. Rather than use a misleading formulation like the “disembodied voice” to describe the result of the recording process, the scene insists that no specious separation between voice and body is possible. Instead, it forcefully demonstrates how a body, regardless of whether we see it, always lies behind a voice emerging from a loudspeaker. The fact that an audience has assembled to watch the performance is a testament to the popularity of the fictional performer—and of Singerman herself—as well as to the fact that declamation is not solely a matter of the voice but rather of multiple rhythms performed by the body.

In one of the very few substantial mentions of Singerman in recent scholarship, Jill Kuhnheim attends to her appearance in a 1934 film, *Nada más que una mujer*, contending that Singerman’s performance, in which she plays a *declamadora* who has ended up in the Philippines, allows us to retune our conception of poetry. These recitals, Kuhnheim argues,

go against the concept of the poem as private or subjective expression and limit the possibilities for a close reading or for our contemplation of the poem as an aesthetic object. Instead, poetry is a vehicle for emotional communication—expressing desire, outrage, heartbreak, and passion—it is a personal story made public. For better or worse, Singerman’s performance repudiates our understanding of poetry as a text genre and allows us to see how poetry reading and performance is a social act. (51)

Kuhnheim thus helps us recognize how Singerman’s performances make it possible to perceive poetry’s necessary connections to others. Abandoning any understanding of poetry solely as a textual form also means casting aside any notion that poetry is somehow individual. But where Kuhnheim frames this process of amplifying poetry’s social side as imposing limits on the forms of carefully reading a poem, this article seeks to emphasize a different point: recitation makes the rhythms of a poem perceptible, and those rhythms in turn allow for other forms of contemplation. By making poetry a social or collective act, Singerman alters the grounds for interpretation but does not eliminate them: carrying the poem inside you because of exposure to its performed rhythm is undoubtedly different than a close reading, but it does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of contemplation.

Singerman herself framed this process through the figure of imprisonment and liberation that, as mentioned above, appeared in the remarks that her character made in *Ceniza al viento* and in the poem that the character recited. In a well-known quotation that Kuhnheim also introduces to convey how Singerman’s popularizing attitudes could occasionally lead to polar-

izing results, the *declamadora* positions herself as a *libertadora* in her autobiography:

Sentí que la poesía encerrada en las cárceles del libro deseaba su libertad antigua, anhelaba expandirse por el mundo y posarse sobre los corazones, quería llegar a las muchedumbres y ser el clarín de batallas redentoras, porque desde el primer momento la poesía que sentí fue la de avanzada y a veces de tipo social. La poesía debía llegar a las grandes masas y a los adolescentes. Quería y debía ser yo la libertadora de la poesía. (*Mis dos vidas* 60)

Rather than risk having the voice locked away either in a cell or on a record, as it was in the Ibarbourou poem and in the Saslavsky film, here Singerman offers an account of poetry that emphasizes a rift in need of repair. Of course, that is not to say that poetry cannot exist in print; what Singerman contends is that speaking of both poetry and performance should once again be considered redundant. And it is by liberating the rhythms of a poem—by demonstrating for audiences that possibility of locating rhythms that may or may not coincide with those she performs—that Singerman signals her singularity and shapes her contribution to poetry as an unmistakably social form. Rhythm, after all, constitutes a relation not only among beats but also among people, and listening to rhythm, while not synonymous with producing it, does effectively mean participating in it.

Establishing and Explaining a Style

Although fond of affirming the importance of what she had achieved, Singerman was far less willing to explain what contributed to her distinctive style, which diverged from the pedagogy promoted in declamation schools like that of the Consejo de Mujeres that she attended yet soon outgrew. When recalling her subsequent spell teaching declamation, for instance, she remembers merely underscoring a simple dictate: “¡No imitar a nadie!” (“Berta Singerman: grabación sonora”) She nevertheless inspired a string of imitators who could only turn to performances rather than any programmatic text to understand her practice. Even in the archive dedicated to her work, there is no material elucidating her principles of the practice of declamation. And among the manuscripts and typescripts of poems sent to her by various poets, there are almost never any markings about how a piece should be performed. Those that do appear are often from the poet rather than from Singerman herself.

The exception to this absence of an *ars poetica* of her poetry performance is “Mi concepto individual sobre el arte de la palabra,” from 1929.⁶ Singerman closes out the first section of this sole manifesto about her form by suggesting that her corpus of poems essentially knows no limits:

Yo misma tengo representados en mis programas todas las épocas y estilos de la poesía. Desde una antiquísima canción hebrea, probablemente del siglo quinto antes de la era cristiana, desde trozos bíblicos, como el *Cantar de los Cantares*, *Salmos* de David, desde toda la poesía anónima (*Cancionero* y *Romancero* español desde el siglo XI), desde el Arcipreste de Hita, Marqués de Santillana, Lope de Vega, Góngora, hasta los más modernos: Pedro Salinas, García Lorca, Oliverio Girondo, Güiraldes, Carlos Pellicer, etc. Recito indistintamente prosa o verso: Rodó, Nietzsche, Andreief figuran con algunas de sus prosas en mis programas. (148)

By naming Girondo and Güiraldes, it would seem she took to heart the comments that had been made two years earlier by a writer in *Martín Fierro* and by Mário Andrade with regards to the absence of contemporary Argentine poets from her repertoire. Yet perhaps even more important is the fact that she stakes a claim on poetry from all periods and styles, and with the mention of prose one might reasonably wonder whether any work exists that does not lend itself to declamation. Indeed, it is by bringing up prose that Singerman brings to the attention of readers and possible imitators that declamation is a set of techniques that can be applied to a text in order to bring out its rhythms. That does not mean, however, that every text has such rhythms, which also explains the need for anthologies like those Singerman helped produce of pieces well suited to those same techniques.

The first facet of her work that Singerman explicitly addresses are misguided expectations about the naturalness expected of a performer. "El artista, al deshumanizarse, como lo exige Paul Valery, no debe disminuirse, sino super-humanizarse," she writes ("Mi concepto" 148). Only by avoiding excessive restraint, in other words, can the *declamadora* perform a range of emotions that will resonate with audiences, and it is almost certainly this same ability to express through what others might deem excess that Carpentier had identified as Singerman's sense of being "eminente plástico." That same plasticity or elasticity of naturalness extends to the following section on the voice as Singerman asks, "¿Cuál es la forma de vida más adecuada a la palabra? ¿Declamarla, decirla, cantarla, teatralizarla?" The emphatic yet perhaps evasive answer is that "Cada uno de esos aspectos por sí solo no basta. Cada uno de ellos por separado sería nada más que una prisión pobre y pequeña para la palabra. Es necesaria la fusión, la amalgama de todos ellos para arrancar a la palabra todos sus secretos" (148). The motif of Singerman as the *libertadora* of the imprisoned word appears once again as she refers to how she draws from various practices in order to convey what might not come through on the page. Even as she foregrounds her corpus, or body, when performing another corpus, or collection of poems, there is still yet another corpus, which would here be understood as the multiple techniques from which she draws. She then extends this logic when underscoring the im-

portance of soldering those various practices into a single, distinctive style:

Y es con la síntesis de todos esos elementos: música, color, plástica, elementos que he reducido a una sola expresión, armonizando sus distintas formas, que he constituido mi arte. De ahí que no declamo, que no recito, que no canto, y, sin embargo, podría hacer perfectamente cada cosa, por separado; podría ser actriz, podría ser cantante, podría ser una *diseus* simplemente, pero no sería...no sería yo. (149)

Singerman thus understands herself to perform a combination of influences and forms that leads to something *sui generis*. Yet even when acknowledging that diversity, it is still necessary to ground the performance in her body, for, as Singerman explains, it is absolutely vital to mobilize a physical response to a poem, no matter how many times she has performed it:

Hay que ... decir el poema sintiéndolo como el poeta cuando 'lo tiene aún en el pecho.' De ahí el silencio que hago antes de empezar a decir un poema. La saturación, el auto-hipnotismo, la preparación interior, la encarnación de la palabra y nervios y sangre y cuando lo siento palpitante en pecho, garganta y labios, es cuando empiezo a decirlo. Esa misma emoción hay que sentirla en el momento de enfrentarse, de descubrir por primera vez el poema cien o doscientas veces: hay que sentirlo siempre como por primera vez. (149)

Singerman must first feel the rhythm of the poem—she must recognize the many relationships that each word establishes with other elements of the poem—before she can begin reciting it. In fact, as she explains her approach to the poem, we can grasp how it is one that her audiences can experience as well, for in her performances Singerman models a way of interacting with poems—one that includes rhythm but it is by no means limited to it.

In a characterization of Singerman's work that echoes some of her self-description while also taking it in new directions, Álvaro Moreyra similarly identifies the role of those silences while expanding on their significance. "Berta não dizia versos, não declamava," he writes. "Com o seu silêncio, as suas atitudes, os seus gestos, com a voz luminosa, voz que a gente olhava, ela escrevia no ar as palavras, punha um pensamento mais prolongado em todas" (n.p.) What Moreyra explains here is a tie between the rhythms of recitation and the possibilities of contemplation: the reference to duration is not to the permanence of the words in writing but rather to the ways in which audiences interact with those words. Emphasizing rhythm, in other words, opens new possibilities for reflection, and in this way Singerman stages a different relationship between poetry and society.

On Poetry Performance and Society

Walter Benjamin famously affirmed in 1939 that “There has been no success on a mass scale in lyric poetry since Baudelaire” (156). Arguing that “only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers” (156), he proceeded to dissect that notion of experience by introducing the well-known distinction between *erlebnis* and *erfahrung*, where the former concerns “the nature of something lived through” while the latter refers to “the weight of an experience” (194). The latter therefore gives meaning to the former as *erfahrung* frames how we process *erlebnis*. At the end of the paragraph introducing that distinction, Benjamin, turning to the testimony of Baudelaire’s peers, recounts how the French poet regularly occasioned different forms of shock, an increasingly common and distinctively modern corporeal event that had a direct impact on the relationship between the two categories of experience. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a well-known photographer, Nadar remembers the poet’s jerky gait—which is to say an ambulatory rhythm—while “Claudel stresses the cutting quality he could give to his speech” and “Gautier speaks of the italicizing Baudelaire indulged in when reciting poetry” (162). Gautier’s actual characterization was that “[i]l mesurait ses phrases, n’employait que les termes les plus choisis, et disait certains mots d’une façon particulière, comme s’il eût voulu les souligner et leur donner une importance mystérieuse. Il avait dans la voix des italiques et des majuscules initiales” (5). The mention of both italics and capital letters signals a means of creating forms of emphasis necessary to create rhythm, and these recollections of rhythm recall the performances of Singerman, who employed techniques resembling those wielded by Baudelaire and who, by 1939, had certainly experienced success on a mass scale. Although she recited rather than composed lyric poetry, she still helped circulate that form among the masses, and her style of performance could help render *erlebnis* into *erfahrung* for many in the audiences that regularly assembled to hear her.

The reason to invoke Benjamin is not simply to point out how one might quickly complicate his claims by summoning the example of Singerman—which, again, is of course not a perfect parallel—but rather to consider how she reframes the relationship between poetry and society. That same relationship was also famously the subject of a radio address and subsequent essay by Benjamin’s friend Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” which does not address recitation but nevertheless helps situate some of Singerman’s distinctive contributions. The arguments of the essay are well known, with Adorno suggesting that although we might judge lyric poetry to be the furthest thing from the social, that supposed separation is ultimately the unmistakable mark of its social engagement: “The lyric work,” he contends, “is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism” (45). The question then becomes how we might perceive that expression, and Singerman was in fact instrumental in rendering audible another point Adorno

stresses, for she extensively recited work by the poet that he cites as an example:

the collective undercurrent in the lyric surfaces in the most diverse places: first merely as the ferment of individual expression and then perhaps also as an anticipation of a situation that transcends mere individuality in a positive way. If the translations can be trusted, García Lorca, whom Franco’s henchmen murdered and whom no totalitarian regime could have tolerated, was the bearer of a force of this kind. (46)

García Lorca bore the force that Singerman would later bear when performing material by the Spanish poet on numerous occasions, often even devoting one of the typical three acts of her performance to material by the Spanish poet. That force, as she explained when recalling the experience of watching him recite his own work, demanded aural apprehension: “Su poesía, diría yo, nació para ser dicha, es poesía hablada y no escrita, poesía para ser recitada” (*Mis dos vidas* 160). She could, in other words, circulate the collective undercurrent that Adorno identifies precisely by declaiming. Although declamation has no role in Adorno’s essay, it sits at the intersection of its two, intertwined topics and therefore constitutes a powerful means of addressing the question of ideology, which, according to Adorno, attempts to hide what great works of art seek to give voice to.

In his work on lyric poetry, Jonathan Culler turns to memorization and memorability to consider the unpredictability of poetry’s ideological effects. For Culler, it is when poems are regularly remembered “that they are most likely to tincture or fracture ideology, to structure our approach to the world, and thus to have a chance of bringing into play their critical edge, but they also run the risk that what readers will find most memorable is what neatly formulates an insight readers might already be inclined to espouse” (337). As a result, making a poem more suitable to memorability—including through declamation—could then participate in creating the possibility of it having some ideological effect. Singerman, for her part, not only gave memorable performances but also performed memorized pieces, thereby exhibiting the efficacy of memorizing a poem and making it into more than words on the page. Her performances thus gave poems a space where they could produce an ideological effect, but, as Culler argues, determining in advance what such an effect might be is difficult “since what the poem quite obviously declares may not be what is taken in, assimilated. And ideology may determine what is remembered, though the memorability of a poem at least gives it a chance of working in other ways and at other levels, especially for attentive and curious readers” (344). Memorability and assimilation can work in opposed directions, Culler suggests, but the important point is that a memorable poem has a chance of realizing something other than what ideology might dictate. Singerman’s performances, which not only insisted on singularity as she provided a personal interpretation of the poem

but also emphasized the collective as they attracted the attention of vast audiences, could often create conditions conducive to producing such unanticipated readings.

One of the clearest examples of such a process occurred with a poem rooted in rhythm. In Singerman's recollection, a poem she first performed on the radio soon followed her wherever she went:

En aquella temporada de Jabón Federal en radio Belgrano estrené un poema que hizo sensación: todo Buenos Aires y la república entera repetían los versos de 'Botas' de Rudyard Kipling que describen la marcha en la guerra, ese cansancio obsesionante del soldado. Fue tal el éxito del poema que cuando salía por la calle grupos de chicos marchaban detrás de mí gritando: "¡Botas, botas, botas!" Yo era la personificación de 'botas.' (*Mis dos vidas* 274)

Other sources indicate that it even became a site of parody, with other performers using this very poem to produce popular imitations of Singerman. But this poem about rhythm that quickly became so memorable as to be considered synonymous with Singerman also possessed an ideological power. The Argentine writer and theater director Kado Kostzer, in a piece reflecting on the experience of seeing Singerman perform later in her career, recalls an encounter with her version of Kipling's piece:

Aún retumban en mis oídos las estrofas de 'botas, botas, botas / arriba y abajo otra vez / no hay descanso en la guerra.' Una marcha militar que había hecho en mis infantiles oídos más efecto que los frecuentes dramas antibélicos de Hollywood. Rudyard Kipling no podía estar más orgulloso de que su alegato llegase en una voz tan privilegiada que había hecho de un poema un hit que todo el mundo tenía en la boca, ya sea seriamente o en parodias. (n.p.)

Singerman's performance could make those marching rhythms not only perceptible but memorable, and they reveal the unpredictability as Kostzer refers to both the anti-war effect of the poem as well as to the frequent parodies that emerged. Whether as force or as farce, then, a poem like Kipling's "Boots" could reveal the unpredictability that Culler identifies through the coincidence of rhythmic form and rhythmic content underscored by Singerman's declamation.

In order to name the relationship that might emerge between performer and public, Charles Bernstein contends that "*The poetry reading is a public tuning*" (6; italics original). This metaphor suggests fostering a sense of agreement by centering the idea of pitch, but we might also understand this process through rhythm and the interaction it affords. After all, rhythm is not only perceived by the body but produced within it, and a poetry reading is a space in which a corpus, or body, relates to yet another corpus, or collection,

which can here refer either to the public or to the collection of poems. While the primacy of the poet that Bernstein promotes as he pays little attention to other performers might explain his notion of matching a tone presumably set by that poet, focusing on rhythm creates an opening for those like Singerman who were not poets but who could nevertheless help poems resonate in spaces where they never had before.

Although Singerman recalled the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla once identifying her as a peer, the best parallel to her work as a declaimer might be found not in the conductor who tunes an orchestra nor in the composer who produces pieces but rather in the role of the arranger ("Mi concepto" 149). "An arrangement," as Alexandra Vazquez argues, "is not a simple transfer of an original song into a different instrumentation ... Rather, to arrange requires having a sense of all of the multiple ways in which instruments can be made to sound and made to carry the work that keeps it close to the original, and to also take it in unforeseen directions" (196). Singerman produces her arrangements by combining the instruments of voice and gesture to create performances that involve the entire body, and she could therefore produce the unforeseen direction that Vazquez emphasizes or the unpredictable interaction with a poem that Culler identifies. But, as Peter Szendy contends, we can also recognize arrangers as "[t]he ones who sign their names *inside* the work, and don't hesitate to set their name down next to the author's ... it seems to me what arrangers are signing is above all a listening. *Their* hearing of a work" (qtd. in Vazquez 196). Singerman did not produce paper versions of her arrangements, nor did she produce any scores that would allow other *declamadores* to repeat the basics of her recitals, but there is an unmistakable sense in which she signed her listening of a poem as she performed it—and, crucially, as she performed its rhythms. By inscribing her work in this way, by corporeally marking out how she heard the poem, she also indicated that still other arrangements were possible, which is to say that there were other ways to dwell within the poem. What she performed, in other words, was just one potential listening—one that relied on her own corpus, or body, and that also comprised another corpus, or collection.

Conclusion: *declamar and democratizar*

Informing Singerman's arrangements was a philosophy that understood declamation as part of a larger project to restore poetry's connection to a broad public. If being a *declamadora* meant also being a *libertadora*, it concerned freeing poetry from books as well as making it more readily available to all—twinning processes, to be sure, but each important in its own way. Of course, that did not prevent her from making a living from declaiming, but she did often offer open-air recitals and, whenever possible, had loudspeakers broadcast her performances outside the venue so that more people could access her work (McGee Deutsch 97). In doing so, at least in Singerman's reading, poetry was finally being returned to the people:

La poesía, mientras fue oral, fue del pueblo. Nació en el pueblo y fue para él durante mucho tiempo hasta que llegó el libro; entonces el pueblo pierde contacto con la poesía. Se apodera de ella una pequeña minoría, el cenáculo que la convierte en terreno santo y vedado. Fue por ende preciso devolver la poesía al pueblo, y ahí es donde se hace presente la necesidad del intérprete. Fue necesario sacar la poesía de los santuarios, de sus prisiones minoritarias, liberarla y difundirla entre las multitudes; en una palabra, democratizar la poesía. (*Mis dos vidas* 188)

Although Singerman might indulge in some self-serving exaggeration here as she once again refers to words imprisoned on the page, it is worth considering how her practice helps foster the process that Alain Badiou describes in the essay "Poetry and Communism." "Poets are communist for a primary reason, which is absolutely essential: their domain is language," writes Badiou, before elaborating on the responsibility that arises from that fact:

Now, language is what is given to all from birth as an absolutely common good. Poets are those who try to make a language say what it seems incapable of saying. ... And it is essential for poetry that these inventions, these creations, which are internal to language, have the same destiny as the mother tongue itself: for them to be given to all without exception. The poem is a gift of the poet to language. But this gift, like language, is destined to the common—that is, to the anonymous point where what matters is not one person in particular but all, in the singular. (94)

If we follow the logic of Badiou, who is not concerned here with either recitation or performance, we quickly note how Singerman easily constitutes an indispensable component of the circuit that takes poetry into the realm of the common. At the same time, Singerman also crucially serves as an example for the ways that others might realize a similar process, including and perhaps especially those who might not share her repertoire. Locating the rhythm of a poem and sharing it—and thereby making that rhythm something to be experienced as well as modified by others—is a crucial step in this process, particularly since perceiving rhythm can entail or at least invite participation in it as the body quickly learns to expect repetitions of beats and stresses.

Rather than employ the framing of the common, Singerman would instead repeatedly use the democratizing of poetry to characterize declaiming, which she recognized as an echo of Romain Rolland's call to democratize beauty. *Declamar*, as evidenced by her quotation above, is *democratizar*, for in performing the work Singerman corporealizes words on a page and thereby reveals that participation in poetry should never be restricted. As a "mensajera y

misionera de la poesía," Singerman conceived her task as "convertir la palabra de los poetas en sangre, carne, nervio y espíritu en mi ser y ofrecerla al corazón de los grandes públicos" (*Mis dos vidas* 313). In other words, she gave the poems an embodied presence precisely so that they could reach new bodies, who could, in turn, become new performers who would subsequently voice their own readings.

Singerman thus repeatedly centers and offers a compelling example of what Francine Masiello, in *El cuerpo de la voz* (2013), has described as the ways that a poem is experienced by the body as a whole. Considering poetry primarily as a textual genre, Masiello advocates attending to "el modo en que nuestro cuerpo en su totalidad es estimulado en su encuentro con el poema, en cómo la visión se enriquece con el sonido—con el ritmo, el tono, la prosodia—, e incluso, en cómo se crea un sentido de plasticidad de la materia, un sentido del tacto a partir de las obras que leemos" (9-10). Crucially, Singerman accomplishes what Masiello alludes to in two stages. In the first, which would be her initial reading, she is corporeally addressed by the poem, just as she explains in the *ars poetica* piece mentioned above where she describes needing to feel it physically before beginning to recite. In the second, she corporealizes the poem so that it might affect audiences in a similar way: they can be moved by the poem both figuratively and literally precisely because they have just witnessed someone else experience such an encounter with a poem.

Masiello builds on this work with the senses and tracks how discourses around them modulate as democratic conditions change in her most recent book, *The Senses of Democracy*. Her central claim is that "when the discourse on democracy is altered—when public participation is engaged or foreclosed, when the concepts of the 'people' are redefined, when we catch sight of nations in distress or hear repeated calls for war, when we feel the weight of modernity pressing upon the walls of tradition—then, indeed, we reframe the sensorium and the uses of human perception" (3). The senses can thus serve as a stage for tracing how democracy is defined, and Masiello does so across contexts ranging from the nineteenth century to the present. The scope of her concerns is also now much broader than poetry alone, but here, too, it is useful to consider where Masiello can help us understand what Singerman attempts to achieve.

Rather than call for a new role for the senses in different democratic contexts, Singerman's principal concern is poetry and its place in the republic of letters, which means that she seeks to change the discourses around the senses in order to make poetry more democratic. Excluding the senses, in her view, means proscribing forms of participation in poetry; foregrounding them instead works against prescriptions about what should qualify as interacting with a poem. It is for this reason that it becomes necessary to attend to the example of Carpentier, who was alert to the sensorial and rhythmic specificities of Singerman's performance and wholly aware of what it would require to capture them in another medium. In this sense, Carpentier was not only more skilled with sound technologies than

those like González Lanuza who criticized Singerman, but also more democratic. By attending to rhythm and thinking across media, Carpentier recognized poetry's ability to foster new forms of participation rather than foreclose them. As a result, one of the remarks in his letter to Singerman that refers to the technical aspects of sound

mixing could instead very well be reformulated as an enthusiastic response to the thoroughly pluralistic approach to poetry that she embodied: "¿Comprende usted ... la maravillosa riqueza que nos brinda este procedimiento?"

NOTES

¹The full title, which I only include here, was *Las mejores poesías para la declamación: Selección de las mejores poesías mundiales para declamar, a base de los programas de Berta Singerman, aumentada con otros numerosos y escogidos poemas*.

²Working with letters between Carpentier and his mother as well as an unpublished chronicle that the Cuban writer produced about cinema, Armando J. Raggi Rodríguez offers a careful overview of the some of the context behind the exchange.

³To render Carpentier's prose as readable as possible, I have corrected the orthographical errors typical of a typescript produced by a typewriter with no ability to produce diacritical marks.

⁴Carpentier makes extensive use of underlining in his letter, and it has been preserved in the quotations.

⁵The last part—from "sigan..." to the end of the sentence—is actually underlined twice, almost as if to produce a typographical form of the accent marks he had used to transcribe Singerman's recited verses.

⁶I cite from the version published in the September 14 issue of *Repertorio Americano*. That journal reprinted pieces from other publications, and Singerman's piece was no exception: a note at the beginning indicates it had previously appeared in *El Diario Ilustrado* in Santiago. (It would also later be published in the February 1930 issue of Havana's *Social*.) A version in Portuguese—"O meu conceito individual sobre a arte da palavra"—had appeared in the July 5, 1929 issue of Rio de Janeiro's *O Jornal*, and a piece from two weeks later in Rio's *A Manhã* suggests that Singerman wrote the piece for *O Jornal* (although presumably not in Portuguese). In the absence of information elucidating the exact chronology, I have elected to cite from the text as it appeared in *Repertorio Americano*.

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