

CLICK HERE IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR MONICA DELATORRE

MÓNICA DE LA TORRE'S *PUBLIC DOMAIN*

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"Sorry, but more than one, it is always necessary to be more than one in order to speak, several voices are necessary for that..." (Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom*)

Admit it. You Google yourself. What are you looking for? A mention on someone's blog? Some type of recognition that you exist beyond the confines of your office? What are you avoiding? Grading papers? Facing your fears? Whatever the mundane and existential reasons that lead us to search for our selves, our names are the vehicle. They are the extension of our bodies in the world, how others know us, our origins and on-going documentation. Yet, how many share our names? The young woman murdered by her husband in California? The track star? Their existence both disconcerts and intrigues us; they are nothing like us, yet we feel connected to them in some way.

The last poem in Mónica de la Torre's *Public Domain*, "Doubles," explores this very issue: the problem of expectations surrounding who we are; our connections and disconnections with others who might be like us. She achieves this by following the correspondence of an Argentine woman raised in Spain, Mercedes Correche, who searches on the internet for her mother, "Mónica de la Torre." Her mother, Correche explains, returned to Argentina from Spain when Mercedes was two and disappeared after being accused by the Argentine government of subversive activities. The series of email exchanges, all with the subject line "abandoned," are between Correche and various people named Mónica de la Torre, all who turn out not to be her mother—from a "transsexual top model" in Veracruz, México, whose English is, by her own estimation, "no good," to a high school cheerleader in the U.S. who gets bad grades in Spanish class. The email exchanges between Correche and these de la Torres become like split screens of miscommunication in an Almodóvar film.

While all the Mónica de la Torres have some relation to Spanish-speaking cultures, their overt demographic differences exemplify how a name might stand for certain false expectations of, or sense of unity amongst, those with the same designation. It reminds us of Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, in which she writes,

We saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting. Anybody saying how do you do to you and knowing your name may be upsetting but on the whole it is natural enough but to suddenly see your name is always upsetting. Of course it has happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often but always it does give me a little shock

of recognition and non-recognition. It is one of the things most worrying in the subject of identity (qtd. in Spahr, 36).

What Stein comes to realize, Juliana Spahr explains, is that “naming, the thing that she once thought defined a person, [is] flexible and variable” (37).

Similarly, what worries “Doubles,” is how the presumed identity of “Mónica de la Torre” shifts from one person to the other, yet each person with that common Spanish-sounding name is trapped by what others expect of them. “I am sick,” writes one of the de la Torres, “of receiving sales calls and junk mail in Spanish! If your last name is Hungarian does that mean that AT&T will send you Hungarian promotional material?” Another stateside de la Torre, revealing her own limited notions of Argentine culture shaped by American marketing, says to Mercedes, “I love dulce de leche Hagen Daas ice cream, isn’t it from the same place as you?” We ask, too, what is expected of a poet with a Spanish-sounding name like Mónica de la Torre? What do we expect of someone from the U.S. with that name, or from Latin America, or Spain? What assumptions do we make? How does marketing (of frozen desserts, of literature, of cultures) shape those assumptions?

Also important to note is that some of the characters Correche corresponds with are “Mónicas,” while others are “Monicas.” This small, yet acute, accent doesn’t just indicate a different set of vowel sounds or the trilled “rr” of Torre, it designates a cleave, a crack, separating them. Still, their desire and ability to communicate in both languages via the internet, to find common ground, also suggests a relationship that persists despite the fact that none of these women are Mercedes Correche’s genetic kin, despite their dissimilarities.

And, of course, one must consider how this internet-aided correspondence upsets or complicates further any notion of identity or group affiliation: any of these Mónica de la Torres can be impostors, presenting an altered or completely invented persona, posting photos of someone else, creating a background foreign to their own. Does that make their connection to each other and to Correche any less real or productive?

In the sense that she examines the construction of identity, we can call de la Torre, the author of *Public Domain*, an identity poet. Her identity poetry may not be what has been narrowly understood as such, but it nonetheless engages in explorations of the self within society, employing performative and experimental techniques—such as Conceptual, Oulipian and Dadaist procedures and appropriations—to break down or question, rather than re-affirm, existing notions of a certain identity or group filiation. In doing so, she questions authenticity, while still allowing for those multiple affinities that occur between and amongst groups of various origins.

De la Torre’s employment of collaged texts and procedural poetic forms, as a means to explore identity and the multi-vocal, multi-situational self, continues the work of her first book, *Talk Shows*. Two poems from this collection, “Bite Its Heart Until It Learns,” and “Poem in Spanish,” are centos that bring together lines from several canonical Latin American poets, which she then translates into English. These poems remind one of Jack Spicer’s *After Lorca*, in the way the poet establishes a dialogue with literary masters, but at the same time displaces their origins by cobbling their work with her own and by migrating them into English. We find in both books this bilingual mediation, the translator and poet working through each poem as if some original existed in another language; one hears these traces and fragments of Spanish or English continually pushing through the surface of the other. As she writes in “On Translation,” another poem in *Talk Shows*, the point isn’t to “search for meaning, but

to reenact a gesture, an intent." And this reenactment called translation—or poetry, or language—is endless, as she reveals in the poem's final lines. Here, the translator is taking a picture of the poet she translates, after an afternoon of listening to him recall his dreams (despite his "disillusionment with Freud"). He "greet[s] posterity with a devilish grin," but the camera, as the translator is well aware, has no film, and he is forced to repeat the pose several times. There is delight in this seemingly unproductive exchange, and, one could say, in all the games de la Torre revels in when she aims her camera at language.

It is no surprise, then, that *Public Domain* continues to explore the complex economic and social system within which language functions. Like notions of Latino-ness sold as dulce de leche ice cream, we are made aware of the circularity of identity and economy, of language and identity *as* an economy. In the anaphoric poem "\$6.82," which begins each line with "My economy," the speaker moves through a dense network in which she chooses her currency and is at the same time dependent upon an existing rate of exchange. Take for example the line, "My economy is language." It is this negotiation of language—as both newly-minted and well-worn currency, as volatile market controlled by external forces and dependable product—that humbly leads us to realize how difficult it is to master, to feel at ease with our investments.

De la Torre expands on this point, with a good dose of sharp humor, by creating a series of poems, grouped as "Imperfect Utterances," that exemplify "the difficult art of public speaking," particularly in the realm of the poetry reading. The first poem in this series, "Plosive Letter (To read into a microphone making all p's pop)," is an open letter to "Estimado Sr. Presidente," written in Spanish. This public address, aimed, we assume, at the President of the United States, condemns unfair immigration policies and public attitudes directed at undocumented workers in the U.S. As a kind of intervention on behalf of those workers, the poem, with its explosive and persistent p's, is both performance and protest. We can imagine the reader popping and cracking her p's (represented in bold in the text) at the microphone, thus amplifying the political and personal discomfort such issues cause when raised publically. Similarly, the use of Spanish, directed at a mainly English-speaking audience, denotes the indispensable nature of Spanish speakers within the U.S. economy, even as it upsets the hegemony of English. In turn, the audience's inability to fully grasp the message—or its annoyance at a less than polished delivery—may, therefore, lead to inaction or disregard. As such, De la Torre's score makes physical the explosive nature inherent in articulating these national and linguistic tensions.

Referencing Shusaku Arakawa, de la Torre also maps out the relationship between the public and private by making evident the blanks, erasures, and refusals that allow these two realms to co-exist, or even replace or transform, each other. Such is the case, certainly, with lyric poetry, which insists on the willingness of the poet to make public the private, but with a good dose of "blank"—call it white space, dashes, elliptical evasions, fragments. The reader, then, determines what is not being said "completely," by drawing meaning from what is being said. De la Torre's playful employment of blanks in the first poem of this collection, "Is to Travel Getting to or Being in a Destination," places at least partial responsibility of the poem—not just its interpretation, but its existence—on the reader. For each section of the poem, she begins with an anecdote regarding a recent trip out West, but frames these not as parts of the poem, but as documents or experiences that might lead to a poem. For several, the poem that is to come of this travel is left to the reader. For example, in the poem's third section, she writes, "I overheard a guy at the Grand Canyon Lodge say, 'I figured out this trip is all about erosion.' Who likes to overhear things? This poem is about overhearing:" The colon is then followed by a white expanse, taking two inches of the page. In that

expanse is not a poem, but a silence (an erosion) we fill in with our own “overhearing,” our translation of the blank. In other words, the poem, like all territorial expansions, could not be completed by just one person. That de la Torre insists on the reader’s involvement reminds us of Édouard Glissant’s ethical reminder: “This is not a passive participation. Passivity plays no part in Relation” (137).

De la Torre also uses blanks or erasures to comment on her own worries of what poetry should or can say. She does this by removing the vowels in a piece that begins, “wrry tht ths prjct hs nthing t d wth wht’s gng n n my lf,” and builds with a list of events, both personal and political, that the speaker fears are not being addressed in her work. In its ever-enlarging font, the poem worries itself breathless, unable to sing beautifully its existential or worldly concerns. All it does is spit out hard consonants, tiring the reader with its impermeable, yet growing, presence. She ends with the perfectly decipherable and vowel-filled: “If ‘war does not sing,’ it makes noise.”

Underneath the crackle of consistent consonant anxiety the poem unloads, is a larger worry, present and clear, which connects us all. In *Public Domain*, we are always at war—in Iraq, yes, but also in other realms, and with ourselves. Alluding to Adorno’s famous question of whether lyric poetry is possible after Auschwitz, de la Torre’s book enters a larger conceptual field that continues to ask this question, falling thus into the tradition, as Dale Smith points out, of “poets who desire to engage with issues of public relevance [by abandoning] the lyric in favor of satire, social documentation, modernist assemblage, and other strategies of poetic engagement.” And de la Torre seems to fret a lot about lyric poetry’s failures—to capture the complexities of identity, to really sing the self, to engage and collaborate with others, to be political, to articulate both the personal and the public—by instead appropriating (and sometimes pretending to appropriate) material from newspapers, websites, and other sources. In doing so, de la Torre appropriates public voices that in poems become easily confused with her own voice, or takes on different characters that seem very unlike her. Or, she performs many voices at once, sometimes overlapping and thus overtaking the singular poetic speaker we have come to expect. In doing so, *Public Domain* reconfigures identity and authorship, constructing a new kind of lyric subject, one that acknowledges the myriad relations ordinarily hidden under the guise of “identity,” one that coincides with the noise of war and public unrest.

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