

# Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in Anti-lynching Songs by Silvestre Revueltas and Carlos Chávez

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If Mexico was one of the world's first modern nation-states, it was also the first to shudder at the spectacle of an untimely death.

Claudio Lomnitz (2005)<sup>1</sup>

There is a Scottsboro in every country.

Diego Rivera (1933)<sup>2</sup>

In early June 2020, shortly after the May 26 protests in response to the murder of George Floyd, I was searching online for recordings of the music of Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas. To my surprise, I stumbled upon a moving video performance of his song “Canto de una muchacha negra”—a setting of Langston Hughes’s poem “Song for a Dark Girl” from *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)—which had been uploaded to Facebook by Dutch Mexican soprano Itzel Medecigo on June 1.<sup>3</sup> The video is simply produced. The viewer hears Medecigo’s studio recording over a montage of stark, sepia-toned photographs of giant, gnarled, and naked trees, probably found images, most of them shot from a middle distance. The importance of these images to the song’s text is clear: “Canto” portrays the aftermath of a lynching from the perspective

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1. Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 28.

2. Quoted in “Race Problem Universal, Says Famous Artist—Painter Tells New York Group That Every Country Has Its Scottsboro Case, Eastern Stirred by Speech of Diego Rivera in Harlem,” *Chicago Defender*, September 2, 1933.

3. Itzel Medecigo and Maxim Shamo, “Silvestre Revueltas—Canto de una muchacha negra (after ‘Song for a Dark Girl’ by Langston Hughes),” Facebook, June 1, 2020, <https://fb.watch/j4fvY6Ymyf/>. Reflections on my personal responses to listening throughout this article are guided by the work of Nina Sun Eidsheim, Peter Szendy, and others who advocate the transfer of some of the privilege of authorship from the composer to the listener. See, for example, Szendy, *Listen*, and Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*.

of the murdered man's lover. As I watched, I wondered: Is this what allyship in the cause of social justice sounds like? What does a musical work composed before the dawn of the US Civil Rights Movement solicit from present-day listeners?

Mexican composers Silvestre Revueltas and Carlos Chávez each wrote one song that execrates the lynching-murder of Black persons in the United States. For "Canto de una muchacha negra" (1938), Revueltas translated and set Hughes's poem, and in "North Carolina Blues" (1942), Chávez continued a pattern of composing vocal settings of texts by his friend the Mexican poet Xavier Villaurrutia, whose poem of the same title appears in his collection *Nostalgia de la muerte* (1938).<sup>4</sup> In addition to asking why two Mexican composers felt compelled to make artistic offerings to the US anti-lynching cause, this article examines a cultural instance in which these icons of Mexican concert music engaged the same political topic, each modeling a form of cross-cultural musical encounter that suited his social thought and professional career without exceeding the boundaries of his personal musical idiom.

In the process of airing fresh interpretations of the songs, I imply that the composers' divergent experiences in the United States—Chávez's proximity to establishment structures of power and Revueltas's intimacy with working-class struggle and race-based discrimination—informed their respective artistic interventions and translations of the social problems that surround lynching for a Mexican audience.<sup>5</sup> Noting that the struggle for social justice in the US context has been accompanied by calls within musicology to interrogate the white racial frame of its canonical repertoire,<sup>6</sup> this article also suggests how the songs might be seen as newly relevant. In them, Revueltas and Chávez pit a Mexican aesthetics of death against violent spectacle and social inequities to assert a universal dignity of life and to situate an antiracist position within the context of a broader international class struggle. Ultimately, I argue that, in these songs, Revueltas and Chávez each effected an artful indirection, a displaced deictic center from which to mediate their social thought regarding the role of racial capitalism in US empire as well as Mexico's own problems of penal excess and extrajudicial lynching. While criticizing Mexican lynching, the composers firmly position it as a problem belonging to a US social context. In addition

4. "North Carolina Blues" appears in this 1938 volume with a dedication to Langston Hughes. As in Chávez's song setting, the title of Villaurrutia's poem is in English though the text of the poem is in Spanish.

5. It would be unfair to view Revueltas as more committed to the cause of the working classes than Chávez. Chávez changed his political position later in life; Revueltas died in 1940, so it is unknowable whether he would have done the same. In the 1930s, they were arguably equally committed. They did, however, have different approaches, which I attempt to capture in the musical and poetic analysis that follows.

6. Impactful recent publications include Morrison, "Race, Blacksound"; Kajikawa, "Possessive Investment"; and Ewell, "Music Theory."

to lending nuance to the microhistory of Mexican allyship in the struggle for Black civil rights, this article also contributes to a growing body of literature that treats the interactions and mutual influence between Mexican and Black American artists and intellectuals in the early to mid-twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these songs' surface appearance as expressions of allyship, I argue that neither work was intended primarily for a US audience; rather, both carry a range of distinct meanings for audiences within and outside Mexico. Both songs also voice affiliations that affirm social structures otherwise neglected in more common theoretical traditions that contend with race and racism. Generally, that scholarship is typically marked by a divide between Marxist approaches, which insist that a focus on the material conditions of life and production are essential to explaining relations between race and class, and critical race scholars, who tend to challenge what they see in Marxism as a reductionist economism that fails to fully account for ideological disparities both between and within class formations.<sup>8</sup> In this article, I consider this divide in terms of the relationship in which individuals stand *as* individuals *to* society, and I reflect on music's potential to sound a revelatory or presentifying experience that, because of its noncognitive nature, assists in bridging the ideological gulf.<sup>9</sup> In that broader sense, the songs discussed in this article invite scholars to rethink the political theorization of difference in the Americas, specifically via W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the international color line, as resisting the simpler but more accepted paradigm of the Black/white binary.

After an analysis of anti-lynching songs by Revueltas and Chávez, I turn to a notion borrowed from art criticism, "aesthetic wit(h)nessing," which I use to bring historical listening into the transhistorical present. Described by artist and cultural theorist Bracha Ettinger and art historian Griselda Pollock as a collapsing of boundaries between the I and the other that enriches and extends the work of witnessing, aesthetic wit(h)nessing offers one way of understanding aesthetic expressions of allyship in a transhistorical mode. Their work reminds me that a researcher's position vis-à-vis her object of study always plays a role in the research process and

7. See, for example, Vaughn and Cohen, "Brown, Black, and Blues," and several essays in Cullen, *Nexus New York*.

8. See, for example, the collection of essays edited by Bakan and Dua, *Theorizing Anti-racism*, which includes a special focus on reconciling Marx's analysis of centralized power with approaches based in Foucault's work on discourse and power.

9. Following Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "presentifying" in this context refers to an experience in which musical gestures bypass the listener's ingrained habits of interpreting music intellectually. "[I]nstead of asking for a meaning, presentification pushes us in a different direction. The desire for presence makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects (rather than ask what those objects 'mean') if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds": Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 124.

in the specific meanings she constructs from historical documents. As a US citizen who self-identifies as white and a member of the middle-income tier who holds a terminal degree in my field, I acknowledge the privilege this position affords me. I also acknowledge the shortcomings inherent in a study produced by a white person who writes about anti-Black racism not having experienced it personally and whose cultural identity has never been the subject of appropriation or other forms of oppression. I seek in good faith in this study to contribute to an ethical practice of holding space together in wit(h)ness in light of past traumas and current conflicts while I attempt to avoid such pitfalls as paternalism and voyeuristic appropriation.

### On Political Meaning in Music

I have also spent the last decade working outside academia. During this time I have found myself in a leadership role at several art music presenting organizations, all of which have to consider how best to attend to challenging social justice programming without assigning crude political meaning that confines musical significance to specific cultural and historical locations. It is a difficult tension to manage. In attempting to make sense of our cultural moment and the varied political meanings assigned to music, I have drawn inspiration from the writings of philosopher Lydia Goehr. “Ideally,” writes Goehr, “[political] music’s function is to help bring about a better world, by presenting the world as it is and manifesting an alternative vision of the world.”<sup>10</sup> I find useful here Goehr’s exhortation to hear music not as either purely musical (transcendent) or purely political (ordinary) but rather as manifesting a “freedom within,” an approach that has the advantage of telling us “how music, or art more generally, can have value and meaning beyond its immediate context of production.” As one paradigmatic example, Goehr offers Hanns Eisler, whose work declared a “revolutionary music” of critical argument in which new forms could “negate one set of ideals and affirm another” when presented dialectically to represent the contradictions of society.<sup>11</sup> Eisler’s example affirmed for composers who wanted to dedicate their talents to furthering a just cause that “[i]t is by no means necessary to deal only with the representation of socially positive and worthwhile actions and attitudes; an educative effect can also be expected from the representation (in as grandiose a way as possible) of asocial actions and attitudes.”<sup>12</sup> The two songs by Chávez

10. Goehr, “Political Music,” 106.

11. *Ibid.*, 108, 100.

12. Bertold Brecht, quoted in Betz, *Hanns Eisler*, 95. One of Eisler’s better-known songs to exhibit this approach is his “Ballade vom Bruder Jim” (1930), to a text by Robert Gilbert (alias David Weber), which nestles blue notes among racist stereotypes pushed to the point

and Revueltas treated here echo Eisler's approach, albeit with strikingly different results and intellectual histories of their own.<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary interventions by Black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James posited that no American working-class movement could succeed in overturning the capitalist ruling class without the aid of the Black masses; that capitalism and slavery "were related systemically; that monopoly capitalism had extended rather than arrested that relationship; and that the forces implicated in the dissolution of capitalism could emerge from the contradictions of that relationship."<sup>14</sup> For Revueltas, too, race-based oppression was bound up with class exploitation as elucidated by Marxist social thought. Like many intellectuals in the mid-1930s, he was convinced that Communism was the only workable social model capable of creating a more just and humane society. In the composer's own words, the "only just social cause" was that of the "liberation of the proletariat and its culture. Any other artistic attitude is sterile."<sup>15</sup>

Revueltas's political commitments were forged during his teens and early twenties, when he attended high school in Austin, Texas (1917–18), and studied violin at Chicago Musical College and worked as a musician in Chicago's silent film theaters (1918–25), as well as in his later twenties, when he worked as a teacher and theater musician in San Antonio, Texas, and Mobile, Alabama (1926–28).<sup>16</sup> Chicago and Alabama, two of the largest US hubs of union and Communist activity at that time, were known cauldrons of class and race conflict.<sup>17</sup> As a theater musician in Chicago, Revueltas was a card-carrying member of the local

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of absurdity in order to assume an antiracist stance. "Ballade" presents its title character as a victim of racial segregation (in Harlem) and finally of a lynching-murder (after moving south and being accused of kissing a white woman). In this song, Eisler and Weber locate the problem of racism within a broader international struggle of class exploitation, depicting racism in the United States "in such a light that the German worker can identify it with class antagonism in his own country" (ibid., 89). After throwing Jim out of a streetcar in New York City in the first strophe, the white men blithely (and ironically) continue discussing "how they had built the city and also the beautiful railway," revealing them to be not only white but also members of the capitalist ruling class. The German workers for whom Eisler intended the song are thus encouraged not only to acknowledge the fact of racial capitalism but also to identify their own struggle in the trials of the titular Jim.

13. It is well known that Eisler moved to the United States in 1939; less well known is that he spent May through September of that year in Mexico City while awaiting his US visa, and that in the interim Revueltas secured a temporary position for his comrade teaching classes in orchestration and "modern harmony" at the National Conservatory.

14. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 313–14. See also Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, and James, *Black Jacobins*.

15. Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas*, 187: "una causa social justa; la única: la de la liberación proletaria y su cultura. Cualquier otra actitud del artista es estéril." Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

16. See Parker, "Revueltas in San Antonio"; Parker, "Revueltas: The Chicago Years"; Candelaria, "Silvestre Revueltas"; and Del Toro, "Silvestre Revueltas."

17. See Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, and Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

musicians' union, but not yet involved in Communist politics.<sup>18</sup> Only six months after his arrival in Chicago with his brother Fermín, race riots exploded among the city's heat-scorched residents. On Sunday, July 27, 1919, a Black seventeen-year-old named Eugene Williams crossed into white territory on the South Side and was targeted by a mob of men and boys who stoned him to death. The incident ignited a week of rioting, murders, and fires across Chicago; hundreds of men were injured and at least thirty-eight died. Officials reported that the violence was between whites and Blacks, but on Tuesday, July 30, a white mob attacked Mexicans José Blanco and Elizondo González, showing "how unfixed these categories of white and black really were in the lived experiences of Mexicans in Chicago in 1919."<sup>19</sup>

An awareness that Mexicans in the United States often formed an underclass alongside Black Americans left a deep impression on a young composer struggling to establish a professional life in a strange country.<sup>20</sup> Nearly a decade later, Revueltas was himself a victim of violence while living in San Antonio, though it is unclear whether the assault was racially motivated. In November 1928, he was accosted by an unknown assailant with a knife, an attack that left deep scars on his face and neck. Several days after he failed to appear at his teaching post at the San Antonio College of Music, police located him recovering in Santa Rosa hospital.<sup>21</sup>

The following January, Revueltas moved permanently to Mexico City, accepting a post teaching violin at the National Conservatory and as assistant director of the newly formed Orquesta Sinfónica de México. Mexico's intensifying suppression of union, socialist, and antifascist activity quickly steered him into the *frente único* (single front), an alliance founded by the Communist Party between radicals and socialists on the one hand and liberal Democrats and progressive trade union leadership on the other.<sup>22</sup>

18. Each of his three Chicago addresses, found in census and union records, are far from the neighborhoods where working-class immigrants congregated, such as the Greenbay district that housed most of the city's recent influx of Mexican immigrants. This fact is not in itself surprising: although he continually struggled for money, Revueltas was not a manual laborer. See Parker, "Revueltas: The Chicago Years."

19. Arredondo, "Navigating Ethno-racial Currents," 400.

20. Did Revueltas recognize the suppression of his own country's African heritage? In the construction of modern Mexico in its post-revolutionary years (1920–40), the elite establishment consistently marginalized the historic role of the country's citizens of African descent. Christina A. Sue writes that the official stance of Mexico's essential non-Blackness represented the erasure of Blackness from the national image, "both as a separate racial category and as a component of the mestizo population": Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race*, 16. She continues, "The fact that there has been no official measurement of the black population in Mexico since Independence reinforces these assumptions" even today (17).

21. See Parker, "Revueltas in San Antonio," 123.

22. These were the years of the Plutarco Elías Calles administration and the subsequent Maximato period that had the effect of extending Calles's influence into the first two years of Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency. The single front organization in Mexico was the Frente

In 1935, Revueltas found himself elected as secretary general of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR).<sup>23</sup> A trip to Spain in that capacity between June and November 1937, via New York and Paris, afforded him opportunities to support the antifascist cause.<sup>24</sup>

Several of the extant letters to his second wife Ángela Acevedo, however, paint a picture of an artist branded by an early familiarity with the hardship that life in the United States offered the working classes, and yet searching for ways to make his work resonate more broadly. As he wrote to her from New York City while awaiting his transatlantic crossing, “I ventured out alone to get to know the city a little. I feel an intense emotion. Painful feelings from my youth lost in this immense factory. Misery and money. Pain and struggle . . . the same disdainful opulence of those who have everything . . . the same dignity, the same noble grandeur of those who work and have nothing.”<sup>25</sup> The following day brought a somewhat lighter mood, which he shared with his wife: “New York is admirable and I begin to enjoy it little by little. . . . [Aaron] Copland is not here. It’s a setback. I would have liked to talk with him to arrange some concerts upon my return trip.”<sup>26</sup> The next day he met with Minna Lederman of the League of Composers to organize a chamber concert of his works. He reported another setback: the League would not begin planning its next season of concerts until September. “The League doesn’t offer the possibility—really, I think they are very mediocre [*puros pinchurrientos*]—of engaging a symphony orchestra,”

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Popular Mexicano (FPM), which supported the reforms of Cárdenas’s progressive government and attempted to institute a Marxist perspective in the post-revolutionary regime.

23. The LEAR was active from 1934 to 1938. Its mission was to contribute through artistic creation to a more just society under Marxist ideology. See Lear, *Picturing the Proletariat*.

24. On the reception of Revueltas’s concert activity in Spain and its political significance, see Hess, “Silvestre Revueltas.” Having examined the two revolutionary anthems Revueltas composed while in Spain (“México en España” and “Un canto de Guerra para los frentes leales”), Luis Velasco Pufleau notes that from the 1937 trip on, Revueltas’s experience in Spain was omnipresent in his artistic output: Velasco Pufleau, “Spanish Civil War,” 339.

25. Letter of June 21, 1937, in Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas*, 58: “Salí solo y a la aventura a conocer un poco de la ciudad. Siento una intensa emoción. Emoción dolorida de mi pequeñez perdida en esta fábrica inmensa. Miseria y dinero. Dolor y lucha . . . la misma desdenosa opulencia de los que lo tienen todo . . . la misma dignidad, la misma noble grandeza de los que trabajan y nada poseen.”

26. *Ibid.*, 59: “Nueva York es admirable y empieza a gustar poco a poco. . . . Copland no está aquí. Es un contratiempo. Yo hubiera querido hablar con él para arreglar unos conciertos para mi regreso.” Copland had published a glowing write-up on Revueltas as publicity for the premiere of Paul Strand’s film *Redes*: Aaron Copland, “Mexican Composer,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1937. Chávez was supposed to have been given the job of composing music for the film but it was offered to Revueltas instead; see Krippner, “Traces, Images and Fictions,” 379. Copland wrote to Chávez almost apologetically about the article: “I suppose you must have wondered how I happened to write that piece for the N.Y. Times on Silvestre. . . . I did it rather hastily—and was very surprised when [the Filmarte Theater’s publicity secretary] called to tell me she had sold it to the ‘Times.’ Apparently anything about Mexico is of interest now”: letter of May 18, 1937, in Copland, *Selected Correspondence*, 118.

he lamented to Ángela, “so my orchestral works won’t be played, at least by them.”<sup>27</sup> His pessimism regarding the substance of New York’s concert scene notwithstanding, by the end of the week a number of meetings with old friends and new acquaintances who knew his music for Paul Strand’s film *Redes* (released in the United States as *The Wave*) had renewed his hopes of gaining traction in that very scene.<sup>28</sup> Aboard the ocean liner *Britannic* on his way to Europe at last, he was ebullient: “It seems I have awakened a great interest [because of *Redes*]. . . . I must return to New York. . . . I think that once this trip [to Spain] is undertaken, which I consider fundamental for my future life, I must take advantage of all opportunities and make all efforts. Ah, money, money!”<sup>29</sup>

Revueltas arrived in Paris on July 11, later than the rest of the LEAR delegation because he and a few colleagues had spent extra time in New York waiting for a less expensive Atlantic crossing. As a result, he missed most of the Second International Writers’ Congress in Defense of Culture, which he had planned to attend. Paris still held one highlight for Revueltas, however: he saw Josephine Baker perform at the Folies Bergère, a visit that prompted a languorous reflection on both the desire and the aversion occasioned by his encounter with the commodified Black female body. As he shared with Ángela,

The legendary Josephine Baker still has a beautiful black body, and besides is a national monument like the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower. . . . In the hall, a woman sold naked women made of rubber who, when pressed with the fingers, make more or less conventional movements. I was tempted to buy one. It is enticing to carry a naked woman that fits into your pocket or your hand.

Luxury and meat.

At times the hall seems invaded by the dark, heavy sadness of desire. There is a kind of warm, fearful shyness in the gazes. The atmosphere becomes humid. The saliva becomes a river—deep and sweet—that floods, drowns. . . . There is a shudder of naked women’s breasts; an excited pain of erect nipples.

27. Letter of June 23, 1937, in Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas*, 60: “La Liga no cuenta con posibilidades—en realidad se me figura que son puros pinchurrientos—de ocupar una orquesta sinfónica, de manera que mis obras de orquesta no las podré tocar, cuando menos con ellos.”

28. See *ibid.*

29. Letter of June 29, 1937, in Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas*, 66: “Parece que he despertado un gran interés . . . es preciso que regrese a Nueva York. . . . Creo que una vez emprendido el viaje, que yo considero como fundamental para mi vida futura, es preciso aprovechar todas las oportunidades y hacer todos los esfuerzos. ¡Ah dinero, dinero!” Rather than viewing this declaration as a blunt contradiction of Revueltas’s professed antibourgeois stance, I read it as an example of a characteristic irony masking the all-too-human desire for a release from economic precarity, which is, after all, one of the primary aims of promoting a more equitable social order.



Hands and bodies become languid . . . they hurt. . . . There is a contained, longing, sweaty complaint; there is a hoarse, hallucinated martyrdom. . . . The trumpets are shouts and the drums blows. Josephine Baker's brown body, wise and elastic, melts fantastically like a statue of hot, thick water. The air has the fragrance and softness of a woman's breast. Hands are sought out in the shadows, bold, lost, blind . . . there is a sadness of trampled bed linens.<sup>30</sup>

In a single passage Revueltas analogizes Baker's body with a monumental edifice and explores the tensions between modernism and the sexualized, racialized body, especially the double movement of simultaneous rejection and desire. His description resonates with the work of several important scholars who have identified the same preoccupations vis-à-vis Baker's art. "Systemically overdetermined and mythically configured," writes Daphne Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent*, "the iconography of the black female body remains the central urtext of alienation in transatlantic culture,"<sup>31</sup> while Anne Anlin Cheng's *Second Skin* further probes the relationship between early modernism and the racialized objects of imperialist practice.<sup>32</sup> Revueltas's private musings exemplify these and similar modernist tropes: the surplus value of the black body in pain, and a notion of the erotic best expressed by Audre Lorde as "an assertion of the life force of women" and "creative energy empowered."<sup>33</sup>

Revueltas probably did not encounter Langston Hughes until September, despite sharing a traveling companion, Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, on different stretches of the trip from Paris to Spain. Unhappy in Paris and upset that he had missed what Guillén described to him as a stimulating conference, Revueltas left for Barcelona on July 15, narrowly missing Hughes's address at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin four days later in a talk entitled "Too Much of Race." In it, Hughes claimed he had come to the conference "most especially representing the Negro peoples of America,

30. Letter of October 15, 1937, in Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas*, 127: "La legendaria Josefina Baker tiene todavía un bello cuerpo negro, y además es un monumento nacional como el Louvre o la torre Eiffel. . . . En el hall, una mujer vendía mujeres desnudas de hule que con la presión de los dedos hacen movimientos más o menos convencionales. Estuve tentado de comprar una. Es atrayente llevar una mujer desnuda que quepa en el bolsillo y en la mano. [new paragraph] Lujó y carne. [new paragraph] Por momentos la sala parece invadida por la tristeza oscura y pesada del deseo. Hay una especie de timidez cálida y medrosa en las miradas. El ambiente se humedece. La saliva se ha vuelto un río—hondo y dulce—que inunda, ahoga. . . . Hay un estremecimiento de senos desnudos de mujer; un excitado dolor de pezones erectos. [new paragraph] Las manos y los cuerpos se hacen lánguidos . . . dulcén. . . . Hay una queja contenida, anhelante, sudorosa; hay un martirio ronco, alucinado. . . . Las trompetas son gritos y los tambores golpes. El cuerpo moreno de Josefina Baker, sabio y elástico, se deshace fantásticamente como una estatua de agua espesa y caliente. El aire tiene la suavidad perfumada y consistente de un seno de mujer. Las manos se buscan en las sombras, audaces, perdidas, ciegas . . . hay una tristeza de sábanas holladas."

31. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 7.

32. Cheng, *Second Skin*, 35.

33. Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 43.

and poor peoples of America.” Calling attention to the imbrication of race, class, and capitalism on an international scale, he described Blacks as

the most oppressed group in America. . . . Negroes do not have to be told what fascism is in action. We know. Its theories of Nordic supremacy and economic suppression have long been realities to us. . . . We Negroes of America are tired of a world divided superficially on the basis of blood and color, but in reality on the basis of poverty and power—the rich over the poor, no matter what their color . . . where forever we work for someone else and the profits are *not* ours . . . where, when we raise our voices against oppression, we are immediately jailed, intimidated, beaten, sometimes lynched.<sup>34</sup>

Hughes traveled from Paris to Barcelona between July 24 and 26 with Guillén, whom he had befriended on a trip to Cuba in 1930.<sup>35</sup> Hughes and Revueltas probably did not find themselves in the same city until September 2. In Madrid, Hughes stayed at the facility of the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals (La Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas para la Defensa de la Cultura), located in the home of an aristocrat who had left the city, and run by the poet Rafael Alberti and his wife María Teresa León, also acquaintances of Revueltas. Hughes spent much of the next three months inspecting battlefields and towns devastated by aerial bombardment and interviewing Black Americans serving in the International Brigades in order to file his firsthand accounts with the *Baltimore Afro-American* and other press outlets back home. Revueltas, meanwhile, busied himself preparing orchestral and chamber concerts of his works *Janitzio*, *Colorines*, *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca*, *El renacuajo paseador*, *Caminos*, and *Himno de los mexicanos combatientes en España*. At a concert of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Madrid cosponsored by the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals on September 19, Hughes and Revueltas finally met. Revueltas directed his *Caminos* and *Janitzio* in a program that also included poetry readings by Octavio Paz and Rafael Alberti.<sup>36</sup> As Hughes’s autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander* reveals, the poet got to know the composer sufficiently well to note his ironic sense of humor.<sup>37</sup>

34. Quoted in Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:344–45.

35. Hughes’s biographer maintains that his impact on Guillén in 1930 was immediate and profound: “Hughes had one crucial recommendation for Guillén—that he should make the rhythms of the Afro-Cuban *son*, the authentic music of the black masses, central to his poetry, as Hughes himself had done with blues and jazz. This idea startled Guillén”: *ibid.*, 1:179. Hughes published a detailed travelogue of their journey through Spain in his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, 311–82.

36. See Hess, “Silvestre Revueltas,” 285.

37. “Silvestre Revueltas conducted the Madrid Symphony Orchestra in a program of his works. I found the jovial Revueltas a likable man, very simple in manner . . . [and] like most Mexicans I’ve known, [he] had a keen sense of humor. He enjoyed the ironic anecdotes and wry jokes about the bombardments, the war, Franco, Mola and Queipo de Llano that continually went the rounds of Madrid”: Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 372–73.

On the return trip from Europe to Mexico, since Revueltas was not allowed into the port cities of Lisbon and Havana because his passport showed that he had visited Republican Spain, he requested from Mexican poet Carlos Pellicer a volume of his poetry to read aboard ship while the other passengers walked about the cities.<sup>38</sup> “Yes, I had one,” the poet later recalled. “It was a recently published copy of *Hora de junio*; I gave it to him, and a short time after our return he telephoned me to say that he had composed a work for chamber orchestra inspired by three sonnets from that book that had given him much pleasure.”<sup>39</sup> It is unclear whether Revueltas similarly received a copy of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* from either Hughes or Guillén, or if he located a copy upon his return. In either case, Revueltas completed his setting of Hughes’s poem “Song for a Dark Girl” as the song “Canto de una muchacha negra” on August 3, 1938.<sup>40</sup>

### A Lasting Power to Disturb: “Canto de una muchacha negra”

Revueltas’s artistic projects from 1936 until the end of his life in 1940 are all directly linked to his antifascist commitment. In several of these works, I also perceive the nascent articulation of an antiracist stance.<sup>41</sup> While this stance is often articulated by other composers through the use of rhetorical devices such as irony, as in Chávez’s “North Carolina Blues,” to be discussed shortly, irony is notably absent in “Canto de una muchacha negra,” which depicts the aftermath of a lynching-murder. Here, Revueltas’s translation is followed by Hughes’s original poem:

Allá lejos, en el sur  
 (Se me parte el corazón)  
 Colgaron a mi amante moreno  
 De una rama del camino.

38. This is according to the diary of his friend Sebastián Rossi; see Cortez, *Favor de no disparar*, 203. Pellicer had altered his passport so as not to attract attention to his having been to “Red Spain” (ibid., 202).

39. Pellicer, “Recordando al maestro”: “Sí lo tenía. Era un ejemplar de *Hora de junio*, de reciente publicación; se lo regalé y poco después de nuestro regreso me telefoneó un día para decirme que había compuesto una obra para pequeña orquesta inspirada en tres sonetos que mucho le gustaron de ese libro.”

40. This is the date on both the version published by Edward B. Marks Music Corporation in 1948 and the autograph at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Departamento Editorial, Facultad de Música, Biblioteca Digital Silvestre Revueltas, [http://datosabiertos.unam.mx/FaM:BDREV:MU\\_10\\_AUTOGRAFO](http://datosabiertos.unam.mx/FaM:BDREV:MU_10_AUTOGRAFO).

41. One might trace the intertwining of race, class, and capitalism in *Sensemayá*, *Caminando*, and “No sé por qué piensas tú,” all settings of poems by Guillén. A new intensity in Revueltas’s works from 1936 is found in *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca*, and it is a prominent feature of *Tres sonetos*, also from 1938. I wonder how Revueltas would have transformed “Canto” if he had later orchestrated it, as was his custom with many of his songs for voice and piano (such as *Caminando*).

Allá lejos, en el sur  
 (Cadaver balanceante)  
 Pregunté al blanco señor Jesús  
 De qué servía la oración.

Allá lejos, en el sur  
 (Se me parte el corazón)  
 El amor es una sombra desnuda  
 Suspensa en un árbol desnudo y retorcido.<sup>42</sup>

*Way down South in Dixie*  
*(Break the heart of me)*  
*They hung my black young lover*  
*To a crossroads tree.*

*Way down South in Dixie*  
*(Bruised body high in air)*  
*I asked the white Lord Jesus*  
*What was the use of prayer.*

*Way down South in Dixie*  
*(Break the heart of me)*  
*Love is a naked shadow*  
*On a gnarled and naked tree.<sup>43</sup>*

The composer had previously written music to accompany scenes of death and funerals in Paul Strand's film *Redes* (1935), and musicologist Roberto Kolb has pointed to three musical gestures employed in *Redes* that reject irony by representing death as the painful and unjust interruption of life.<sup>44</sup> In a broader artistic context, these gestures stand in stark contrast to imagery of a "laughing death" made famous in the works of Mexican artists José Guadalupe Posada and Diego Rivera.

All three musical gestures that Kolb identifies in *Redes* are also present in "Canto de una muchacha negra" (henceforth "Canto") in slightly altered form. The song is a dirge in which a doleful vocal line is grounded by an ostinato figure consisting of unrelenting sighing gestures and unresolved cascading dissonances in the piano accompaniment (see example 1).<sup>45</sup>

42. Revueltas, *Canto de una muchacha negra*.

43. Hughes, *Fine Clothes*, 75.

44. According to Kolb, *Redes* offered a critical vision of Mexico informed by a leftist spirit at odds with the country's commercial cinema: Kolb-Neuhaus, "Four Ways of Describing Death" and "Silvestre Revueltas's *Redes*." The passing of two of Revueltas's young daughters in 1934 and 1936 gave him an unfortunate familiarity with the sorrow of loved ones left to mourn an untimely death.

45. Examples 1 and 2 are transcribed from Revueltas, *Canto de una muchacha negra*. The overall tone of "Canto" resonates with Spanish conductor-composer Pedro Sanjuan's assessment of *Homenaje a Federico García Lorca*, which he called "a veritable mourning:

## Example 1 Silvestre Revueltas, “Canto de una muchacha negra,” mm. 1–7

Quasi recitando

Voice

Quasi recitando

Piano

A - llá le - jos, en el sur\_\_\_\_\_

5

(Se me par - te el co - ra - zón)

The *sf* sonority in the piano that opens “Canto” creates an effect of being jolted awake. Its relentless repetitions as an ostinato grate on the ear, which I consider a sonic signature of the cinematic Revueltas. This opening sonority initiates a weeping or *pianto* gesture starting with an E $\flat$  octave in the right hand over a major sixth (D $\sharp_4$  and B $\sharp_4$ ) in the left hand. On beat 2, the A $\sharp_4$  in the left hand creates two sonorities: a minor second against the B $\flat$  and a tritone with the E $\flat$ s in the right hand. The D $\sharp_4$  is held over, so the minor second it forms with E $\flat$  is still present. One expects some sort of resolution on beat 3, since the right hand makes a resolving gesture by falling a half step, but the A $\sharp_4$  instead reinforces the tritone with E $\flat$ .

The resulting constellation of dissonances—the final two beats of each measure include a tritone, a major second, and a minor second—repeats throughout the work. When considered alongside the melodic rendering of

pain, acidity, lyricism of bitter exaltation, a sour lyricism, red-tinted . . . which sings the monstrous in its most atrocious form”: quoted in Velasco Puffeau, “Spanish Civil War,” 332 (“Verdadero duelo: dolor, acritude, lirismo de exaltación amarga, lirismo acibarado, de tinte rojo . . . que canta lo monstruoso en su forma más atroz”; my translation).

the text, the tonal instability registers either as hopelessness or, potentially, as arousing disgust—that “ugly feeling par excellence,” to quote Sianne Ngai, which is often instrumentalized for political purposes (usually by the political right but occasionally, as in this example, by the left). Disgust for Ngai represents the object “as if it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might.” Disgust both includes and attacks the opposition between itself and desire by “strengthen[ing] and polic[ing]” the boundary between subject and object and in doing so “destroys not only ‘aesthetical satisfaction’ but the disinterestedness on which it depends.”<sup>46</sup>

Revueltas connects this feeling of disgust to the lynched man, with the weeping gesture in the accompaniment achieving dynamic intensity in measure 7 in response to the word “corazón” (heart). The reiteration of the gesture in the song’s closing measures, alone after the vocal line has ended with a fermata on a rest, leaves an impression of a slowing, final heartbeat bringing the moment of death to the listener’s temporal present (see example 2, mm. 29–30). The vocal line of “Canto” is recitation-like throughout, as in many blues songs in which the melody consists of a reciting tone and the neighbor tones and thirds that surround it.<sup>47</sup> Kolb labels a figure of this kind in Revueltas’s score for *Redes* a “static ‘death’ motif.”<sup>48</sup> The figure rises and then falls back to its starting pitch, hinting at non-movement and nondirectionality, which Kolb also designates a metaphor of birth and death (see example 3).<sup>49</sup> A figure in measures 5–6 of “Canto” has the same contour, but in this context the upper pitch of the minor third (G♭) has the effect of a blue note (see example 1).<sup>50</sup>

Revueltas’s use of a heartbeat gesture creates an intimacy involving our presence with and attention to this *faced* person, who is not portrayed as an already dead *thing* that is no longer human.<sup>51</sup> A striking feature of Hughes’s poem is that it conveys the standpoint of a narrator (subject) who is a young Black woman. One may initially interpret the title “Song for a Dark Girl” as “song written for a dark girl,” but it ultimately becomes clear that this is a “song *of* a dark girl.” Revueltas grasped the distinction, translating the title as “Canto *de* . . .,” not “Canto *para* . . .” The narrator’s subjectivity is not insignificant. I read the poem as Hughes’s attempt to articulate a Black women’s standpoint *avant la lettre*. In the process of

46. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 334–35.

47. See Bessie Smith’s “Blue Spirit Blues,” for example, or even Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit.”

48. Kolb-Neuhaus, “Four Ways of Describing Death,” 196.

49. *Ibid.* The reduction presented in example 3 is reproduced from this same source, with permission.

50. A similarly nondirectional motive can be found in the famous tuba line of the opening section of *Sensemayá*.

51. For Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of face, see page 496 below.

## Example 2 Silvestre Revueltas, “Canto de una muchacha negra,” mm. 25–30

25 **Più lento** *ff* *più lento ancora*

Voice

El a - mor es u - na som - bra des - nu - da Sus -

Piano

*ff* *ff*

27 *più lento sempre*

- pen - sa en un ár - bol des - nu - do y re - tor - ci - do.

*mf* *sf*

her mourning, the narrator boldly interrogates her faith: “Pregunté al blanco señor Jesús / De qué servía la oración” (I asked the white Lord Jesus / What was the use of prayer); and in that single query posed in the face of brutality, one hears the incipient decolonizing of her own consciousness. Revueltas raises the register and intensity on the word “Pregunté” (I asked) to underscore the question’s defiance.<sup>52</sup>

The beginning of the voice’s final phrase, “El amor es una sombra desnuda” (Love is a naked shadow), matches the higher register and intensity of this question (most of the rest of the vocal part is considerably lower in pitch), and to highlight this dramatic climax Revueltas employs a musical “cross” symbol borrowed from “Crux fidelis,” the Gregorian hymn

52. Revueltas dedicated “Canto de una muchacha negra” to Sonia Verbitzky, a Polish immigrant who was a voice professor and a colleague of Revueltas at Mexico’s National Conservatory. Verbitzky made her career as a lieder singer touring European capitals between 1924 and 1930; she subsequently became known as a performer of modern Mexican vocal music. More importantly, though, Verbitzky participated with Revueltas in political meetings sponsored by the LEAR. I suspect Revueltas may have composed this song for one of these meetings, but I have not been able to confirm that it was ever performed at one.

Example 3 Silvestre Revueltas, score for the film *Redes*, mm. 90–94, orchestral reduction

for Good Friday. During the nineteenth century, this musical figure had been used to symbolize Christ's suffering on the Cross by Liszt in his symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht* and by Wagner for the "Grail" motive in *Parsifal*.<sup>53</sup> In that repertoire, it normally appears as a major second followed by a minor third, but in "Canto" Revueltas forms a motive (B–C–E $\flat$ ) in which the minor second provides a blue-note inflection (see example 2, m. 25). One might hear this as a musical representation of a favorite trope of Harlem Renaissance writers: the Black Christ. Literary references to the Black Christ were well established by the time Hughes published his poem "Christ in Alabama" in response to the trials of the Scottsboro Nine in 1931.<sup>54</sup>

By means of these various musical gestures, Revueltas resists depicting the lynching as a swinging-body spectacle and instead frames it as a provocative static photograph of the still, naked corpse—the kind snapped by workers of the "lynching industry" (as Du Bois called them in the pages of *The Crisis*) and sold to members of the erstwhile mob as a souvenir.<sup>55</sup> The sonic experience Revueltas creates here is analogous to viewing one of those ghostly images, which have a temporality all their own. Surfacing from the (often distant) past, they arouse in the viewer the face-slapping,

53. Liszt's use of the "Cruz fidelis" motive and Wagner's appropriation of it are described in Cook, "Liszt's Second Thoughts." See also Merrick, *Revolution and Religion*.

54. Such references may be found in works including W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Prayers of God" (1920), Claude McKay's "The Lynching" (1920), Countee Cullen's "Christ Crucified" (1922) and "The Black Christ" (1929), Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), and Georgia Douglass Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925). I discuss some implications of the use of cross motives further below. At this point, it is important to note that the cross symbol is presented with a specifically African American inflection.

55. Du Bois, "Lynching Industry," 9.



heart-pounding immediacy of a something-to-be-done, the stillness giving way to an impulse for movement, whether recoiling from the scene in horror or drawing near it in compassion. The still figure in both image and sound brings to (after)life not only the specter of a dead person but a social figuration, tangible and tactile, “that a social or collective body has been unable to resolve or put to rest,” one that conjures “recalcitrant memories and buried histories.”<sup>56</sup> The memory of disfigured Black bodies “swinging in the southern breeze” is often repressed but repeatedly “erupt[s] uncontrollably, like a nightmare causing profound ontological agony and excruciating, psychic pain,”<sup>57</sup> a figuration that Jacques Derrida referred to as “hauntological.”<sup>58</sup> Responding to Derrida, sociologist Avery Gordon suggests that the hauntological is “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known . . . especially when they are supposedly over and done with . . . or when their oppressive nature is continuously denied.”<sup>59</sup>

One may rightly ask, then, what meaning lynching and the questioning of faith implicit in “Canto” had for the contemporary Mexican audience for whom the song was intended. Mexico had its own problem of extrajudicial lynching that reached its zenith in 1938, in a period known as the *Segunda Cristiada*. As a response to the violent conflict between church and state that characterized the Cristero War (1926–29), the Cárdenas administration had embarked in 1934 on an ambitious national program of socialist education, a defanaticization campaign that cast “the teacher in the role of priest, the law in the role of God, science in the role of religion, and work in the role of the religious cult, while Catholicism now stood in the role of idolatry and superstition.”<sup>60</sup> In response, mobs of conservatives and Catholic reactionaries, who felt that not only their spiritual but their communal way of life was being threatened, would come to hang, mutilate, and torture approximately one hundred federal socialist teachers between 1934 and 1938.<sup>61</sup> Attacks on teachers were accompanied by a similar rise in attacks on Protestants. Assaults were most prominent in the central and southern Mexican states of Puebla, Michoacán, Jalisco, Querétaro, Veracruz, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Morelos, and Chiapas. Revueltas’s translation of Hughes’s poem discards the reference to “Dixie,” offering the possibility of an alternative locus (Mexico City?) from which to issue the song’s deictic gesture: “Allá lejos,

56. Krondorfer, *Unsettling Empathy*, 140.

57. Cone, “Strange Fruit,” 8.

58. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

59. Gordon, “Some Thoughts,” 2.

60. Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 398. Gema Kloppe-Santamaría notes that the liberal elites who conceived and promoted this campaign were themselves religious men who believed in an enlightened form of religion free of fanaticism and corporate prerogatives: Kloppe-Santamaría, “Lynching of the Impious,” 108.

61. See Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence*.

en el sur” (Far away, in the south). His translation of the line “my black young lover” as “mi amante moreno” may also have been intended to widen the racial and political contexts for the piece, in that in Mexico “moreno” means “darker-skinned” as opposed to “negro” (black), which would more clearly communicate African heritage. This displacement effects a reversal of proximity and distance, making the suffering of Black Americans at a distance proximate, and making what is proximate (that is, the lynchings of socialist teachers and Protestants) appear remote enough to facilitate a fair assessment.

### Not without Laughter: “North Carolina Blues”

Unlike that of Revueltas, Chávez’s understanding and application of Marxist social thought manifests a detached, intellectual approach to class struggle. His role as a composer was, in his own words, that of a “curious spectator in the concrete play of reality.”<sup>62</sup> From 1934, Chávez concerned himself, like some of his US colleagues, with applying Marxist social theory to the role of the composer, and he published a series of articles in the Mexico City newspaper *El universal* that were intended to prepare his audience for the performance of *Llamadas*, his proletarian symphony for workers’ chorus and orchestra.<sup>63</sup> His detached approach to addressing social issues in his music also informed the concept of death that he employed in his song “North Carolina Blues.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1939, having recently embarked on a period of intense focus on composing vocal music, Chávez wrote to his friend the poet Xavier Villaurrutia, “Here are the poems. The musical accents fall on the syllables marked by the diagonal lines. In this way, I believe the translation may be facilitated.”<sup>65</sup>

62. Chávez, *Musical Thought*, 18. This is not to suggest, however, that Chávez was indifferent to the antifascist cause. At least one of his works was performed in a concert of the Congress of Mexican Writers, Artists, and Intellectuals (Congreso de Escritores, Artistas e Intelectuales Mexicanos) held by the LEAR in Guadalajara in January–February 1937 as a prelude to the LEAR’s solidarity trip to Spain; see Revueltas, “Nicolás Guillén y la LEAR.”

63. See Saavedra, “American Composer,” 29.

64. We might also hear this approach as Chávez “refusing to cooperate with grief”: Gordon, “Something More Powerful,” 204.

65. Letter of December 23, 1939, Fondo Carlos Chávez, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City: “Aquí están los poemas. Los acentos musicales caen en las sílabas siguientes a las rayas transversales. De este modo creo que la traducción se podrá facilitar.” I am grateful to Oswaldo Mejía for helping me locate items in the Chávez-Villaurrutia correspondence. Chávez’s focus on vocal music during this period includes the following works: *Tres poemas para voz y piano* (1938, texts by Pellicer, Novo, and Villaurrutia), *Cuatro nocturnos* (1939, for soprano, contralto, and orchestra, texts by Villaurrutia), *La casada infiel* (1941,

In a recent essay that probes the composer's relationships with the poets of his generation, Susana González Aktories posits that Chávez is referring here to Villaurrutia's poem "North Carolina Blues," which the poet dedicated to Langston Hughes.<sup>66</sup> If true, it implies that he initially intended to set a translated version of the poem, presumably in English, but ultimately discarded that possibility.<sup>67</sup> In the following analysis, however, I suggest that his decision to retain the original Spanish text implies an interpretation that underscores the song's relevance for a Mexican audience, given that Chávez composed most of "North Carolina Blues" a few years later.

The text of Villaurrutia's poem appears in slightly altered form in the song, as reproduced below. Whereas Villaurrutia's poem has the simple refrain "En North Carolina," Chavez repeats the full first stanza after the second, and brings back abbreviated versions of this first stanza after each successive one:

En North Carolina	A
El aire nocturno	
Es de piel humana.	
Cuando lo acaricio	
Me deja, de pronto,	
En los dedos,	
El sudor de una gota de agua.	

Meciendo el tronco vertical,	B
Desde las plantas de los pies	
Hasta las palmas de las manos	
El hombre es árbol otra vez.	

En North Carolina	A
El aire nocturno	
Es de piel humana.	
Cuando lo acaricio	
Me deja, de pronto,	
En los dedos,	
El sudor de una gota de agua.	

---

text by García Lorca), *Arbolucu, te sequeste* (1941, for SATB chorus, text collected by Kurt Schindler), and "North Carolina Blues" (1942, a year in which Chávez also began setting English texts in preparation for writing an opera in English, a project that eventually became *The Visitors*).

66. González Aktories, "Literary Affinities," 272.

67. A possible alternative interpretation, based on the reference to "musical accents," is that Chávez enclosed not poems by Villaurrutia but a copy of his own *Tres poemas para voz y piano* of 1938, which were published in a bilingual edition by G. Schirmer in 1942 with English translations by Willis Wager.

Si el negro ríe Enseña granadas encías Y frutas nevadas. Más si el negro calla Su boca es una roja entraña.	C
En North Carolina El aire nocturno.	A'
Como decir Que la cara de un negro se ensombrece?	D
	A' (piano)
Habla un negro: —Nadie me entendería Si dijera que hay sombras blancas En pleno día. En diversas salas de espera Aguardan la misma muerte Los pasajeros de color Y los blancos, de primera.	E
El aire nocturno Es de piel humana.	A''
Nocturnos hoteles: Llegan parejas invisibles, Las escaleras suben solas, Fluyen los corredores, Retroceden las puertas, Cierran los ojos las ventanas. Una mano sin cuerpo Escribe y borra negros Nombres en la pizarra.	F
Confundidos Cuerpos y labios, Yo no me atrevería A decir en la sombra: Esta boca es la mía. <sup>68</sup>	A'''

68. Wilson, *Art Song in Latin America*, 95–105.

*In North Carolina  
The night air  
Is of human skin.  
When I caress it  
It suddenly leaves,  
On my fingers,  
A drop of perspiration.*

*Shaking his vertical torso,  
From the soles of his feet  
To the palms of his hands  
The man is tree again.*

*In North Carolina  
The night air  
Is of human skin.  
When I caress it  
It suddenly leaves,  
On my fingers,  
A drop of perspiration.*

*If the Black man laughs  
He shows gums of pomegranate  
And snow-covered fruits.  
But if the Black man is silent  
His mouth is a red entrail.*

*In North Carolina  
The night air.*

*How do you say  
That the face of a Black man darkens?*

*A Black man speaks:  
No one would understand me  
If I said there were white shadows  
In plain day.  
In different waiting rooms  
They await the same death,  
The passengers of color  
And the first-class whites.*

*The night air  
Is of human skin.*

*Night-time hotels:  
Invisible couples arrive,  
Climbing the steps alone,  
The corridors oozing,  
The doors receding,  
The windows closing their eyes.  
A bodyless hand  
Writes and erases black  
Names on the chalkboard.*

*Confused  
Bodies and lips,  
I wouldn't dare  
Say in the shadows:  
This mouth is mine.*

Villaurrutia was an admirer of Hughes and a translator of his poetry into Spanish.<sup>69</sup> In his original poem, the repeated *estribillo* (refrain) “En North Carolina” vaguely recalls the spiritual-inspired repetitions in Hughes’s poems “Fire” and “Moan.” The poem does not, however, exhibit the fine-tuned blues- or *son*-inflected rhythmic sense shared by Hughes and Guillén; it is a poem in a markedly surrealist style, consistent with the rest of Villaurrutia’s oeuvre. Villaurrutia nevertheless incorporated several of Hughes’s most powerful poetic themes into this work, such as the centrality of laughter to the Black American experience as a method of enduring adversity, an approach to writing about hardship that resonated strongly in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Surrealism formed one of the primary avenues beyond Marxism that led many non-Black intellectuals to cast their lot with the Black radical tradition.<sup>70</sup> In 1932, for example, a manifesto published by a group of French surrealists led by André Breton called for the overthrow of bourgeois culture and identified with anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia. “For centuries the soldiers, priests and civil agents of imperialism, in a welter of looting, outrage and wholesale murder, have with impunity grown fat off the colored races,” it began. Denouncing the “punitive expeditions, Blacks lynched in America, the white scourge devastating town and country,” the authors moved on to decry the “agents of imperialist thought, in league with opium and literature, [who] have swamped us

69. Xavier Villaurrutia established himself as an active member of Mexico City’s modern literary circles when still a young man, publishing his first poems in 1919 at age sixteen. His first collection of poetry, *Reflejos*, was published in 1926, the same year as Hughes’s first collection, *The Weary Blues*. In 1928, he cofounded the Mexican literary magazine *Contemporáneos*.

70. Robin D. G. Kelley discusses this affinity in his foreword to the reprint of Cedric L. Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, xxi.

with their irretentions of nostalgia; the function of all these idyllic alarms among the dead and gone being to distract our thoughts from . . . the abominations of the present.”<sup>71</sup> Thus did surrealist artists attempt to evade the frustration of their efforts to reconcile the dimensions of experience and perception, in the process “break[ing] loose . . . from the principle of world-representation that had accompanied the rise of modernity.”<sup>72</sup> “North Carolina Blues” can be said to denote Villaurrutia’s and Chávez’s intellectual sympathy not just with the plight of Black Americans in the US South but also with anticolonial movements worldwide, as Chávez would assert a few decades later: “Mexico was in fact a country of slaves,” he wrote. “The War of Independence . . . was not only a revolution for political independence from the crown of Spain, but also a revolution against the prevailing social injustices.”<sup>73</sup>

Using local experience as a method of broaching the universal was a compositional conceit in his work, and in “North Carolina Blues” Chávez depicts a grotesque spectacle of racism in the southern United States to point to related problems in other democratic societies. The date on the autograph score, December 1942, places the completion of “North Carolina Blues” at the culmination of a months-long heated debate in the Mexican Congress about reinstating the death penalty. I offer a brief examination of the episode here to suggest how Chávez’s setting of “North Carolina Blues,” a song unmistakably about lynching in the United States, might also have been understood as connecting Mexican debates over criminal justice reform and Mexico’s own problem of lynching with international movements toward social and racial justice.

Progressive legislators who struck the death penalty from Mexico’s penal code of 1929 received international acclaim for their efforts. To overcome the retributive killings of the Porfirio Díaz regime and the horrors of revolutionary violence, the state apparatus moved toward the redemption and social rehabilitation of convicted criminals. Arguments for the necessity of retributive justice resurfaced, however, after newspapers publicized horrifying details of the murders perpetrated by Mexico’s most notorious serial killer, Gregorio Cárdenas Hernández, also known as the “strangler of Tacuba,” in August and September 1942. In this morbid episode, Cárdenas strangled four young women and buried them in the garden behind his suburban bungalow. The sophistication of the criminal, a twenty-seven-year-old chemistry student, and the erotic dimensions of the crime—prosecutors cited both his confessed necrophilic acts and his

71. Surrealist Group of France, “Murderous Humanitarianism,” 67, 69. Breton played a key role in “discovering” the work of the engraver José Guadalupe Posada and in enshrining him as the key precursor of Mexican modern art; see Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 48.

72. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 45.

73. Chávez, *Musical Thought*, 95.

extreme misogyny—fed a national obsession with crime stories for several months.

The trial constituted a public spectacle that allowed the crime pages of the newspapers and progressive penal reformers to construct competing visions of criminal justice.<sup>74</sup> As the newspapers stirred up public sentiment calling for the reinstatement of capital punishment, liberal members of Mexico's congressional Cámara de Diputados found it necessary to remind their colleagues of the immediate circumstances in relation to which the death penalty was being invoked and why it had been banned in the first place. As Representative Martín Torres argued,

at present the question is being considered only on the basis of the situation that has been caused, of the unrest that has developed in connection with the recent crime committed by Gregorio Cárdenas. . . . After the Constitution of [18]57, it was Porfirio Díaz who called for the death penalty to be reinstated without any restriction; but all the men who took part in the Revolution know perfectly well why the death penalty was reinstated.<sup>75</sup>

Several congressmen based their arguments for redemptive justice on statistics, asserting that the death penalty in other countries, including the United States, was simply ineffective and lacked the force of intimidation on the basis of which its ability to suppress crime was postulated. Representative Félix Díaz Escobar went so far as to suggest that the death penalty often had the opposite effect on some of his needier countrymen:

The disdain for life, generalized as it is among a great number of citizens, and precisely among those with the greatest propensity to commit crimes as a consequence of the circumstances and environment in which they have developed . . . strips the death penalty of almost all its power of intimidation because, among us, I repeat, death is not feared. And if this death comes, not unexpected and obscure at any crossroads or tavern; [if] it arrives instead surrounded by *all the spectacular apparatus that gives its execution as a punishment the character of a popular festival*, then it would be very desirable for many subjects whose death would make them believe they appear as glorious heroes, before the thousands of onlookers who would see them die “like men,” and thus the criminal “punished” by the law would march to

74. The impact of Cárdenas Hernández's crimes and resulting trial on the public's imagination is hard to overstate. Within days of their revelation, radio station XEW in Mexico City had produced a radio drama that reenacted the murders' grisly details. For a thorough examination of how the crime pages of the newspapers articulated their retributive vision of justice in this public debate, see Meade, “Anatomies of Justice,” vol. 3, esp. ch. 7.

75. Congressman Martín Torres, Congreso de la Federación Mexicana, *Diario de debates*, November 24, 1942, 7: “En el presente se está planteando la cuestión solamente al amparo del medio que se ha provocado, de la agitación que se ha desarrollado, con motivo del último crimen llevado a cabo por Gregorio Cárdenas. . . . Solamente después de la Constitución de 57, fue Porfirio Díaz el que pidió que se restableciera la pena de muerte, sin ninguna cortapisa; pero todos los hombres que han intervenido en la Revolución saben perfectamente por qué fue restablecida la pena de muerte.”



the wall proud and erect, fixing on his head (according to him and most of the spectators) the victor's crown, defiant and haughty, offering the example of his death to his future imitators.<sup>76</sup>

While the speech might seem periphrastic for the purposes of a congressional debate, the themes of popular bloodlust and indifference to death were a persistent source of concern among nineteenth- and twentieth-century penal reformers. Anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz cites one of the earliest of these, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, whose *Diccionario burlesco y formalesco* (1815) contains an entry for “Ahorcados” (hanged men):

Those hapless individuals who expiate the enormity of their crimes in a final torment. These macabre spectacles should only excite compassion in the Good, and serve as deterrents to the Wicked, but they should never be the object of entertainment.

Nonetheless, in our Mexico we see the people milling around to enjoy these executions, not only with indifference, but even joyously (as they might see a bullfight). Candy vendors and food stalls contribute quite a bit to the festive spirit: they make such a confounded racket that they perturb the poor man who is about to expire, and they egg on the plebs [*populacho*] to see a man killed with the same lightheartedness as a bull. Such coldness can only earn these spectators the epithet of ferocious barbarians.<sup>77</sup>

These passages not only recall spectacles of lynching in the US South but also make clear that the public killing of condemned men held a particular fascination for the Mexican public that extended back for generations, just as generations of social reformers did their best to wean the “populacho” from what they saw as its baser human instincts.

Several congressmen who argued against the reinstatement of capital punishment in the 1942 debates, however, chose to frame their remarks not in a moralizing tone but in the modern terms of class struggle and the state's responsibility to intervene on behalf of the lower classes. Torres

76. Congressman Félix Díaz Escobar, Congreso de la Federación Mexicana, *Diario de debates*, November 17, 1942, 5: “Ese desdén por la vida, generalizado en un gran número de ciudadanos y precisamente entre aquellos que más propensos están a delinquir por las circunstancias y medio en que se han desarrollado . . . le quita a la pena de muerte casi todo su poder de intimidación, porque entre nosotros, repito, no se le tiene miedo, y si esta muerte llega, no imprevista y obscura en cualquiera encrucijada o taberna; sino que llega rodeada de todo el aparato espectacular que le da a su ejecución como pena, los caracteres de una verbena popular, entonces sería muy deseable para muchos sujetos cuya morbosidad les haría creer aparecer como héroes gloriosos, ante los millares de curiosos que les verían morir ‘como los hombres,’ y así el delincuente ‘castigado’ por la ley, marcharía al paredón erguido, altivo, ciñendo sobre su frente, según él y la mayoría de los espectadores, la corona del vencedor, desafiante y altanero, poniendo el ejemplo de su muerte a sus futuros imitadores.” Translation up to “death is not feared” from Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 38. The remainder of the translation and the emphasis are mine.

77. Quoted in Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 37–38.

argued that the restoration of the death penalty “undoubtedly affects the needy class more than others. . . . It is true that the environment in which the wage earner develops contributes greatly to the increase in crime. . . . I am convinced that with this vote [against reinstating the death penalty] we will contribute to fulfilling the duty that has been sustained through the long history of the labor movement.”<sup>78</sup> His colleague Díaz Escobar agreed: “The purification of justice in Mexico . . . is more effective than the application of the death penalty because criminals in Mexico . . . are a product of the social environment in which they develop: misery, ignorance, poverty, vice, filth. The state must advocate to solve the problems of the humble population.”<sup>79</sup>

It is unclear whether Chávez specifically intended “North Carolina Blues” as a response to the events described above. They should nevertheless be seen as contributing to the constellation of social relations surrounding the work, especially given how keenly attuned Chávez was to complex social problems throughout his career.<sup>80</sup> In his own words, a composer “transforms, in terms of music, whatever he absorbs from the outside and whatever is his congenitally; he depicts his present moment in his music, so that, in reality, all music is autobiographical.”<sup>81</sup>

In Lomnitz’s analysis of death tropes in Mexico, artists and intellectuals who, like Chávez, came of age in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution collectively shaped a distinctively Mexican aesthetics of death that came to be seen as a metonymic sign of Mexicanness.<sup>82</sup> Influenced primarily by the European *danse macabre* in both its medieval and its nineteenth-century incarnations, skeletal imagery, coupled with humor and the Dionysian elements of the festival of the Día de Muertos, was taken up as a peculiarly Mexican symbol in the early twentieth century.<sup>83</sup> Contrary to the current of representation in the post-revolutionary generation that considered the

78. Torres, *Diario de debates*, November 24, 1942, 7: “El restablecimiento de la pena de muerte, más que otras, indudablemente tiene que afectar a la clase menesterosa. . . . Es cierto que el medio en que se desarrolla el asalariado contribuye mucho al aumento de la criminalidad. . . . [T]engo la convicción de que con ello contribuiremos al cumplimiento del deber que se viene sosteniendo a través de una larga trayectoria del mismo movimiento obrero.”

79. Díaz Escobar, *Diario de debates*, November 17, 1942, 5: “La depuración de la justicia en México . . . es más efectiva que la aplicación de la pena de muerte, porque los delinquentes en México . . . son producto del medio social en que se desarrollan: miseria, ignorancia, pobreza, vicio, inmundicia. Debe el Estado avocarse a la resolución de los problemas de la población humilde.”

80. Looking beyond the Mexican national identity to which commentators have historically related Chávez’s music, Leonora Saavedra convincingly argues that he directed his stylistic choices at will, cultivating a polysemic style capable of evoking a wide variety of associations: Saavedra, “Carlos Chávez’s Polysemic Style.”

81. Chávez, *Musical Thought*, 5.

82. Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 27, 52.

83. Posada’s *Calavera catrina*, in particular, was viewed as “the counter to the impious vanities of the worldly bourgeoisie”: Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 50.

violent and oppressive presence of death as the only truthful way to represent the real (as in the work of Revueltas and of painters José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros), artists including Rivera, Villaurrutia, and Chávez used the idea of humorous intimacy with death “as the recognition of a telluric force that fosters . . . negotiation and struggle between opposed actors: Indians and Spaniards, workers and capitalists, scientists and clergymen.”<sup>84</sup>

Chávez sets the poem’s depiction of the lynching-murder of a Black man in the second stanza to an accompaniment characterized by the popular dance rhythms of the habanera and cinquillo, which gives the man’s dance of death “the character of a popular festival” and a specifically Mexican aesthetic quality (see example 4).<sup>85</sup> But Chávez noted later that the habanera was not merely a local musical idiom; he made a case for the universality of its rhythmic pattern, going so far as to taxonomize it as “a combination of an amphibrach and a spondee,” thereby stripping away its origin in a dance form and any extramusical connotation.<sup>86</sup> In this passage, however, he employs the habanera to grotesque effect, likening the lynched man to Posada’s dancing skeletons. Absent is any hint of disgust or moral outrage; the music presents the incongruity without forcing the listener into an ethical position. It does not dare us to move in sync with a brutal, unjust execution but, like the European *danse macabre*, invites us to the dance that we will all inevitably come to perform. Chávez’s dance of death, then, cannot be said to provoke a moment of epiphanic intensity in which the physical presence of musical gestures acts forcefully on the body. More generously, it could be said to express a non-Cartesian worldview in which humans consider their bodies to be part of a cosmology or divine creation, not seeing themselves as eccentric in relation to the world but as being physically part of the world.

I have argued above that “North Carolina Blues” was at least partly directed toward a Mexican audience, but the identification of other musical gestures directs attention to Chávez’s friend and professional contact in the United States William Grant Still, who also addressed the topic of civil rights in his compositions of the early 1940s, especially in his choral ballad *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* (1940).<sup>87</sup> Between January and May 1940, Chávez was in New York for the Mexican cultural festival he curated at the Museum of Modern Art. Still’s work premiered at Lewisohn Stadium on June 24, 1940, conducted by Artur Rodzinski, and it is clear

84. Ibid.

85. Examples 4–6 are transcribed from Wilson, *Art Song in Latin America*, 95–105.

86. Chávez, *Musical Thought*, 68.

87. Chávez and Still had enjoyed a cordial friendship since 1926, when the two were active in the circle of Edgard Varèse’s International Composers’ Guild in New York. I am grateful to Leonora Saavedra for generously sharing with me her knowledge of the Chávez-Still correspondence in the Archivo General de la Nación.

**Example 4** Carlos Chávez, “North Carolina Blues,” mm. 18–25. Copyright © 1961 (Renewed) by Carlanita Music Company. All rights for the USA administered by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

18 *Più mosso*  $\text{♩} = 72$   
*mf*

Voice

Me - cien - do el tron - co ver - ti - cal,

Piano

*Più mosso*  $\text{♩} = 72$   
*mp*

20

Des - de las plan - tas de los pies Has - ta las pal - mas de las

23 *ritard. poco* -----

ma - nos — El hom - bre es ár - bol o - tra vez.

that Chávez came to know the work: in 1944 he had the text translated into Spanish and mounted a performance with his Orquesta Sinfónica de México.

The two works have a close musical connection in their use of a four-note cross motive as a feature of the text setting. “North Carolina Blues” culminates in an apotheosis that transforms the Eucharistic invocation “Hoc est corpus meum” (This is my body), which in the Catholic tradition draws together substance and form to effect God’s presence on earth, through a semantic slippage—“Esta boca es la mía” (This is my mouth)—that gestures

toward the assumption into heaven of an innocent soul (see example 5).<sup>88</sup> In this musical moment, the sublimation of death through transcendence is elucidated more forcefully than in the poem alone. Villaurrutia's literary gesture echoes the Black Christ trope mentioned above.<sup>89</sup> As historian James H. Cone affirms, "that God could 'make a way out of no way' in Jesus' cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of Black folk."<sup>90</sup> Chávez adds this tropological layer to "North Carolina Blues" through the use of a musical symbol of the Cross consisting of a four-note cruciform motivic cell that appears in its most straightforward configuration eight times (see example 6).<sup>91</sup>

This application of the cross symbol directly echoes the dramatic climax of Still's *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, which employs a similar motive for the line "A long dark shadow will fall across your land!" (culminating on the syllable "cross," albeit as part of the word "across"; see example 7).<sup>92</sup> Wayne Shirley reports that Rodzinski, who was engaged to direct the work's premiere, wrote to Still expressing "a very strong feeling I have about the ending. . . . [T]he last sentence . . . would cause tremendous antagonism. . . . [L]et me know if you couldn't change the ending to some kind of apotheosis of humanity."<sup>93</sup> It is tempting to imagine what Still thought about the conductor's disregard for his coded reference to the Cross, for what more fitting apotheosis of humanity could there be in the Christian tradition than crucifixion and resurrection? After deliberating over several alternatives, Still and his collaborator, poet Katherine Chapin

88. One of Villaurrutia's preferred poetic techniques was paronymy. Analysts of his poetry have noted the variety of contexts in which he plays with the word "boca" (mouth): "abocado" (doomed), "desemboca" (flows), "la boca de una herida" (the mouth of a wound), and so on. See Luis Tizcareño's introduction to Villaurrutia, *Nostalgia de la muerte*.

89. It is notable in this respect that Villaurrutia dedicates "North Carolina Blues" to Hughes.

90. Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2.

91. Many composers have used similar four-note motives as a symbol for the Christian Cross. (This is different from the three-note cross motive borrowed from the "Crux fidelis" discussed above in relation to Revueltas's "Canto.") My understanding of the application of these four-note motives derives largely from De'Ath, "J. S. Bach, Allegory, and the 'Kreuz' Motif," pt. 1, which surveys the use of cruciform motives in Bach's choral music. According to De'Ath, of the sixty-seven appearances of the word "Kreuz" and its derivatives ("kreuzte," "Kreuzigung," and so on) in the church cantatas (BWV 1–199), only nine occur without an apparent cruciform shape in the melodic line.

92. Example 7 is transcribed from Still, *And They Lynched Him*. I have not been able to locate an analysis of *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* that notes the use of a cruciform melodic cell or suggests that Still meant to compare the lynched man to a Black Christ figure. Though it regrettably falls outside the scope of the present article, the recognition of such a motive here invites further analysis that might build upon the estimable foundation laid in Shirley, "William Grant Still's Choral Ballad."

93. Letter of April 29, 1940, quoted *ibid.*, 440–42. Rodzinski was concerned about presenting a work he heard as violently anti-American, since his sister-in-law and niece in Poland were awaiting their US visas.

**Example 5** Carlos Chávez, “North Carolina Blues,” mm. 104–23. Copyright © 1961 (Renewed) by Carlanita Music Company. All rights for the USA administered by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

104 **Tempo primo**  $\text{♩} = 60$  *f*

Voice

Con - fun - di - dos ————— Cuer - pos y

Piano

*f* *mf*

108 *cresc.* *ff* *senza rall.*

la - bios, Yo no me a - tre - ve - rí - a ————— A de - cir en la

113 *ritard.* ————— *a tempo*

*f* *dim.* *mp*

som - bra: Es - ta bo - ca es la mí - a.

118 *mp* *p* *pp* *ritard. poco*

a

**Example 6** Carlos Chávez, “North Carolina Blues,” cross motives. Copyright © 1961 (Renewed) by Carlanita Music Company. All rights for the USA administered by G. Schirmer, Inc. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

5  
Voice  
Es de piel hu - ma-na. \_\_\_\_\_

10  
de - ja, de pron-to, \_\_\_\_\_

15  
(p)  
go - ta de a - gua. \_\_\_\_\_

43 Allegretto ♩ = 92  
Si el ne-gro rí - e \_\_\_\_\_

stentato poco cresc.  
51  
Su bo-ca es u - na ro - ja en-tra - ña. \_\_\_\_\_

cresc.  
109 ff  
Yo no me a-tre - ve - rí - a \_\_\_\_\_

112 senza rall.  
— A de-cir en la som - bra: \_\_\_\_\_

Piano

Example 7 William Grant Still, *And They Lynched Him on a Tree*, mm. 353–56

353

S  
A  
T  
B  
Bn.  
Tbn.  
Vc.

A long dark shad-ow will fall a-cross your land! \_\_\_\_\_

A long dark shad-ow will fall a-cross your land! \_\_\_\_\_

Biddle, changed the line to “Clear the shadow that falls across your land,” thereby preserving the textual reference to the Cross.<sup>94</sup>

In “North Carolina Blues,” four-note cross motives most often appear as the culmination of a musical phrase and coincide with words that amplify their significance, even though the poem contains no direct or indirect reference to the Christian Cross. In addition to offering a way of expressing allyship with his US colleague and empathy with the plight of Black Americans in the Jim Crow South, the use of cross motives in “North Carolina Blues” emphasizes the power over life attained after death in Christian theology. As Octavio Paz lamented in 1949, such a regenerative portrayal of death was often absent in the death cultures in contemporary Mexico: “Death in Mexico is sterile; it does not fertilize or engender, the way that the Aztec or the Christian death did.”<sup>95</sup> Whereas Aztec sacrificial practice was tied to fertility, and for Catholics the dead could advocate for the living, modern death in Mexico, he argued, was “lacking in eroticism” and therefore devoid of meaning to Paz and many of his contemporaries. Invoking the Crucifixion, then, was a way of imbuing death—and in this case the death of a member of what Mexicans have often termed the “clase ínfima” (inferior class)—with transcendent meaning, a dignified status historically refused to the lowest classes in Mexico and therefore a potent political statement itself.<sup>96</sup>

94. At the premiere on June 24, 1940, however, the chorus sang the original text; see *ibid.*, 444.

95. Quoted in Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 405.

96. Death in Mexico’s long history has often maintained the class distinctions of life. In the colonial period and after Independence, corpses of the underclasses were routinely left to rot if the families could not afford to pay the church for a proper burial. In the revolutionary period, too, lower-class prisoners condemned to death would be hanged and left as an object lesson, while the more dignified death by firing squad was reserved for elite combatants. Lomnitz offers many more examples.



Revueltas's "Canto" and Chávez's "North Carolina Blues" offer related but fundamentally distinct translations of Black suffering into a contemporary Mexican context. Chávez offers a political statement that emphasizes the transcendence and redemption attained through death, while Revueltas's song constitutes an ethical solicitation that insists on the reality of worldly suffering. In the composers' worldview, the Crucifixion narrative represented a death that is rendered meaningful and therefore transformed into a symbol of hope. Indeed, the character and content of the composers' standpoints as "earwitnesses" to lynching come across most readily in their applications of musical symbols of the Christian Cross. Revueltas's adaptation of the Black condition from a familiar US context to a Mexican one voiced his continued hopes for proletarian liberation after the demoralizing defeat of Republican Spain, a conflict in which he had invested much personal and professional effort. Similarly, one may read into Chávez's amplification of the Black Christ narrative promulgated by artists of the Harlem Renaissance his attempt to help bridge the gap between the world of African Americans' suffering and that of others, and to invite his Mexican audience into what may have been a largely new and unfamiliar world.

### The Possibilities and Limitations of Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing

With their polysemy and borrowings from Black literary traditions, "North Carolina Blues" and "Canto de una muchacha negra," as I have presented them here, complicate several of our handiest binaries (Black/white, insider/outsider)—simplistic frameworks that lie at the heart of confounded efforts to evaluate their meanings. In these two songs, literary portrayals of the brutal act of lynching are translated by each composer's faculties, which remake the encounter-event in a process that occurs at the intersection of history, memory, politics, and aesthetic possibility. The compositional process therefore stages for the listener different instances of "wit(h)nessing," one theoretical way of reconceptualizing and evaluating the kind of allyship that these songs and their histories present.

Aesthetic wit(h)nessing involves entering a noncognitive but compassionate mode of viewing art that cultural theorist Bracha Ettinger names "fascinace,"<sup>97</sup> a modality that art historian Griselda Pollock describes as a "prolonged openness to being co-affected in the encounter with the pathos of the other" but one that is "neither voyeuristic nor fetishizing, neither sadistic nor mastering; these being the classic psychoanalytical theses on the gaze and the field of vision."<sup>98</sup> The gazing of *fascinace* is an element of transsubjective responsiveness in a type of encounter that

97. Ettinger, "Fascinace," 61.

98. Pollock, "Missing Wit(h)ness," 268–69.

Ettinger calls “Matrixial,” which is characterized by the pairing of hospitality and compassion between an *I* and a *non-I* (as opposed to the phallic *not-I*). *Matrixial fascinace*, then, modifies the phallic mode that Lacan argued produced the image as *fascinum*, which serves to arrest the viewer in terror before the threat of death. In her study of several paintings based on a famous morgue photograph of Marilyn Monroe after her autopsy, Pollock explains that “the matrixializing artwork proffers a mode of *being with* the dying, both staying close as a witness to a crime that may have inflicted death, and sustaining some dimension of the subjectivity of the *non-I* even as the *non-Is* meet extreme dehumanizing violence.”<sup>99</sup>

Pollock writes that “[w]hat de-phallicizes . . . and thus Matrixializes” those who encounter a piece of art “lies in the *wit(h)ness* created through the materiality of the artworking in the forms chosen, the space and the framing, and above all touch.”<sup>100</sup> By “touch,” she is referring to the tenderness (or violence) evident in the traces left by the physical act of painting. I would posit that the closest analogue to painterly touch in sound is a composer’s gestural economy, and Revueletas is a prime example of a composer whose affects may be traced in his musical gestures. For me, his heartbeat gesture, in particular, evokes a *Matrixial* listening mode, arresting attention by calling on my instinctive bodily empathy, an instance of *fascinace* rather than *fascinum*.

And yet certain gestures run the risk of mistranslation or ambiguity in the transhistorical moment of reception. Chávez’s mild vision of Black death at the hands of white supremacy may not resonate as strongly with today’s listeners unless they are inclined to perceive the articulation, to borrow Paul Gilroy’s phrasing, of an “anti-racist hope in anything other than its negative moment; that is, as a creative conjuring with the possibility of better worlds rather than embattled criticism of this comprehensively disenchanting one.”<sup>101</sup> In an Ettingerian analysis, the portrayal of a brutally lynched Black man afflicted by a dance of death that reduces him to a dead *thing* (a no-longer-human) in today’s highly charged political climate risks coming across as intolerably glib. In Chávez’s musical gesture, I also hear an incitement to the sonic equivalent of Lacan’s “phallic gaze,” a gesture of “showing” that permits a detachment from the captivating image (*I* versus *not-I*) and in this case encourages the listener to renounce their relation to the suffering of the sonic object. Thus is the subject de-faced (following Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of face; that is, not the image of a face but a register of expression or appeal),<sup>102</sup> similar to the way artist Dana Schutz (perhaps unintentionally) defaced Emmett Till anew with her

99. *Ibid.*, 270.

100. *Ibid.*, 288.

101. Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 30.

102. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*.

violent brushstrokes in the painting *Open Casket*, for which she was widely fustigated in the aftermath of its showing at the 2017 Whitney Biennial.<sup>103</sup>

On the other hand, modern analogues for the grotesqueness of Chávez's depiction of Black death are also close at hand, following a long tradition of artistic interventions that depict asocial actions and attitudes in as grandiose a way as possible. Childish Gambino's provocative music video "This Is America" (2018) constitutes a performative neominstrelsy featuring musician Donald Glover's naked torso, facial contortions, and alluring dance movements of both African and Black American origin. Contemporary commentators have noted that Glover glides seamlessly between the shucking, grinning, sloth, and mirth of the "Coon" stereotype, the bravado and erotic power of the "Stagolee," and the sharply dressed, truth-talking "Dandy."<sup>104</sup> Lulled by what seems at the outset to be an innocent diversion, the video's sudden violent turn causes in me (and many others, judging by online reaction videos) a chilling epiphanic physical reaction. The video shares with Chávez's song the subversion of an uplifting communal activity (dance) to deliver a powerful indictment of contradictions in American society.

For twenty-first-century listeners, Glover's identity as a Black artist and performer gives him a strong foothold from which to critique American injustice. If Chávez's and Revueltas's songs can communicate allyship to listeners today, it is through the composers' analogizing the movement for civil rights and social justice in the Jim Crow context with the struggle to enact a socialist vision in Mexico that served the twin aims of economic development and equal rights for all. I have therefore contended that in the social and temporal environment of their production the songs said simultaneously, to invoke Childish Gambino, "This is [US] America" and "This is Mexico, too" at a cultural moment when an awareness of the international color line and the imperialist ambitions of white capitalist supremacy ran high.

Hearing the songs today is a grievous reminder that we are all witnesses of the modern-day analogue of such spectacles. There can be no doubt that, as Saidiya Hartman notes, we are still haunted by the failures of Reconstruction.<sup>105</sup> Both "North Carolina Blues" and "Canto de una muchacha negra" exhibit a nascent understanding of the overlapping nature of

103. See Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, "Dana Schutz's Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Sparks Protest," *Artnet News*, March 21, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-painting-emmett-till-whitney-biennial-protest-897929>.

104. Aida Amoako, "Why the Dancing Makes 'This Is America' So Uncomfortable to Watch," *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/this-is-america-childish-gambino-donald-glover-kinesthetic-empathy-dance/559928/>. An online compilation video of reactions to watching "This Is America" for the first time, "Reactors Reactions to Childish Gambino 'This Is America,'" has 5.5 million views at the time of writing.

105. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 14.

race, class, and capitalism, a notion that has been advocated, refined, and disseminated by Black feminists and critical race theorists in the period since the songs' composition. The nuance afforded by the lenses of more recent social theories, including aesthetic wit(h)ness, enable a future exegesis of these and similar works exhibiting Mexican allyship with Black Americans to further interrogate Black/white and insider/outsider binaries. Such nuance also allows the cultivation of a transhistorical commentary that broadens and complicates the audiences for each work.

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## Abstract

Mexican composers Silvestre Revueltas and Carlos Chávez each wrote one song that execrates the lynching-murder of Black persons in the United States. In them, the composers pit a Mexican aesthetics of death against violent spectacle and social inequities to assert a universal dignity of life and to situate an antiracist position within the context of a broader international class struggle. In the process of airing fresh interpretations of the songs, I imply that the composers' divergent experiences in the United States—Chávez's relative proximity to establishment structures of power and Revueltas's intimacy with working-class struggle and race-based discrimination—informed their translation of Black suffering into the (differently historically colonized) context of Mexico. Both composers effected an artful indirection: a displaced deictic center from which to mediate their social thought concerning Mexico's own problems of penal excess and extrajudicial lynching. Bracha Ettinger's aesthetically activated *Matrixial* dimension sets a theoretical and analytical stage for an exploration of these anti-lynching songs and offers a way of understanding aesthetic expressions of allyship in a transhistorical mode.

**Keywords:** Carlos Chávez, Silvestre Revueltas, Mexico, lynching, Harlem Renaissance, vocal music

