

Border-Listening/ Escucha-Liminal

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Territorializing from within: protocolos [en tránsito] para atender lo de adentro

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Introduction

*Yo ya me voy
A morir a los desiertos,
Me voy dirigido.
Esa estrella marinera
Sólo en pensar,
Que ando lejos de mi tierra
Nomás que me acuerdo me dan
Ganas de llorar.*

I am leaving
to die in the deserts,
I'm headed
That little sailor star
Just thinking,
That I am way far from my land
Just as I remember
I feel like crying.

These are the words sung by a trio of men known as *Los Cardenche-ros de Sapioriz*, one of the last remaining Canto Cardenche groups performing. This musical form was born and preserved through the generations in the region of Comarca Lagunera, located in the extreme southwest of the states of Coahuila and Durango in Northern Mexico. A polyphonic *a capella* form, the Canto Cardenche appeared as the melancholic self-expression of laborers working in farms and mines in the mid nineteenth-century, when a considerable number of workers were brought to the northern region's colonial farmlands and plantations (Romero 2011).

Previous work by ethnomusicologists states that Canto Cardenche first appeared in Zacatecas, where Catholic missionaries taught Gregorian chants and polyphonic songs to locals to be sung at re-

ligious services (Luna et al. 2015). However, there is no certainty about where and when exactly the Canto Cardenche originated. In a way, as beautifully proposed by Nadia Romero, the construction of knowledge about the Lagunera polyphonic histories has been a series of "epistemological ensembles" caused by a confluence of people coming from diverse worldviews (Romero 2014). Movement, transit and the mournfulness of parting ways is a constant narrative in Canto Cardenche, responding to the different dispossessions experienced by workers on the farmlands.

The term *Cardenche* comes from a type of cactus found in arid regions of the North of Mexico, especially in the states of Durango, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosí. In the solitude of these regions with their large areas of desert, blots of bright pink - a *rosa mexicano* color - are visible in the vast range of earthy tones that paint the landscape in rural Northern Mexico (Woodman 2018; Luna et al. 2015). The plant possesses thorns that, penetrating the human skin, cause an intense pain that only intensifies with attempts to remove them. Canto Cardenche comes from the intrinsic human need to express our struggle through our voices. Cardenche songs are songs that wound like thorns.

This paper seeks to unveil the repository of ethnobiological knowledge to potentially be found in Canto Cardenche in relation to sound studies. Language and the environment are entangled in every aspect of Canto Cardenche as forces that portray urgency and resilience. Through examining melodies as carriers of memory, the embodied soundscapes of identities, histories and multiple realities are further discussed. While previous research work capitalizes on the potential of archiving Canto Cardenche and its previous body of work, the approach taken here differs, seeing Canto Cardenche as a continuing practice. Finally, as an overlay to this research, together with singers Edna Hernandez, Gil Espinosa, and Luisa Almaguer, the past history and body of work of Cardenche is recognized, and the possibility of expansion, stretching and subverting the rooted moral models is explored. The environment is the speaker in Canto Cardenche, the accompaniment and driver that forges links with another person - as simple and comforting as "How are you, really?"

Memory carriers of histories

When nothing was ours, we had the voice to fill us with hope.

–José Concepción Hernández Medrano

Ex-Hacienda de Ortega, Municipio de San Luis de la Paz, Guanajuato.

The heartbreaking *a cappella*, polyphonic Canto Cardenche songs are single-handedly shaped by one of the most powerful tools of human communication: the voice. The *a cappella* vocal form is a response to the limited means of workers during the 1800's, who lacked access to any form of instrumentation. As Canto Cardenche singer Fidel Elizalde says, "the only ones with access to musical instruments were rich people, but our fathers and grandfathers had the will to express their feelings."¹ The Cardenche singers had only the sounds of their natural landscape as a background, in which ongoing complex sonic exchanges are constantly muting, changing and auditing sound (Flügge 2011).

Much like the essential role spirituals played in the United States, representing the means of expression of the hopes and frustrations of slaves (Steinfeld 2016), Canto Cardenche served as an outlet of resistance to dehumanization, and a tool with which to keep a memory alive generation after generation. While landowners sought to erase this memory by controlling resources, Canto Cardenche serves as their workers' testimony. Death is ever-present in the lyrics, along with depictions of emotional and physical pain. The raw feeling of desperation is amplified by the lyrics, some of them highly dramatic, as in "At the foot of a green Maguey" or "I'm going to die in the desert".²

1 Fragment from interview "El Último Canto Cardenche" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keRvUiFVGtY> (accessed January 15, 2020).

2 "Al pié de un Verde Maguey" and "Yo Ya Me Voy a Morir a los Desiertos" are some of the best-known Canto Cardenche songs.

When exploring the troubled relationship between past and present through the novels *Home* and *Songs of Solomon*,³ Toni Morrison uses the word "rememory", suggesting that the act of revisiting a person's memory, whether physically or mentally, becomes simultaneously part of the collective memory (Visvis 2008). The persistence required to keep a memory alive is not only based on oral traditions, but also on the support a community exercises in pursuit of such "rememory". Thus the melodies in Canto Cardenche become what can be referred to as "the memory carriers of histories" embodying the soundscapes of internalized identities, histories and multiple realities. This is particularly the case, given that Canto Cardenche was birthed and practiced outside the normative spaces for music and what was catalogued as "good" taste (Sluis 2016). The term "memory carriers" has previously been used in research on the management of urban biodiversity and cultural landscapes, as Erik Andersson explains: "Memory carriers can be explained as slowly changing variables and features that retain or make available information on how different situations have been dealt with before" (2016).

Through the years, Canto Cardenche has acquired many names, many of them derisive; the songs have been described as the songs of "drunkards, of rubbish dumps, of the poor" by locals and scholars (Luna et al. 2015), due to the context in which they were performed, i.e., in the peripheral areas of the northern villages. Frequently undermined by the powerful and wealthy, *el Canto Cardenche* represented a space for rest and unrest, in which people found representation and/or resistance, becoming a potential source of "public scandal" (Romero 2014) in the eyes of the wealthy.

Canto Cardenche does not adhere to the norms of academic musical performance: the singers are not expected to have an academic musical background, nor a trained voice. Each encounter with a Cardenche song is therefore expected to be different, there is no standardization nor predictability since each voice is always different. Just as Haraway (1994) talks about how encounters with an individual

3 Morrison, Toni. 2013. *Home* (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 2012). Morrison, Toni. (New York City: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1977). *Song of Solomon* (New York: 1977).

produce a world, so does each encounter with a musical performance. Each singer comes with their own worlds and each revisits a unique personal memory when performing a song. Moreover, each performance is a different experience - even if people share the same geographical area, they do not share the same kind of soundscape. Listeners possess individual associations with different sounds, and each individual focuses on different aspects while listening. People attune their ears at different levels of attention and immersion (Fluegge 2011). Following Haraway's thoughts on individual encounters (1994), each encounter with a Cardenche song further enriches our visualization of the North Mexican landscape, by distorting the "sacred image of the same" expected in a voice.

The environment as a speaker

"If you are a migrant, you carry the territory in your memory, you live alternating worlds."

– Jaime Martínez Luna

During early meetings with Edna Hernandez, Gil Espinosa, and Luisa Almaguer, the conversations centered around the concept of "The environment as a speaker" and the ways in which polyphonic singing became a form of high quality listening in communities, where the environment functions as a funnel for the messages of Canto Cardenche. Polyphony is a musical texture that embodies a prominent sonic ontology, yet also offers unconventional dimensions that register as a new "being-in-listening" (Ghosh 2017). Elen Flügge and Jean Luc Nancy also endorse the concept of "being-in-listening" as a closer approach to the self, meaning that "to be in listening is to be at the same time outside and inside" - to be open from outside and from within (Hainge 2017). The very essence of musical polyphony is communal and public because of its sonic nature (Ghosh, 2017). Canto Cardenche has the potential to bring people together, in harmony with their environment. Edna recalls how singing Cardenche in her childhood turned into a sound-bath of sorts when using it to communicate with people from her neighborhood. A cousin a few houses away could start a Cardenche as a way to ask "How are you?" which

might grow into a voluble exchange, with jokes and exaggerations ensuing for hours.

For this reason, the first exchange of Cardenche singing between Edna, Gil, Luisa, and I started with a simple, yet monumental "How are you?". It was a disarming, yet grounding exercise that resettled us in the place we were standing. A preparation "to be in listening".

Canto Cardenche originates in a profound way from the land. Indeed, it is the counteract to dispossession of lands, to the discomfort and unsteadiness felt under the feet whilst transient. This state of transience brought a team of collaborators closer. Edna, Gil, Luisa, and I found each other in places that were difficult to call home, while relying on screens and voice messages as our common place for meeting. "I'm my home, my many homes" asserted Edna - we are all populated by different voices and our *cuerpas*,⁴ our territory. The ongoing, unscheduled exchange of voices, the glitches in communication, the city breathing in the background traced our experiences and relationships with the land each of us was situated in. In a way, we were "singing our maps" - mediating and mapping our relationships with our geographies through song.

When looking at classic Cardenche songs, such as "La Noche Llegará", from which a fragment can be read below, the lyrics provide a detailed description of the singer's landscape, depicting valleys and sidewalks.⁵ The use of polyphonic voices powerfully captures the visual and sonic soundscape of the northern region. In this manner, if applied to Fernández-Llamazares framework of "singing their maps", one could say that the works of Canto Cardenche sing their maps of belonging by transforming songs into soundwalks of their landscape, tracing the deep cultural attachment and connection to the singer's lands.

*De pronto duermo y estoy soñando que estoy volando por fin en libertad,
soy golondrina surcando el viento sobre los valles en que nací, la noche*

4 *Cuerpas*. Feminization of the word "bodies" in Spanish.

5 "La Noche Llegará" performed by the Canto Cardenche band Cardencheros de Sapioriz <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMk6lNn0aLo> (accessed January 17, 2020).

llegará, y yo descansaré bajo la luna, la noche llegará y no terminará, yo dormiré.

(Suddenly I sleep and I am dreaming that I am finally flying free, I am a swallow furrowing the wind over the valleys where I was born, the night will come, and I will rest under the moon, the night will come and not end, I will sleep.)

Silence: a social process.

My ear is an acoustic universe sending and receiving.
My ear also sounds. Where are the receivers for these tiny,
mysterious signals? Inside? Outside?
— Pauline Oliveros.⁶

The act of remembering is a vehicle in Canto Cardenche songs for communities to understand not just the violence of past oppressions, but also the act of rooting themselves in the place where they come from. The collective aspect of Canto Cardenche that comes alive when more than two people join their voices reconnects the community to the land. It is a tool for territorializing through community self-determination, a space of recovery from historical trauma, in which people come together to rebuild themselves through vulnerability.

In Canto Cardenche, silence is not a gap, but rather an accompanying arrangement to the voices. John Cage claimed that even in great absence of sound, he was able to hear two light tones: the pounding of his heart and his blood streaming through his head.⁷ Silence is not an absence of sound (Miller 2007), but silence reconfigures listening

⁶ Oliveros, Pauline. The Earth Worm Also Sings: A composer's practice of deep listening. *Leonardo Music Journal*, 3(1) (1993), pp.35-38.

⁷ Cage's experience of sitting in a soundproof chamber at Harvard University in 1952. In the anechoic chamber, Cage had the revelation that there is no such thing as silence, he was able to hear his heart beating and blood circulating.

as a discontinuous and non-linear act (Lunberry 2012).

When Edna, Gil, Luis and I started to play with our audio messages, sharing murmurs, we remembered how Cardenche offers enjoyment although attention is rarely brought to that. We found complicity in minutes of pause between murmurs, experienced without any sense that something was lacking. Silence is complicity (for both wrongful and rightful reasons). Silence is always a social process, involving different actions and agencies. Consequently, silence does not refer to something totally absent in the social sphere, but rather to the absence of narration. However, if lyrics are political, then so is their absence. If instrumental accompaniment is social, then so is the lack of it. If music is ascension and aesthetic experience, or a story we wrap around ourselves, then so is the scarcity of it. Absences are political in Canto Cardenche - expected but later met with omission.

Lo de adentro y lo de afuera. Lo público y lo privado.

(The inside, the outside. The public and the private.)

"Language is a male discourse," Gloria Anzaldúa contends about the culture in which she grew up and her relationship to the Spanish language (1987). Spanish preserves the masculine version of its words even in its neutral form, implying that women can only connect to each other through the agency of men. Canto Cardenche has been a male-dominated musical style throughout most of its existence, comprised of romantic songs inspired by male heartache and love for women. Constructed through a male gaze, Canto Cardenche depicts women through male words that have also shaped both the identity of the "*Norteño*"⁸ and the image of the northern landscape, and which position the role of women in the Northern region of Mexico as visible objects of romantic desire.

Although Hector Lozano divides el Canto Cardenche into two categories - religious singing and Cardenche singing (2002) - another way to regard this division is between what is public and what is

⁸ A male person from the North of Mexico.

private; our insides, our outside; the space of nurture and the space of exposure. The repetition and reproduction of these songs through male-majority singers strengthens the boundaries that define by whom Canto Cardenche was meant to be sung. Household gender dynamics have the power to dictate control and interpretation of our environment, thereby transforming certain musical endeavors into segregated auditory spaces (Lentjes, 2016). During the earliest years of Canto Cardenche, men dominated the public space (and continue to do so), possessing more right to navigate through the public spaces where Canto Cardenche was performed regularly. In contrast, private spaces such as households were the designated places for women. Here, women learned from Canto Cardenche as indirect listeners, overhearing their relatives and friends sing these songs (Romero 2014).

Nadia Romero (2014) mentions that, beyond depicting the struggles of love, the Cardenche song canon embeds the “rules of the game” by encoding a vast collection of advice and learnings from family and elders, covering such areas as the consequences of good and bad decisions and social and moral responsibilities within the community. For many families, Canto Cardenche functioned as a moral model in which the ultimate goal was to follow ancestral traditions of marriage and family.

What are the rules of the game now? What if a queer person was told they will never understand the pain of men in Cardenche? Recognizing the past of Cardenche leads us through these growing exchanges of singing to claim what was considered public and private in the past and subvert it. We find in Canto Cardenche an instrument for careful navigation of our ongoing transit through undisciplined procedures, a steady place for encounters that still allows resistance against decoupling from our environment.

“What is it that we have murmured behind closed doors?”. For women and gender-nonconforming individuals, many musical practices that suggested public involvement were historically limited to being lived as spectators, listeners in the back. Gil Espinosa asked himself several times if the goal of our actions was ultimately to counter,

provoke or reinterpret Canto Cardenche. Eventually, it became clear that it was an act of expansion, “ensanchar”, broadening the space limited by history. Who is the provocateur? Probably ourselves and what we allow ourselves to share in our vulnerability.

Conclusion

I accompany you, I listen to you, I tell you my story.

In this paper, el Canto Cardenche has been unveiled as a continuing space in which to find resilience in the voice of the other. Canto Cardenche deliberately persists as a memory carrier of histories given strength by the will of the community to exercise care through “being-in-listening”. A way of territorializing from within, Canto Cardenche offers grounding to a land that is not our home, but a body that carries us. The collective aspect of Canto Cardenche that comes alive when more than two people join their voices, reconnecting the community to the land. It is a tool for territorializing through communal self-determination, a space of recovery from historical trauma in which people come together to rebuild themselves through vulnerability. Each singer brings to their performance their own world, and each revisits a unique personal memory when interpreting a song. To sing is an act of healing through remembering. Set in the desert of Northern Mexico, an awakened city, or a place in which the mind feels secluded, Canto Cardenche breaks with a raw crack of a voice that unlocks histories and stories and a rooted sense of belonging, interconnected to the relationships that take place within these environments.

I am my house, my many houses and in one of them I find your voice.

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