"MISTRESS OF HER OWN SILENCES": THE TRANSATLANTIC POETRY OF MARÍA ACUÑA

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In 2006, the Congress of Deputies in Spain presented a contentious bill: The Law of Historical Memory – it would be passed a year later. A long time in coming, the law sought to redress the wrongs experienced by victims of both sides of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), offering rights to the victims of the war and of the dictatorship of General Franco. Since then, exhumation of the repressed past, in the form of unearthing of mass graves and the granting of citizenship to those who fought on the losing side has proceeded, and the scholarship in fields ranging from political science to history, literature to sociology, has uncovered new interpretations of the era. The attempt to restore "forgotten" or "hidden" narratives that progressively become part of academic inquiry ought to include not just the notables but also the unsung voices that played a quiet yet equally relevant role in that past. Within this context of historical memory recovery, in 2015 I undertook a study of the then unpublished poetry of María Acuña. Throughout her life, Acuña would experience not only Franco's dictatorship, but the peaceful political transition to democracy in the peninsula, as well as two violent insurgencies in Central America, where she lived for a number of years (and met an early death). First, in El Salvador during the Civil War (1979-1992), then in Nicaragua as the Sandinista

Revolution unfolded from the late 1970s into the 1980s. The starkly different phases of María Acuña's life are reflected in a poetry of great precision, passion, and, above all, a musical fluidity that merges Spanish and *castúo* (the regional dialect of Extremadura), Europe and the Americas.

María Acuña did not publish her poetry during her lifetime, keeping significant parts of her biography from even her family and closest associates. Following the death of the poet in 1994, one of her daughters traveled to her home in El Salvador. In a small apartment, countless scraps of paper with labored handwriting were found. Acuña, schooled only for a few years, had scribbled poems everywhere: on the margins of unpaid electric bills, the backside of grocery lists, the pages of spiral notebooks. Some poems, almost drawn across pages and difficult to decipher, were irrepressibly erotic, others political. Still others were about her native land. They were poems by a woman once known in Madrid as *la poeta descalza*, the barefoot poet. A 1961 article in a glossy magazine had stretched the truth about her: "She can´t read or write, but she renders poetry" (Pintado 34).

For six years I have been working with all those scraps of paper, recordings of old interviews and poetry recitals, dictated letters sent to relatives and friends, and notebooks, reconstructing the works of Acuña. Indeed, I am the first and so far only scholar to have published on her work in the form of two posthumous editions of her poetry. Throughout, I keep asking myself: what light do questions about cultural identity and intercultural contact in Acuña's life can possibly shed on her work? How does her poetry reflect Acuña's dialogue with both leftist and conservative ideological traditions? My research takes up these questions for a book that explores the life and lifeworld of this non-canonical poet whose works and personal trajectory reveal a side of gender, politics and art as buried as the human remains still being unearthed from the Spanish Civil War. By studying Acuña as woman, witness, and poet, I aim to create not just a portrait of a specific artist, but an understanding of the complex transatlantic journey she navigated throughout her life. While much about her remains unknown, how does silence beckon the ghosts of the past?

The first part of the title to this essay alludes to a novel by South African writer Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (1979). Rosa Burger, the main character, is the daughter of human rights activist and political prisoner Lionel Burger in whose shadow she walks. Based on real life anti-Apartheid activist Bram Fischer, the narrative borrows freely from his famous trial, which Gordimer followed closely and even attended. Fischer was well-known for having formed part of the defense team of Nelson Mandela and his co-defendants at the historic Rivonia Trial.[1] Afterwards, Fischer was accused of abetting communism, put on trial himself, and sentenced to life in prison. Upon contracting cancer, he was permitted to leave and died shortly after under house arrest. The prison department demanded his ashes be returned after the funeral and, to date, his remains have not been recovered.

When the book was published, Gordimer acknowledged having included passages Fischer made in court – she even "described the novel as 'a coded homage' to him" (quoted in Wästberg). In addition, *Burger's Daughter* also puts to use unattributed quotes by South African Communist Party member Joe Slovo, and even writings disseminated by the Soweto Students Representative Council during the Soweto uprising.[2] As it turns out, the school children's demonstrations of 1976, known as the Soweto Uprising, took place as Gordimer was writing the novel and she decided to incorporate it to her narrative. This interplay between reality and the imagination, fact and creativity is embedded in *Burger's Daughter*. To what extent could what had become public record be fictionalized, what had been hidden from sight be reclaimed as part of a national reckoning? These questions suggest a process of bearing witness through transitional justice, the kind the aforementioned Law of Historical Memory enabled in Spain in the mid-2000s. Apartheid South Africa and Francoist Spain, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in a post-Apartheid dispensation and the struggle between amnesty and memory in democratic Spain share the weight of an unremitting past.[3]

Through *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa Burger seeks to discover her voice and, at last, if only partially, she succeeds in creating her own

identity. In the third section of the book, when Rosa is interviewed by state agent Brandt Vermeulen, we are told that "She showed no signs of nerves or embarrassment, yet neither did she have the defensiveness he was used to meeting if someone were pressing him. She was mistress of her own silences; as if she were the one waiting for her to speak instead of she herself looking for an opportunity" (Gordimer 183). This idea of self-possession under duress, of chosen silence, of what remains unsaid, fuels my investigation of Acuña's work. She was and remains, I argue here, the rightful owner of her silences. Almost thirty years after her death, I pry open some of those silences to probe into what the world of creative artists like her can yield towards understanding hitherto unsung women. What is known about her?

María Acuña was the first woman to wear pants in her native village, to smoke cigarettes in public. The first, perhaps the only, to have had a chauffeur in uniform drive her the two hundred and thirty-six kilometers in a convertible from the capital, across the arid, severe landscape, to Herrera del Duque, Badajoz. She cuts a striking figure across the somber and claustrophobic years of post-war Spain. Born in 1928, she survived the fratricidal war, grew up with chronic hunger, rebelled against a rural patriarchal order when widows in their twenties would grow old in the same mourning clothes to which their husbands' early deaths confined them. Escaping for the promise of anonymity and progress of Madrid, she left the village carrying a small cardboard suitcase in one hand, a newborn in the other. Having given birth to a son out of wedlock at a time when the Catholic Church sanctioned the harshening dictatorship, she refused to bow to convention. Instead, she set out to find her own voice away from the narrowness of a provincial life presided over by landowners and priests, legislators, and military officers. The rural world she was leaving behind in the 1940s merits revisiting.

In the Author's Note to *Callejón del lobo* (2006), the first in a sobering trilogy of novels about life in Extremadura after the Spanish Civil War, which covers up to the advent of democracy in the 1970s, Desiderio Vaquerizo tells us:

> La Extremadura de posguerra hereda, en su mayor parte, una situación de enormes injusticias sociales, agravadas por las consecuencias de un conflicto vivido de forma particularmente fratricida en las zonas rurales, donde las depuraciones habían sido continuas y de muy diferente signo de acuerdo con la evolución de la contienda. Son las mil caras de un enorme poliedro que explica las heridas, en muchos casos aún abiertas, y el retraso cultural y económico de numerosas comarcas – sobre todo, marginales – hasta bien entrados los años setenta. El oscurantismo religioso propugnado por una Iglesia aferrada a los principios del Concilio de Trento; el dirigismo político, canalizado siempre a través de las mismas clases sociales privilegiadas que favorecían abusos y el más descarado nepotismo; la concentración de tierras en pocas manos; la explotación laboral y personal de aparceros, jornaleros, y criados, de hambres bien administradas por parte de los señoritos sin escrúpulos que mantenían en su propio beneficio un sistema casi esclavista de corte feudal; los favores sexuales como exigencia interna de permanencia en el marco de explotación de la casa y su entorno, remota persistencia del derecho a pernada; o la perpetuación del servilismo como sistema social ideal, en beneficio de sólo unos pocos que se enriquecían a costa del resto, son las pinceladas dominantes de un cuadro lacerante de enorme sufrimiento y humillación colectiva que definen en buena medida la particular idiosincrasia del campo extremeño (375).[4]

That is the region Acuña hailed from, and the life she fled as a young woman when she set out for the capital city in the middle of the twentieth century. Yet the sounds, colors, expressions, the rituals and symbols, the liveliness of culture in Extremadura rather than being left behind were captured in poems she scribbled on loose sheets of paper she would carry from one place to another. Acuña barely completed elementary school, where attendance was not mandatory, let alone a priority, for girls at the time. But she filled reams of untitled notebooks with verse. In her, a raw intelligence and rare poetic sensitivity found their way around educational and economic obstacles to forge a poetry of great precision and lucidity.

"SHE CAN´T READ OR WRITE, BUT SHE RENDERS POETRY"

Three biographical and poetic phases can be identified in Acuña. First, from 1928 into the late 1940s she lived in Extremadura. Poems she would write much later reflect themes of nature and rites associated with that landscape; in the second phase, from the 1940s to the early 1980s, the poet lived in Madrid and her work increasingly acquires an urbanite flavor; finally, from the 1980s to early 1990s, after she crossed the Atlantic and moved to Central America, her writing turns markedly political. She could as easily dedicate a poem to fellow Spaniard and sometimes-mentor Cayetana Fitz-James Stuart (1926-2014), the late Duchess of Alba, as to Nicaraguan Minister Tomás Borge Martínez (1930-2012), or to an unnamed, barefoot six-year-old child carrying a sibling on his back as he picked up fallen fruit at one of San Salvador's markets.

When she arrived in Madrid during the postwar years, despite her lack of formal education and means, Acuña's charismatic nature and talent opened doors to the soirées hosted by the Duchess of Alba, well known for organizing intellectual and artistic gatherings. The poet also entered the literary circles of the Café Gijón – a premier institution of Spanish letters since the nineteenth century – and joined the nightlife at legendary flamenco establishments like El Corral de la Morería and Café de Chinitas, where she would mingle with socialites and artists like Antonio el Bailarín, Pepita Reyes and Lola Flores. Likewise, she came across scientists and physicians like Gregorio Marañón, José Botella y Llusiá and Julio Iglesias Puga; actors and singers like Fernando Sancho and Sara Montiel at the emblematic Pasapoga Music Hall and Museo Chicote cocktail bar. Apparently, it was at the glamorous Museo Chicote where Salvador Dalí asked Acuña to pose for him, a request she refused on account of what she found to be his obsessive and grotesque habit of grooming his long, iconic mustache.[5]

Partaking in this buzzing, lively culture she met the then budding journalists José Antonio Plaza, Alfredo Amestoy, Tico Medina and Jesús Hermida, who would invite her to recite her poetry at the

national television studios, Televisión Española (TVE). During the 1960s Acuña is reported to have appeared in programs like "Tele-Madrid," "Plaza de España," "Cuarta Dimensión" and "A Toda Plana."

Published in the weekly celebrity and royal news magazine *Garbo* in 1961, the interview "No sabe leer pero compone poesias" (see Fig. 1) displays three striking photographs. The first captures Acuña in a romantic pose, eyes cast down, holding a long-stemmed rose as her black hair cascades over her shoulders. In the second photograph, at the bottom right-hand corner, cigarette in hand, the poet recites with visible emotion as she faces a microphone held by the journalist. Most revealing, though, is the picture on the upper-right hand: Acuña next to three members of the American rhythm and blues and doo wop group The Platters (Pintado 34). At the time that shot was taken, The Platters were on tour and played at the Torrejón de Ardoz American military base near Madrid. A. G. Pintado, the interviewer, writes "cuando estuvo recientemente en Madrid el famoso conjunto de color 'Los Plathers', una mujer joven de cabellos negros acompañó los ratos libres del quinteto. 'Los Plathers' tenían en España una amiga entrañable llamada María Acuña, a la que habían conocido en su primera visita a nuestra capital" (Pintado 34).[6] This illustrates the extent to which the poet was immersed in the cultural happenings of Madrid during the 1960s, having gained access even to internationally renowned American musicians.

Two other remarkable points in the spread stand out. To begin with, the misleading title "She can´t read or write, but she renders poetry." While, as has been noted, Acuña lacked basic schooling, she was literate. The emphasis on her lack of academic credentials, however, points to the fact that she drew inspiration, primarily, from oral culture. That orality is of utmost importance when considering the musicality of her poetry. In fact, one of the interview sub-headings announces "María Acuña, de la aldea extremeña, poetisa y rapsoda" (Pintado 34).[7] This association with classical Greek performance of epic poetry links Acuña to the source of the genre she excelled at through innate talent: "Su declamación de la poesía extremeña ha sentado escuela, aunque inédita, porque María es una de esas raras

• La poetisa María Acuña

NO SABE LEER PERO COMPONE POESIAS

★ *María Acuña, de la aldea extremeña, poetisa y rapsoda.*

★ *«Los Platters» la descubrieron y quisieron llevársela.*

por A. G. PINTADO

Los veintiocho años morenos y sentimentales de María Acuña se expresan con la sabiduría poética del pasado resentido por un amor que se le torció. Ella apenas sabe leer y mucho menos escribir. Y, sin embargo:

—Desde muy pequeña recito las poesías compuestas por mí.

—María, ¿a usted le suenan los nombres de Rubén Darío, Antonio Machado, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer...?

—¿Cómo dice...?

Y comienza a recitar de su cosecha, llorando con los ojos secos de rabia.

«...Un teléfono en mi mente yo siempre estoy recordando, veces giro sus cifras que yo pueda evitarlo...»

María tiene dos clases de versos: los del campo y los de la ciudad. Los últimos son más desgarrados, y hablan de un gran amor que se doctoró en Medicina. Nadie como ella ha logrado recitar a Gabriel y Galán, quizá el único poeta que conoce. Su declamación de la poesía extremeña ha sentado escuela, aunque inédita, porque María es una de esas raras inteligencias creadoras que surgen de pronto entre el pueblo, después de haber permanecido desconocidas durante años.

Ahora se la acaba de descubrir. Cuando estuvo recientemente en Madrid el famoso conjunto de color «Los Platters», una mujer joven de largos cabellos negros acompañó los ratos libres del quinteto. «Los Platters» tenían en España una amiga entrañable llamada María Acuña, a la que habían conocido en su primera visita a nuestra capital.

—Ellos me han aconsejado que cuidara mi arte, y me animaron ahora para que les acompañara a América. Ellos me hacían recitar mis cosas en cualquier parte, pues les gusta mucho mi manera de decir. Me han dicho que si me fuese con ellos podría obtener grandes triunfos.

—¿Y no se va?

—Por ahora no. Quiero que me conozca primero el público español.

LECCIONES PARA POETAS ERUDITOS

«...Y muertecita de miedo cuando lo cojo en mis manos me da pena si lo cuelgo ¡Y qué dolor si te hablo...!»

Nunca se subió a un tablado ni se puso ante unas cámaras cinematográficas. Pero el día que lo haga, María repartirá los beneficios entre los pobres. Ella está casada, vive bien y no necesita el dinero.

Su «violín de Ingres» son las obras de caridad. Conoce del mundo solamente su pequeño pueblo de la Siberia extremeña y Madrid. Cuando está hablando con nosotros le vienen ganas de comer, se excusa y saca de un armario un plato con pescadillas fritas... Como mejor crea sus poesías es descalza, o en la cama. Los rasgos de su escritura parecen hechos por una niña de nueve años. Compone sus poesías principalmente para ella. Por eso, el día en que un célebre compositor le pidió algunas de estas para ponerlas música, ella rechazó la oferta. En pocos minutos su inspiración crea poesías de cuarenta o cincuenta versos bien medidos.

El vocabulario castellano de María es deficiente. Cuando la falta una palabra, su maravillosa intuición la inventa. Sin embargo, sabe entenderse hablando en inglés.

• La poetisa con tres de integrantes del famoso junto «Los Platters», du la reciente visita de los mos a Madrid

Nadie se ha preocupad enseñarle ritmo, dicción, mo..., porque su catedr interior se lo ha ense desde que era muy pequ Cinco corresponsales r panoamérica han acudi panoamérica han ocudi su domicilio, recientem para grabar su voz. Y nos poetas de ancha e ción están asistiendo día día a las clases que M les da sobre poesía pop

GENIO SIN I TRACION

Acuña, un apellido he do de su abuelo patern gran general Acuña, de la Guerra de Cuba. de un sastre de pueblo, ría no ha estudiado má los seis o siete bachille personales de que di todo genio sin ilustraci

Fotos Wa

• María Acuña graba su recital para la radio sudame

Fig. 1. **Interview published in Garbo's number 447 on 7 October 1961.**

inteligencias creadoras que surgen de pronto entre el pueblo después de haber permanecido desconocidas durante años" (Pintado 34).[8] Among the audiotapes found in her literary estate, Acuña can be heard reciting with extraordinary depth works by José María Gabriel y Galán and Luis Chamizo. A second noteworthy aspect of the interview comes through the revelation that she performed her own written poetry since she was a young girl. That explains how, in a subsequent interview she gave in New York in the 1980s, Acuña estimates the volume of her writing by the time she turned thirty would reach 800 poems.[9]

Only one of them is quoted in *Garbo*,

> [...] Un teléfono en mi mente
> yo siempre estoy recordando,
> a veces giro sus cifras
> sin que yo pueda evitarlo [...]
> [...] Y muertecita de miedo
> cuando lo cojo en mis manos
> me da pena si lo cuelgo
> ¡Y qué dolor si te hablo [...]![10] (Acuña qtd. in Pintado 34)

Love and its pangs are a recurrent theme in her poetry. While in the *Garbo* interview a lost love for someone highly educated in the health sciences is mentioned in passing, throughout Acuña's writings an emphasis on the various manifestations of love becomes a powerful source of joy but also sadness – as this early poem suggests.

Despite having been noticed and attaining a relative notoriety during the 1960s, at her death in 1994 Acuña's poetic production lay scattered amidst the papers and items she left in the hands of various family members. Her literary estate consists of an assortment of notebooks with poetry and letters, as well as audiotapes in which she recites her own poetry and the work of others, sings, and tells stories. Her sound archive also includes tapes of interviews she granted to American writer and anthropologist Tobias Hecht, film historian Laura Carías, and exchanges with Chilean doctor Hernán Sanhueza, at the time regional director of International Planned Parenthood

Federation, in New York. The audiotapes have been converted into CDs but most of their content needs to be digitized and catalogued.

CURATING SILENCE

María Acuña would carry scribbled sheets with verses from home to home, continent to continent, her elegies to fallen heroes of the left, or the right, found no certain home while she was alive. In 2015, I set out to write a book that would aim first to collect as much of her poetry as possible, then analyze and contextualize it – hers an important, individual voice amidst the hitherto seldom recognized collective of women's cultural output originating in the postwar years in Spain yet reaching beyond the Atlantic to Latin America. To that end, I spent a sabbatical year in Spain, traveling between Madrid and Extremadura, gathering material. In Madrid, I made use of the Fondo Documental de Radio Televisión Española, Filmoteca Española, Archivo Histórico Nacional, and Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE). As repository of Acuña's sound archive, the BNE was and remains an invaluable resource. It was in the august interior of the eighteen-century palace that houses the library where I found the aforementioned *Garbo* interview. Since the end of that sabbatical leave, I have spent long hours sifting through and transcribing the handwritten poetry manuscripts left behind, and most of the recordings.

The author's handwriting in the sample displayed (see Fig. 2) is legible (the reason I chose it) but most other poems are harder to decipher. None of them is dated, a mere few have titles. The orality of the written sign is quite powerful in all: often words are made up or misspelled, a reminder of the limited schooling Acuña received. While cataloguing and editing the material, I found myself struggling to piece together fragments that may or may not have been jotted down as a single poem. Sometimes the same poem appears in up to eight or more versions. Other times, I had to reconcile the written with the oral rendition of the same words included in the audiotapes. The poor quality of the sound required repeated listening sessions, making for

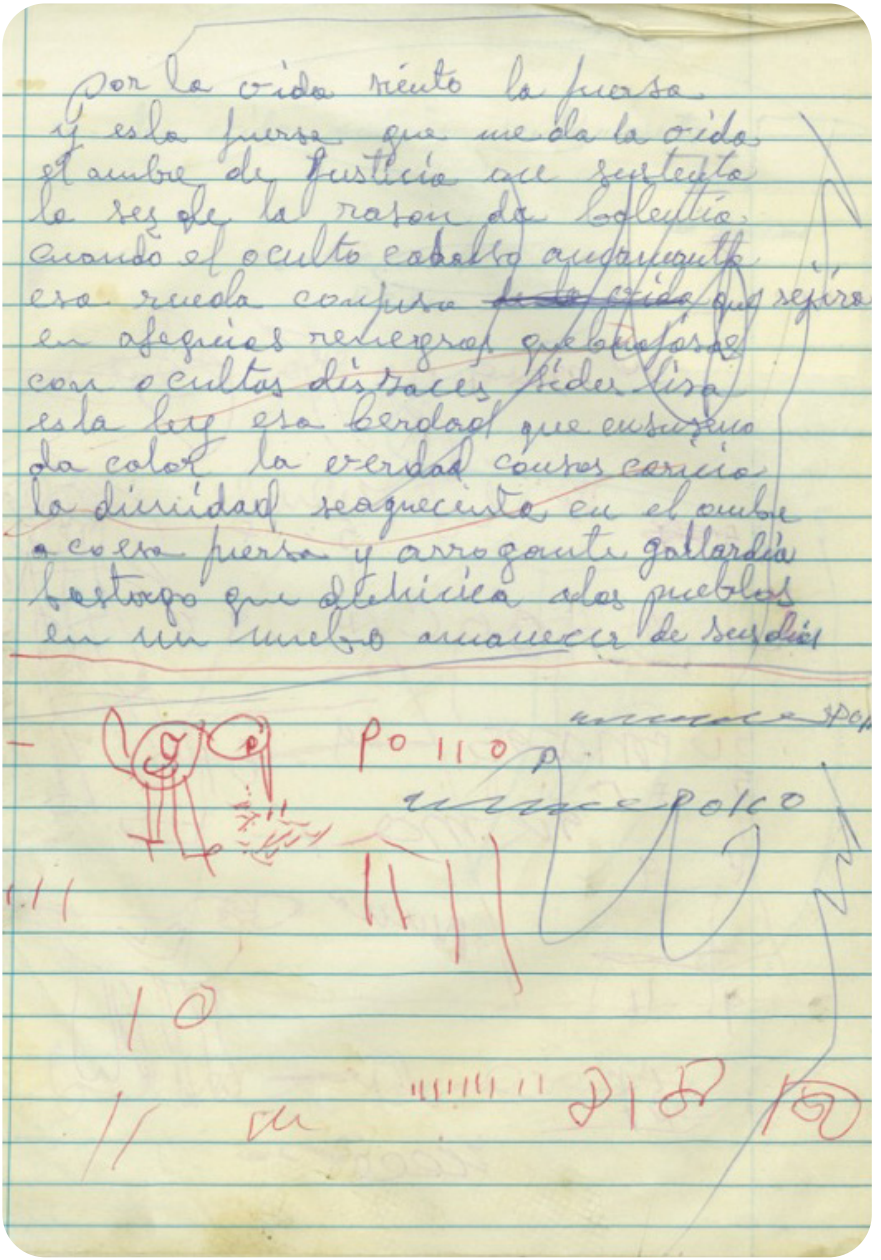

Fig. 2. **Sample page from Acuña's notebooks as an illustration to gauge the curatorial travail involved.**

a painstaking reconstruction of the poems. The *castúo* posed challenges: what words to keep in standard Spanish, which to italicize to signal regionalism? Transcribing was slow, and it would take me five years to arrive at the point of sending a sample of the poetry to publishing houses. While the curatorial work is far from complete, *Poesía descalza*, the first volume, appeared in 2020 and a second book in 2021.

The title poem of the second collection, *Por la vida siento la fuerza* (2021) displayed above in the author's handwriting, appears to have been written after Acuña moved to Central America. The poem addresses the rebellious spirit and energy she would find in politics, particularly during the last phase of her poetic production. Living between El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s and early 1990s, Acuña witnessed first-hand the insurrections and civil wars that tore those two countries apart. At night, she would climb up the stairs to the open sky terrace of the building where she lived to tune in to banned "Radio Venceremos" through shortwave radio. The underground broadcaster for the anti-government Frente Farabundo Martí de Revolución Nacional (FMLN), "Radio Venceremos" kept her apprised of the notorious human rights abuses committed by the Salvadoran military forces and the advances made against them by guerrilla fighters. The poem's opening stanza signals what drew thousands to pick up arms, "El hambre de justica me sustenta/la sed de la razón da valentía," while the third stanza captures hope in the inevitability of change to come:

> Es la ley esa verdad
> que en su seno apacigua con caricias.
> La dignidad se acrecienta en el hombre
> con ímpetu y arrogante gallardía,
> vástago que dignifica a los pueblos
> en un nuevo amanecer de sus días.[11] (Acuña, *Poesía descalza* 49)

Faith in that "nuevo amanecer" fed countless Salvadoran and Nicaraguans, then mired in a conflict that would take too many lives

and propel the exodus of millions. The anaphora (new dawn) is also reflective of the call for a new society encouraged by the Sandinista Revolution. Instead of being readily identifiable with a particular party, however, the poem remains sufficiently abstract and humanitarian in its appeal for community building among the oppressed. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that just as had been the case in Spain, in Central America Acuña's raw intelligence and charisma would bring her close to the echelons of power. In El Salvador, she would meet the first president to be elected after twelve years of civil war, Armando Calderón Sol, but also guerrilla combatants. In Nicaragua, she rubbed elbows with the ideologically divided top-ranking members of the Sandinista ruling junta: Edén Pastora ("Comandante Cero"), Tomás Borge, Sergio Ramírez, Daniel Ortega, Violeta Chamorro and fellow poet and liberation theologian Ernesto Cardenal. In one of her latter works, Acuña dedicates a poem to the Chapultepec Peace Accord (1992).[12]

In addition to the poetry, I have also combed through boxes and papers searching for interviews Acuña gave in the early to mid-1960s, a good number of years after her arrival in Madrid from Badajoz, as well as during the 1980s and early 1990s. The *Garbo* interview is one of the few findings in print I have located to date. As I delve further into the scattered material, I seek to gain greater insight into the complex chronology of Acuña's life and oeuvre, the absence of certain details and the silences ensconced within. Once as complete a documentation as possible is assembled, the first question to address is contextualization.

Among women's silenced voices, where should the work of Acuña be placed? In general terms, at the time she first wrote, the 1950s, scholars identify two types of poetry: "arraigada/rooted" (Dionisio Ridruejo, Leopoldo Panero, Luis Rosales) and "desarraigada/unrooted" (Dámaso Alonso, José Luis Hidalgo, Blas de Otero).[13] While it would be premature to align Acuña's work with a particular school or generation, her poetry is closer to the second, as it shares with it an existentialist character and a preoccupation with social and political concerns. Subsequently, social poetry develops further in the

peninsula and writers like Blas de Otero, José Hierro and Gabriel Celaya transform the angst of the postwar years into protest writing. At the time, only a handful of women poets publish in the journal *Espadaña*, given the patriarchal model set up by the *Sección Femenina* (the women's branch of the Falange political movement – an organization whose mission it was to instruct Spanish women in patriotic, religious, and social morals.) While scant, these women poets hail from diverse regions and deal with different themes (love, nature, social poetry). But the notion of a collective of women writers is not discernible. Yet, these women vindicate their right to the public sphere and find in poetry a measure of freedom. To return to Rosa Burger's search for identity, poetry in the postwar years was a means to finding one's voice. This is something Acuña sought: she left rural Extremadura hungry for greater freedom and an opportunity to create her own path.

In the 1960s, a recurrent theme surfaces among Spanish writers – a preoccupation with being human – and poetry becomes a source of self-knowledge. Subsequently, the generation known as the "novísimos" appears; progressively they begin to distance themselves from political commitment in search of avant-garde and formalist creation, just as experimental poetry irrupts on the scene. Clara Janés begins to write in the 1960s, and her love poetry, as well as themes of otherness, are reflected in her poems; then, in the 1970s Ana María Moix, who forms part of the generation of the "novísimos," begins to be published. Just as women poets gain a foothold in the publishing houses in the 1970s and 1980s, Acuña emigrates to Latin America – a period of poetic production to be studied in the latter part of the book I plan to write, and which requires further research. Poets like Roque Dalton, Ernesto Cardenal, Claribel Alegría or Gioconda Belli are some of the Central American voices to consider in order to assess Acuña's work in the Latin American context.

How can the live poetry circles in which she participated in Madrid during the 1950s and 1960s be understood as an integral part of the literary and cultural formations emerging despite the dictatorship? While the passing of Spain's Law of Historical Memory establishes

the unavoidable moral debt to face up to a difficult past, no reference is made to the gender oppression women endured under the yoke of a patriarchy that made itself felt through discriminatory laws and policies – with the full support of the Church and the *Sección Femenina*. Partly, my research draws on Acuña's poetry to reconstruct a female experience of those postwar years. Women's creative role under Franco, the narrative of regional lives too often neglected, must be acknowledged, and written into Spain's intellectual history. Some examples of the retrieval done to date include Tania Balló's *Las Sinsombrero: Sin ellas la historia no está completa* (2016) and, two years before, the documentary the author made with Serrana Torres and Manuel Jiménez Núñez by the same title. There are also Dulce Chacón's *La voz dormida* (2006), Jesús Ferrero's *Las trece rosas* (2011) and Enesida García Suárez's *Mi infancia en el Franquismo* (2018), as well as a good number of women poets being published by the feminist press Ediciones Torremozas. Yet, with few exceptions, e.g., Enesida García Suárez, upper-class, educated, and urban women writers continue to be the focus. What might the work of an unschooled single mother who recited more than she wrote, who raised by herself the children born of various men, and who scorned the institution of marriage, tell us further about postwar Spain, or the creative lives of ordinary women, or of revolutions in Central America?

Because stopping research on María Acuña in the peninsula would be shortchanging the scope of her legacy. While her formative years in Extremadura (from the late 1920s through the1940s), and her more mature writings in Madrid (where she lived from the1950s through the 1970s) are undeniably the backbone to her poetry, only by engaging with her experiences and politicized literary production in Nicaragua and El Salvador, where she died, could we gain a fuller understanding of this remarkable poet. Since she emigrated to Central America toward the latter part of her life, establishing Spain's cultural connection to Latin American poetic movements post mid-twentieth century is paramount. Acuña's gift for capturing the vitality of a vanishing rural world, her yearning for corporeal love, the searing of partings, her unvanquished free spirit, all reveal a trajectory that belies a

narrative of women's submission. Thus, inviting us to ask: within a context of historical memory recovery, almost three decades after her death, what do unsung creative artists like Acuña yield for our understanding of twentieth-century women?

My work expands on the emerging scholarship by exploring the life and art of a non-canonical poet who does not fit established academic categories, opening onto a panorama where rural and nonelite experiences remain neglected. The book delves into twentieth century poetry, women and gender studies, exile and memory and is animated by the notion that any attempt to restore "forgotten" or "hidden" narratives that progressively become part of academic inquiry ought to include voices neglected in the past. What enabled a country girl to mingle with generals and presidents, to join the cultural avant-garde wherever she landed? How did a semi-literate woman turn into an accomplished poet? The trajectory and moves that took María Acuña from village to capital city to global citizen are etched in a poetry that bears witness to her life and times. What that poetry tells us about the possibilities of transcending place of origin, class, gender, and national boundaries for a twentieth-century woman opens a window on the intersections between cultural and personal memory. The archive, rather than imposing silence, must be grown, as Acuña's two posthumous poetry collections do. That growth reminds us that restoring voice is not only possible but the logical redress to historical omissions. For that reason, an examination of the transatlantic poetry of María Acuña holds the promise of contributing, and enriching, the field of Comparative Hispanic Studies – and it takes us full circle to the second half of the title that opens this essay.

1 Known as “the trial that changed South Africa.” Nelson Mandela and nine other defendants, top members of the African National Congress, were sentenced to life in the Rivonia Trial, at the Pretoria Supreme Court, on two counts of sabotage. For more information, see https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/rivonia-trial-1963-1964.

2 See Yelin 219-38.

3 The TRC process was an extraordinary example of transitional justice. A result of the negotiations between the National Party and the African National Congress, the TRC was an attempt to address and try to heal the ravages of Apartheid, as experienced by victims and perpetrators alike. Forgiveness was not the outcome for all those testifying before the TRC, neither was forgetting. Apartheid survivors, like Franquismo’s victims on both sides, carry unrelenting memories of their historical trauma.

4 English translation: “Postwar Extremadura inherited, mostly, a landscape of great social injustice, exacerbated by the consequences of a fratricidal conflict. In the rural areas, retaliation by one band against the other was ongoing since the beginning of the war, resulting in different outcomes as the civil strife unfolded. These are the thousand faces of an enormous polyhedron that accounts for the wounds, open still in some cases, owing to the cultural and economic backwardness of some districts – particularly those that had been marginalized – well into the 1970s. Religious obscurantism, promoted by a Catholic Church still clinging to the principles of the Council of Trent; political intervention channeled through the enduring and privileged social classes that favored abuse and thrived on entrenched nepotism; land accumulation by the few; labor and personal exploitation, with sharecroppers, day workers and servants surviving chronic hunger in a quasi-slave and feudal structure enforced by unscrupulous masters; sexual favors an unspoken requirement to secure a place within the exploitative household and environs, a lingering reminder of the droit du seigneur; a persisting abject servility as the ideal social system that benefitted a handful growing rich on the backs of others. These brushstrokes help paint a general image of the vast and humiliating collective suffering and peculiar idiosyncrasy on the soil of Extremadura.” Unless noted otherwise, all translations are mine.

5 These biographical details have been gleaned through interviews with Acuña, whose audiotapes the family has donated to Archivo de la Palabra, Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE).

6 English translation: “When the famous African American vocal group The Platters were in Madrid recently, a young woman with black hair accompanied

the quintet during their free time. The Platters had a dear friend named María Acuña, whom they met during their first visit to our capital city."

7 English translation: "From a village in Extremadura: María Acuña, poet and rhapsode."

8 English translation: "Her declamation of poetry from Extremadura has laid the foundations for a new school of poetry. Even though she is unpublished, María is one of those rare, intelligent creators who suddenly breaks into the stage after long years of anonymity."

9 See interview by Columbia University trained Venezuelan film historian Laura Carías, "Poesía CD" at the Archivo de la Palabra, BNE.

10 English translation: "A phone number lives within me / I think of it at all times / Turning the dial / Without meaning to / I shake with fear / When my hands hold the receiver / With regret when I put it down / Sorrow piercing through me as I lift it."

11 English translation: "Hunger for justice sustains me / Thirst for reason encourages me. // That truth is law / It caresses our hearts, appeasing us. / Dignity grows within men / with emboldened impetus and power, / offspring that dignifies the people / a new dawn, for our new days."

12 See prologue to *Poesía decalza*, pp. 13-14.

13 In the early postwar years, two schools of poetry stood out. Linked to the Franco regime, rooted poetry offered an idealized and heroic vision of life embracing the patriarchy and a Catholic ethos while unrooted poetry reflected the existential and political angst of the time.

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110

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