

THE SEARCH FOR EXTRATEXTUAL LIFE: TRANSCULTURAL NARRATION IN *EL HABLADOR*

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Since the arrival of the first Europeans to the American continent there have been generations of oral and written tales reflecting the meeting of peoples. Such an encounter of peoples and traditions has always had linguistic and cultural dimensions. I would posit that yet another encounter takes place in fictional discourse. In the Americas the deep tradition of native storytelling has manifested itself dramatically in innovative narratives at the turn of the century. These print narratives combine aspects of oral and written cultures, of native, ancient, and contemporary stories, and question the suitability and credibility of the written word even while they try to create new communities of readers. What seems to be occurring more recently has to do with the encounter of cultural forms—a collision of the stories and storytelling as a concept, narrative, and locus of meaning. *El hablador*, Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa's 1987 novel, has been of particular interest for its overt curiosity about storytelling and for its structural debt to oral tale-telling. I would like to suggest a rereading of *El hablador*, taking into consideration the works of the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko, which attempt to fuse native or mythic elements with new narrative strategies. Are these texts merely nostalgic excursions toward pre-literary origins, or do they subversively unseat traditional narratives through a double or plural reality? At the very least *El hablador* and other works portray a unique and complicated relationship of narrative to self, reader, community, tradition, and artistry. 87

El hablador, translated "The Storyteller" or literally "The Talkative One," reveals a profound attraction to oral culture and storytelling from the very beginning. An anonymous narrator—contemporary to Vargas Llosa and sharing some of the author's characteristics—describes how, while on holiday in Florence "para olvidarme por un tiempo del Perú y de los peruanos," he unsuspectingly comes upon an exhibition of photographs of the Machiguengas (or Matsigenka), a particularly remote

Amazonian tribe.¹ While perusing the photos, this Peruvian narrator is unnerved by the description of an *hablador*—storyteller—surrounded by a group of listeners. The narrator is stunned that such a notoriously private ritual would have been photographed. He is also titillated to have (finally) seen it represented and thinks that he may recognize the identity of the storyteller. Thus begins the voyeuristic frame tale: these gallery observations from abroad preview and mimic the narrator's real-life attempt to uncover and write the story of an ethnologist friend's fascination with the Machiguenga tribe.

Several important details about the novel's content and structure sketch a profile of cultural difference and collision. Twenty years earlier, before the novel's opening, the narrator meets Saúl Zuratas, a fellow university student who develops an obsessive interest in the Machiguenga. Vargas Llosa paints this friend, Saúl, on a thoroughly symbolic canvas: he has a disfiguring birthmark which covers half his face, bright red hair, and a cruel nickname, "Mascarita" (little mask). He is also half
88 Jewish, has practically memorized "The Metamorphosis" by Kafka and has a talking parrot named Gregor Samsa. Mascarita abandons his study of law for ethnology, then discards ethnology for lacking morality in its approach to "pure" cultures. Eventually, in the narrator's estimation, Mascarita becomes "bewitched" by the Machiguengas and their beliefs (EH 21). He travels to the jungle multiple times, gets to know the tribe and learn their languages, then disappears. At the same time the narrator has become bewitched by Mascarita's entrancement; the narrator speculates that Mascarita, a physical and social outcast, has experienced a type of cultural, and perhaps religious, conversion. After Mascarita disappears, the narrator voyages twice into the jungle to pursue his suspicions about Mascarita and the Machiguengas. But why should the narrator be so enthralled? The remoteness of the tribe, the secrecy of their storytelling traditions (even missionaries and linguists, the novel tells us, who have penetrated the group are unable to get close to the storytelling), and the sacred importance of storytelling all propel the narrator. He attempts to compose a history of the native storytellers himself and writes to Mascarita for help. However, lacking a response and doubting other sources, he abandons the project: "inventadas por mí, las voces de los habladores desafinaban" (EH 104).²

The novel is constructed with a split narrative, a strategy that Vargas Llosa has used elsewhere. Here, the chapters alternate between the narrator's first-person narrative and transcripts of mythic stories told among the Machiguenga. The novel's overall trajectory is, that as the narrator slowly approaches the truth about his friend, the storytelling chapters suspensefully reveal the identity of the tribal storyteller. They are of course the same person: Mascarita has joined the Machiguengas and become a storyteller, a fact long suspected by the narrator and reader.

Since its publication *El hablador* has garnered quite a lot of critical attention, with many attempts to explain the novel's obvious dichotomies, including the clash of fiction and reality and the tension between orality and literacy. Others have suggested that the novel is a newer version of South America's preoccupation with civilization

and barbarism or that it parodies the large, perplexing differences in contemporary society. My current interest in the novel has to do with the mythic sections as a structural device that works with and against the rest of the narrative. I see Vargas Llosa as responding to the formal concerns of modernity at the same time that he tells or invites the reader to notice these formal concerns. In particular, his construction of the narrator, the storyteller, and the divided narrative sets off an intended reaction that affects our reading and our sense of the novel as a form.

First, let us consider why there are some interpretive challenges to the storytelling sections. One notices they are told in the first person, by the storyteller himself, with repetitive phrases or oral markers. They are sprinkled with native terms and make specific references to the group of Machiguenga that are listening: “Aquí estamos. Yo en el medio, ustedes rodeándome. Yo hablando, ustedes escuchando. Vivimos, andamos. Eso es la felicidad, parece.” (EH 41)³

While the storyteller’s use of “we” locates him as a member of the larger group, his distinction between “I” and “you all” is distancing because he also makes reference to himself as different from the rest. This emphasis on difference seems to mirror the very separateness of the split narratives; the shifts between chapters are as abrupt as one movie narrative cross-cut by another. They are separate screens, separate worlds.

The stories themselves include the origins and nomadic nature of the tribe, descriptions of Tasurinichi, the creator, and practices of the *seripigaris* (shaman or *curanderos*). The tales of Tasurinichi or other mythic figures are often introduced by some version of the phrase “Y [Tasurinichi] me contó esta historia que ahora les voy a contar” or are followed by the refrain “Eso es, al menos, lo que he sabido” (EH 52, 56).⁴ In other moments the storyteller veers away from the transmission of tales and gives his singular interpretations of certain tribal practices and beliefs (including infanticide of the disabled and the secondary status of women). Eventually the storyteller revealingly describes himself physically and his new lease on life for having joined the tribe. Throughout, the mythic sections remain quite separate from the frame tale sections and the traditional tales seem remote to the contemporary narrative.

Reading this novel in the context of other works from the Americas that also draw on native storytelling traditions provokes worthwhile comparisons. For example, *El hablador* was published 10 years after Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, a novel in English which integrates myth from the Laguna Pueblo of New Mexico with a contemporary narrative. Silko is very clear that she makes no distinction between types of stories, but understands all stories relevant to a community as forming an intricate and infinite web.⁵ The continuity of *Ceremony*’s main narrative with “mythopoetic” fragments is therefore part of Silko’s larger narrative and conceptual design. Silko extends this concept in her novel by collapsing the perceptual boundaries between a mythic world and the experiential world. *Ceremony*’s unnamed narrator functions not as the sole creator of the text but as the mediator between the reader and “Thought-Woman,” an “external” or loftier source and the figure behind all true

beginnings. In terms of narrative, Silko's multiple voices or narratives do not seem related to technical artifice or fragmentation for its own sake. Rather, multiple narratives provide an emphasis on community and a modest and necessary dissolution of a singular narrative voice. In primarily oral cultures, which are frequently small, any telling is likely to have more than one participant. Any individual tale or perspective would likely be accompanied by a story or stories of origin, thus multiplying the "voice," but also interconnecting, not alienating.

In *El hablador* the reader's reflection on the identities of the storyteller and narrator, the ostensible sources of the narrative, is practically required. While it is true that the split sections contain their own plots, the reader's impetus for reading is to determine the elusive identity of the storyteller hinted at by both the narrator and the storyteller. The narrator and reader, in effect, metaphorically circle the same figure at the same time that the storyteller is presumably encircled by listeners. Yet, the narrator's unconfident attitude and overt desire to pursue the truth makes us wonder. Does he, do we, believe the storyteller is really a storyteller? The reader can't help but ask: how convincing are the storytelling sections as transcriptions or as realistic experience? The author himself raises the specter of inauthenticity.

If the mythic chapters are performance scripts, the burden of realism is very large. On the surface there is the problem of language. Although the storyteller's monologue frequently includes Machiguenga words, it is notably in Spanish, and the term Machiguenga (as the narrator himself points out) is a hispanicized term (EH 8). At the very least, then, these transcriptions are translated, if not further removed. And though they are rambling with occasional remarks to listeners (the oral markers), the storytelling sections retain regular paragraph breaks, punctuation, and complete sentences, remaining on the whole more literary than spontaneous. These sections do feel contrived, seamless in an unbelievable way. In contrast, the mythopoetic sections in *Ceremony* are centered on the page, arranged in verses recalling incantations and ponderous performances.

Diana Beatriz Salem, Allen Johnson, and others who have studied the Machiguenga have indicated that the elevated figure of the *hablador* as presented in the novel does not exist in the Machiguenga culture. Within that group, the oldest *seripigari* is usually accorded the most respect and, because of his age and knowledge, assumes the role of teller of the tribal tales. However, there is no great mystery accorded to his identity or function. Salem further explains that from the tribe's point of view, a non-native (like Mascarita) could never become a *seripigari* because, when under the influence of *ayahuasca*, the hallucinogen that produces their visions, the outsider would see images of his own culture instead of the ancestral images of the Machiguenga (Salem 146-48). In addition, Vargas Llosa's storyteller includes some personal details that stand out as suspicious. It is as though the storyteller's manner is both too flamboyant and too perfected, too individually oriented to fit the conception of a storyteller as the voice of a group.⁶ It is interesting to note that while the anonymous and equally

important narrator remains literally out of sight, the storyteller in *El hablador* casts a physical presence, though “masked,” through his own description; and then he virtually steps into a spotlight by voicing personal objections to tribal practices.

One concludes that Vargas Llosa, though having done impressive research (including works cited in the narrative and in the book’s acknowledgements) and drawing on his own trips to the Amazon with an anthropologist in the 1950s, liberally invented the Machiguenga figure of the storyteller and other cultural components of his narrative.⁷ Interestingly enough, the storytelling fragments have received an entire gamut of critical opinions in the minefield of assessing authenticity. They have been deemed satiric or parodic by some, and as “initiated into an ancient wisdom,” a harmonization of the “modern and primitive” by another.⁸ How can one interpret such a range of responses? On the one hand, Vargas Llosa has created in Mascarita an impossible, clown-like figure—red-haired, marked, a misfit—who cannot be taken seriously, especially when he veers away from traditional stories. On the other hand, it would seem that in the absence of narratives written by Machiguenga writers, Vargas Llosa’s ersatz storytelling awakens an element of what Louis Owens call “ethnostalgia” in certain readers (12). Anxious to encounter the authentically native, the non-native reader finds the mythic stories a quaint and untouched strain in counterpoint to the narrator’s (and reader’s own) cosmopolitan jadedness.

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Vargas Llosa has suggested that he favors the ambiguity of a split narrative because he prefers fiction that calls attention to its construction.⁹ But in its acknowledged attempts at representation, *El hablador* crafts a deeper, modernist inquiry into the nature of literary origins. If, in the context of the narrative, the storytelling sections are utterly fictionalized, one might suspect that the narrator has imagined and written them. The fictionalized transcripts then become the extreme imaginative extension of the narrator’s obsessive interest in the *habladores*. Although the narrator confesses he has given up writing about the *habladores*, he has, in fact, produced a memoir that does just that. (A fact underscored by the way he signs off the text, listing the dates and locations of his writing.) He also writes specifically of the frustrated desire to re-create that mythic voice in a literary style:

la dificultad que significaba inventar, en español y dentro de esquemas intelectuales lógicos, una forma literaria que verosímilmente sugiriese la manera de contar de un hombre primitivo, de mentalidad mágico-religiosa. Todos mis intentos culminaban siempre en un estilo que me parecía tan obviamente fraudulento.... (EH 152)¹⁰

By thus calling attention to his own shortcomings in imitating or re-creating the imagined storytelling style, the narrator sets up a comparison of his narrative performance with that of Mascarita’s, and, of course, Vargas Llosa’s. The problem seems to be that literary language and forms, those marks on a page, will always disappoint, because representation will always be limited and true meaning lies in shared experience and in the stories themselves.

Ultimately the book revolves around these two figures—the unnamed narrator-author and the eponymous storyteller, who is identified by function but hidden behind his nickname. This centering on two elusive figures begs the question: where is the humanity in all this? The fact that the author is never quite sure, never can completely know Mascarita's motivations or fate suggests that the answer is not in the text. That is, the imagined voice of the Machiguenga storyteller continuing to haunt the author on the last page as he wanders around Florence is the extratextual life, the elusive humanity, the vitality and traditions of a community that he cannot know. For Mascarita, the novel claims the Machiguenga and their stories have had a transformative effect. As in Gregor Samsa's experience, Mascarita's transformation appears to be total and inexplicable. The modernist preoccupation and appeal of both figures is that their humanity, though (even horribly) obscured, is very present. Though Kafka's work embraces the fantastic realm, Vargas Llosa remains grounded in a realism that only allows for speculation of distant myths while mechanically blurring fiction and reality.¹¹

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In *El hablador* the search for the essentially human is also a search for literary and cultural origins. If the novel, like the epic, depends on a relationship to origins, the transcultural realignment in Vargas Llosa's novel is that, through the mythic segments, those origins must shift to include the local imagination. That said, the novel is neither an Edenic narrative celebrating Machiguenga culture nor a declensionist tale pointing to their inevitable decline or assimilation. There is a certain ethnostalgia, but the novel critiques both the modern and the traditional. Vargas Llosa thwarts ethnology as a mode of encounter and condemns the capitalistic destruction of the jungle. And via the storyteller's (albeit personal) commentaries on tribal practices, he avoids remythologizing the Machiguenga as pure "ecobeings."

Unlike Silko's novel, which begins in the oral-mythic imagination represented by an "ethnic insider" (to use Werner Sollers's term, 256), *El hablador* begins in the literate imagination and tries to inject it with the oral. But for all the interest and importance accorded to storytelling, the novel fails to integrate its essence. The continuity of an oral and written imagination (and an uninterrupted oral culture), which *Ceremony* displays, is absent. *El hablador* attempts, fails, and laments its own formal capacity to enter and represent the oral world. Mascarita's monologues are perplexing circus performances before an unknown audience of readers. Yet the distinct narratives, seemingly simultaneous, propose worlds and forms in contact, a multitude of voices that threaten chaos like the side story of the narrator's technologically challenged television show, appropriately named "The Tower of Babel." There is no closure; the novel remains open, and we are still left to ask if, in the modern world, experience and representation can ever be coextensive.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Vargas Llosa, *El hablador* (hereafter abbreviated as EH) 7, "in order to forget for a while Peru and the Peruvians." (This and all subsequent translations are my own unless otherwise noted.)
- 2 "invented by me, the storytellers' voices wouldn't ring true."
- 3 "Here we are. I, in the middle, you all around me. I talking, you listening. We live, we walk. That is happiness, it seems" (trans. Helen Lane, *The Storyteller*, 1989).
- 4 "And [Tasurinichi] told me the story I'm about to tell you." "That, anyway, is what I have learned."
- 5 Silko describes, for example, in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of Spirit* how oral storytelling within the Laguna Pueblo community always embraces the creation story and understands all other stories to be a part of it.

- 6 As Louis Owens explains in *Other Destinies*, "For the traditional storyteller, each story originates with and serves to define the people as a whole, the community.... Within the oral tradition, literature is authorless ..." (10-11).
 - 7 Vargas Llosa describes his trip with Juan Comas, the Mexican anthropologist, in the late 1950s, in "A Passion for Peru." For a discussion of the source materials for native myth in *El hablador*, see chapter entitled "The Storyteller" in *Rain Forest Literatures: Amazonian Text and Latin American Culture* by Lúcia Sá.
 - 8 See William Rowe and Vivian Schelling's discussion of *El hablador* as satire in *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America*, 213-14, and María del Carmen Prodoscimi's review of the novel.
 - 9 See, for example, his comments about invented narrators in *Cartas a un joven novelista*, 65-66.
 - 10 "the difficulty of inventing, in Spanish and within a logically consistent intellectual framework, a literary form that would suggest, with any reasonable degree of credibility, how a primitive man with a magico-religious mentality would go about telling a story. All my attempts led each time to the impasse of a style that struck me as glaringly false..." (trans. Helen Lane)
- 94** 11 See María Isabel Acosta Cruz' analysis of Vargas Llosa's tendency to write fiction closely related to reality.