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# Dionysian Embodiment: Abject Queerness in Federico García Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman"

*El poema "Oda a Walt Whitman" de Federico García Lorca (Poeta en Nueva York, 1940) es bien conocido por su lenguaje homofóbico. Este artículo explora, a través de las imágenes del cuerpo, la incomodidad y el asco que rodean la subjetividad* queer *del poema. Mi análisis se centra en la dicotomía entre el encaramiento apolíneo y dionisíaco, una tensión que revela el vínculo entre la conceptualización lorquiana de lo* queer *y la abyección.*

Palabras clave: *García Lorca, abyección,* queer*, subjetividad, Dionisio*

*Federico García Lorca's poem "Ode to Walt Whitman" from Poeta en Nueva York (1940) is well-known for its shockingly homophobic language. This article explores the discomfort and disgust surrounding queer subjectivity in the poem, specifically through images of the body. My analysis is centered on the dichotomy between Apollonian and Dionysian embodiment, a tension that reveals how Lorca's conceptualization of queerness is linked to abjection.*

Keywords: *García Lorca, abjection, queer, subjectivity, Dionysus*

In June 1929, Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) arrived in New York to study at Columbia University, a trip that would radically influence his poetic voice. During his time in New York City and Vermont, and later in his three-month stay in Cuba, he wrote the poems that would eventually comprise his book *Poeta en Nueva York* (*Poet in New York*), published posthumously in 1940. One of his best-known poems from the book is "Oda a Walt Whitman" ("Ode to Walt Whitman"), written in 1930 and "privately printed in full for an elite homophile audience" (Smith "Double vision" 171,) in Mexico in 1933.[1] John K. Walsh reports further that "the first printing … was a special edition of fifty copies, run off by a private press called Alcancía in Mexico City and released on 5 August 1933" (258-59) and was later published in part in Gerardo Diego's anthology *Poesía española* in 1934 (260). The poem shows the figure of Walt Whitman as an emblem of homoerotic male desire rooted in a bucolic past, contrasted

against the New York queer scene in the late 1920s. "Ode to Walt Whitman" has inspired numerous analyses about the queerness displayed in the work. Lorca, a gay man, expresses at times a startling and upsetting attack against the so-called *maricas* – effeminate queer men engaged in public expressions of sexuality – of New York and other cities. The poem reveals an ideological discomfort that Paul Julian Smith refers to with the psychoanalytic term "ambivalence" (Smith "Double vision" 170). I propose to analyze the ambivalence of "Ode to Walt Whitman" through the lens of abjection – as a method of leaning into the ideological discomfort of this poem, both that of the lyrical subject and that of the reader. How does Lorca use the abject to cause disgust and discomfort towards "unacceptable" forms of queerness? How does this abjection affect queer subjectivity?

## DISGUST, DISCOMFORT, AND DESIRE: KRISTEVA'S THEORY OF ABJECTION

Lorca's poetic expression of queerness in relation to the portrayal of "unacceptable" forms of queerness can be better understood through the psychoanalytic concept of abjection. As defined by the French-Bulgarian critic Julia Kristeva in her 1980 book *The Powers of Horror*, abjection is the sense of horror and disgust that provokes a rupture with one's sense of self. There is no longer an opposition between "I and Other" (7). Abjection is both a condition that is experienced and also a process of doing away with borders of subjectivity and corporality even while attempting to affirm one's identity. Among Kristeva's multiple examples, the disgust that both produces and is a symptom of abjection can come about from witnessing a cadaver, vomit, or even the sticky film of proteins on the surface of milk (3). Illness, uncleanliness, or a repulsive object are all abject given how they "disturb identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). As we will see, Lorca's poem is full of elements of waste, death, and contamination. These abject elements threaten the boundaries of the subject and are seemingly inescapable. This disturbance of identity and order are present in "acceptable" versus "unacceptable" forms of queerness that Lorca's poetic voice proffers in "Ode to Walt Whitman." Diana Fuss's discussion of the abject homosexual in *Inside/Out* aligns with the ambivalence and abjection in Lorca's poem, which casts queerness as the "outside" against the heterosexual "inside." Fuss contends that "heterosexuality secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality" (2). While Fuss speaks of homosexuality versus heterosexuality, I will also be using the term "queer" in addition to "homosexual" to refer to the dynamics at play in Lorca's poem and in the larger historical backdrop of the setting.

The term "queer" has a long evolutionary history and now encapsulates the non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender, covering a wide variety of identities, desires, expressions of self and community that do not fit under a single word such as "gay." When I refer to the "queer scene" of 1920s New York, it is within this broad semantic context. This retroactive application of terminology is, however, done with caution: this is not the terminology that Lorca would have used. While the term "queer" has been a slur, and can still be used as such, it had begun to be reclaimed as an identifier in early twentieth-century New York.[2] Certain terminology at work here is indeed ahistorical, such as the idea of "internalized homophobia." To speak of internalized homophobia on the part of Lorca is perhaps not a term that he or his contemporaries would have used, but remains a useful label to help the reader understand the confusion, disgust, and longing expressed in the poem, and one that other Lorca scholars have understood to be a part of his expression of sexuality.[3] As we will see, the designation of "acceptable" versus "unacceptable" forms and expressions of queerness in the poem are linked to the concept of what is deemed "natural" in a heteronormative society, and that which does not fit within these borders becomes abject.

In "Oda a Walt Whitman," we see that Lorca's poetic self, the "I," expresses his revulsion at certain forms of queerness, a feature of the poem that has been discussed by numerous critics.[4] The specific reading of abjection in Lorca's work is far rarer than analyses of "Ode to Walt Whitman." Currently, Elena Castro's chapter in *La subversión del espacio poético en el surrealismo español* approaches visual elements in Lorca's drawings and poems through the lens of abjection and explores how the abject serves as a means of subverting dominant discourses in Lorca's surrealist aesthetics. José Antonio Llera's *Lorca en Nueva York: una poética del grito* is also a reading of the abject in Lorca's New York poetry, as he references Kristeva in his analysis of the representations of vomit, blood, and urine (Llera, *Lorca* 51). Despite exploring the transgressive nature of these bodily fluids, Llera does not delve deeply into Kristeva's text, nor does he specifically connect abjection to sexuality. Miguel García López discusses Kristeva and the abject in *Queering Lorca's Duende: Desire, Death, Intermediality* in a chapter that analyses the grotesque in Lorca's drawings. For García López, the abject is a way of straddling the boundary between life and death, connected to Lorca's concept of the *duende*. My approach, however, questions how the abject relates to queer embodiment, specifically the disgust surrounding the transgressions of the *maricas.* Abjection and "Ode to Walt Whitman," therefore, are clearly intertwined, and will prove key to unpacking Lorca's discomfort around supposed "unacceptable" expressions of queer subjectivity.

"EXTRA-HUMAN ARCHITECTURE AND FURIOUS RHYTHM": LORCA IN NEW YORK

*Poet in New York* is a site of literary anguish, anguish that is mediated in Lorca's "Ode" through the figure of Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Arriving in the hostile urban landscape of New York City, so different from his native Granada, Lorca faced a strange, overwhelming environment, itself a protagonist in this poem. The poet arrived on the heels of crushing artistic (and potentially romantic) rejection from Salvador Dalí and the end of his relationship with sculptor Emilio Aladrén (Richter 70). He went on to witness firsthand the devastation of the Wall Street Crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. Lorca's time in New York City was pivotal for both his personal life and artistic development. According to Lorca himself, *Poeta en Nueva York* is a lyric portrait of "Nueva York en un poeta. Un poeta que soy yo" (*Obras III* 163) and critics have approached the book as both autobiographical and as a site of literary imagination. In his lecture on *Poet in New York*, Lorca describes his poetry as narrating a particular isolation: "No os voy a decir lo que es Nueva York por fuera, … ni voy a narrar un viaje, pero sí mi reacción lírica con toda sinceridad y sencillez … [l]os dos elementos que el viajero capta en la gran ciudad son: arquitectura extrahumana y ritmo furioso. Geometría y angustia" (*Obras III* 164). Lorca's poetic voice in "Ode to Walt Whitman," stunned by the city's publicly visible queer scene, turns to the transcendentalist poet as a refuge in his time of culture shock.

In this new atmosphere, Lorca's poetry also undergoes an evolution of style, as Maurer notes in the introduction to *Sebastian's Arrows*: "*Poet in New York* marks an abrupt change in his poetic work. Abandoning the shorter lines, rural ambience, and stylized imitation of popular verse … he creates a Whitmanesque protagonist who denounces the evils of modern civilization, above all in the United States" (xxiv). This "Whitmanesque protagonist" is most evident in "Ode," but also ties into a larger transformation of his poetics. David Richter's *Garcia Lorca at the Edge of Anguish* makes a similar point about *Poet in New York's* anguish over modernization: "the New York projects constitute an engaged critique that questions artistic and social norms and draws attention to the amplified sense of existential void caused by the modern age" (71). The apostrophized figure of Whitman serves as the symbolic center for the main ideological tensions of the poem.

This "existential void" is most evident in the dichotomy between the contemporary urban development of the city and the imagined bucolic past, and it is this dichotomy that sets the poetic stage for the opening of "Ode to Walt Whitman." The poem begins with a scene of workers on the banks of a river, but not the Hudson. This is the East River – which runs by

Harlem, a prominently Black neighborhood, as well as the Bronx, both sites of multiple cruising grounds.[5] Leslie Stainton situates Lorca's own cruising grounds as those of Harlem, in particular, the club Small's Paradise (228), which Chauncey situates in the epicenter of Harlem's gay scene "in the area between Fifth and Seventh Avenues, from 130th to 138th Street" (252). The poem opens with a scene of tireless industry:

Por el East River y el Bronx

los muchachos cantaban enseñando sus cinturas,
con la rueda, el aceite, el cuero y el martillo.
Noventa mil mineros sacaban la plata de las rocas
y los niños dibujaban escaleras y perspectivas.

Pero ninguno se dormía,
ninguno quería ser el río,
ninguno amaba las hojas grandes,
ninguno la lengua azul de la playa. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 266, 1-9)

In these first two stanzas, Lorca situates the reader geographically within the city, establishing a scene that is both erotic and industrial. The young men are sensual as they "[enseñan] sus cinturas" (1) with the phallic "martillo" (*Poeta* 3) in hand and yet work with tools of industrialization to forge the constantly growing city. Despite their physical proximity to the river, they are disconnected from the serenity of nature: "ninguno quería ser el río, / ninguno amaba las hojas grandes, / ninguno la lengua azul de la playa" (7-9). Lorca continues with an increasingly grim portrait of industrial modernity:

Cuando la luna salga
las poleas rodarán para turbar el cielo;
un límite de agujas cercará la memoria
y los ataúdes se llevarán a los que no trabajan.

Nueva York de cieno,
Nueva York de alambres y de muerte.
¿Qué ángel llevas oculto en la mejilla?
¿Qué voz perfecta dirá las verdades del trigo?
¿Quién el sueño terrible de sus anémonas manchadas? (García Lorca, *Poeta* 266-267, 20-28)

The moon is disturbed by industrialization, its rising in turn clouded by pulleys, wires and buildings – scenes of construction that will inevitably block the view of the moon as they continue to advance. The penalty for failing to engage in the toil of capitalist industry is a deadly one: "los ataúdes se llevarán a los que no trabajan" (23). The poetic voice denounces industrialization and capitalism throughout the poem as a form of social protest. The condemnation of industrialized America is clear in the sixth stanza, and Lorca's poetic voice questions the city, seeking some form of redemption in the form of an "ángel," (26), a "voz perfecta" (27) who can speak long-forgotten "verdades del trigo" (27), which have been obliterated due to industrialization.

It is against this dark atmosphere of destruction of the American pastoral and questions of fertility that Lorca invokes the figure of Walt Whitman. Whitman was a transcendentalist poet best associated with nature through his works such as *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and whom Lorca knew to be gay, despite the subduing of Whitman's queer sexuality in Álvaro Armando Vasseur's translated anthology, *Poemas* (Gibson, *Mundo gay* 323-24). Lorca's initial encounter with Whitman was through Vasseur's translation, which may have influenced his depiction of Whitman in the poem as less outwardly sexual.[6] Apostrophizing the dead poet, Lorca writes:

Ni un solo momento, Adán de sangre, macho,
hombre solo en el mar, viejo hermoso Walt Whitman,
porque por las azoteas,
agrupados en los bares,
saliendo en racimos de las alcantarillas,
temblando entre las piernas de los chauffeurs
o girando en las plataformas del ajenjo,
los maricas, Walt Whitman, te señalan. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 267, 45-52)

Lorca's portrait of Whitman is that of soft masculinity rooted in the pastoral. Whitman's status as a transcendentalist poet already connects him with nature outside of the poem; that Lorca situates him in the pastoral is of particular importance to the expression of male queer sexuality that defies industrialization. As Enrique Álvarez observes in *Dentro/fuera,* pastoral space is deeply connected to classical Greek mythology and "has been adapted through literary history to express the yearnings and desires of the homosexual imagination, from Virgil's *Second Eclogue* to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*" as well as in Andre Gide's *Corydon* (267). Lorca reinforces these pastoral references within "Ode" with the images of the "mariposa," (García Lorca, *Poeta* 267, 30) "luna," (31) and "niebla" (34)

("butterfly, moon, mist"). The butterflies in Whitman's beard are especially significant, as, according to Rob Stone in his key study "'Quiero llorar': Lorca and the Flamenco Tradition in *Poeta en Nueva York*": "Lorca employs the butterfly as a symbol of dream-like aspirations which, when contextualized by the metamorphosis of puberty, may be understood in Freudian terms as the elusive realization of his true sexuality" (503). The image of the butterfly therefore links Whitman even closer with a utopian, dream-like queer masculinity and sexuality. These emblems of nature are soft, bordering on feminine, but Lorca reinforces the masculine within this softness: he has "hombros de pana" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 267, 31), and, of great importance, his lush and pure "barba" (30). The images associated with Whitman in this stanza are ephemeral, characterized by whiteness: the white light of the moon, the delicate wings of a butterfly in his white beard.

Of crucial importance is Whitman's comparison with Apollo: his "muslos de Apolo virginal" (32), an image that, like "pájaro," is evocative of both the erotic and the classical. Apollo, Greek god of sun, light, poetry, and truth, loans these qualities to Lorca's Whitman through the proximity of their association. Apollo appears elsewhere in Lorca's work as figure connected to homosexuality, including earlier in *Poeta en Nueva York* in the homoerotic "Tu infancia en Menton." As Paul Binding observes about both "Oda" and "Tu infancia": "Apollo was the first Greek god to make love to a member of the male sex; in certain classical and post-classical literature his name becomes a shorthand for homosexual relations" (23). The erotic present in this imagery is paradoxical in nature; the "muslos de Apolo" are clearly sensual, and yet they are "virginal." Of this paradox, Binding writes: "we have seen that Lorca usually introduces [Apollo] to provide cultural ballast for discussion of homosexual themes. He is virginal in that his sexual behaviour is free from sinfulness" (136). Whitman, a gay man and the author of "We Two Boys Together Clinging" was by no biographical indication virginal, but Lorca's poetic voice seeks to make him less sexually expressive and excessive. To allude to Apollo is to implicitly – or, in Lorca's case, as we shall see, explicitly – allude to Dionysus. One modern usage of this dichotomy is described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy:* Apollo, the god of the sun, is "[the] luminous one … his image must include that measured limitation, that freedom from wilder impulses, that wise calm of the image-making god" (16). The abstemious Whitman of Lorca's "Ode," with his virginal Apollonian thighs and luminous beard is diametrically opposed to Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility, theater, and ritual madness. Whitman is the "enemigo del sátiro / enemigo de la vid," positioning him against promiscuity and drunkenness, two hallmarks of Dionysius. If Apollo represents order and limitation, Dionysus threatens rigid social

boundaries. Dionysian rituals, according to Eric Csapo, "dissolve social boundaries by rendering them ambivalent and paradoxical, confusing things with their opposites, until the social status distinctions between them appear artificial and meaningless" (254). That which stems from Dionysus pushes at normative structures, which we will see enacted by the *maricas*.

Lorca presents the reader with these Dionysian aspects of the poem in contrast to the Apollonian Whitman. He writes:

Ni un solo momento, Adán de sangre, macho,
hombre solo en el mar, viejo hermoso Walt Whitman,
porque por las azoteas,
agrupados en los bares,
saliendo en racimos de las alcantarillas,
temblando entre las piernas de los chauffeurs
o girando en las plataformas del ajenjo,
los maricas, Walt Whitman, te señalan. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 267, 45-52)

Lorca's poetic voice at first continues with his framing of Whitman as an idyllic paragon of chaste masculinity, an "Adán de sangre, macho" (*Poeta* 45). He is positioned in contrast to "maricas" (52) who do not embody the "hermosura viril" (40) that the very masculine Whitman does. Lorca's Whitman is therefore less of a sexual being and more of an erotic one, a lover of men in a way divorced from the body and elevated to a less carnal plane. He is an object of desire who desires from afar. However, the *maricas* are cast as a Dionysian opposite, sordid and separated from nature entirely. Not only are they outside of Whitman's natural world, in the urban landscape, "agrupados en los bares" (48) they are lascivious, engaged in drunkenness and sex "temblando entre las piernas de los chauffeurs / o girando en las plataformas del ajenjo" (50-51). The poetic voice emphasizes such disgust when he describes the *maricas* as a type of pestilence invading the city: "saliendo en racimos de las alcantarillas" (49), more rat or insect than human. Even worse, they point to Whitman as one of their own: "los maricas, Walt Whitman, te señalan" (52). Such pointing-out can be seen to relate to the rituals of Dionysus: to look directly at the god was significant, as "the principal way of taking possession is through the eyes" (Cspaso 256). This idea of possession is interwoven in the poetic voice's disgust towards this action of pointing, of claiming. Jonathan Mayhew observes that this pointing signals that "their sexuality is justified by his" (*Legacy,* 150), tying the *maricas* to Whitman in a way that the poetic voice vehemently rejects.

In this contrast of Apollo against Dionysus as two archetypes of queer expression, we see an underlying ideological tension. Whitman's New York

poetry would seem to fall on the Dionysian side of the divide with his poem "City of Orgies":

City of orgies, walks and joys,
City whom that I have lived and sung in your midst will one day make you illustrious,
Not the pageants of you – not your shifting tableaus, your spectacles, repay me:
……
Not those – but, as I pass, O Manhattan! your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love,
Offering response to my own – these repay me;
Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me. (Whitman in Chisholm 121, lines 1-3 and 7-9)

As Diane Chisholm argues, "Whitman's city poet derives joy from the abundance with which passers-by reflect ("repay") his investment of desire. He interpellates … bustling pedestrian city traffic with a gay gaze … It is a look of homosocial/homosexual exchange between city lovers – a 'robust love' between fellow Manhattanese" (21-22). These "tableaus" and "spectacles" are similar to the scenes that Lorca's poetic voice observes in "Oda a Walt Whitman," though, as in Lorca's poem, in "City of Orgies" Whitman's lyric self does not obtain his greatest pleasures from these spectacles, but rather, through an exchange of gazes with other queer men. The scene that Whitman paints, however, is quite different from that of Lorca's vision of queer Manhattan. Mayhew maintains that it is this "misreading" of Whitman that Lorca so viciously objects to, while he is simultaneously misreading Whitman himself. This is exemplified in the poetic voice's horror over the *maricas* pointing to Whitman, "this gesture … is parallel to Lorca's own: the speaker of the poem, too, is pointing at Whitman, singling him out for praise and naming him as the most specific precursor of his own sexual identity," (*Legacy* 151) in an ideological move that muddies the waters of the seemingly clear boundary between the two modes of queerness. He is also attempting, through claiming Whitman as his own, to avoid being named and singled out by the *maricas* as one of them: José Moraza explains that the true danger of their pointing is that "inevitablemente, también van a señalar a Lorca" (481).

## "CARNE PARA FUSTA": LORCA'S POETICS OF ABJECTION

The disgust in "Ode" is two-fold: that of the discomfort of the poetic voice towards queerness and the discomfort that this produces in the reader. The main source of this discomfort is the pejorative and abject emotions expressed by a (queer) lyrical self towards other queer poetic subjects.

There are two main areas of discomfort within the poem: embodiment of material and sexual excess under capitalism, and non-normative gender presentation, specifically that of the feminine and the non-macho. The abjection of these bodies is highlighted through the poem's emphasis on the material excess of capitalism, consumerism, and city expansion, all enacted on the bodies of the city's inhabitants. We have already seen how those in the city are tied to the deadly rhythm of capitalist toil, separated from the natural world. Lorca's poetic voice is especially disgusted by the lavish public expression of overindulgence, from the drunkenness ("girando en las plataformas del ajenjo") to the sexual ("temblando entre las piernas de los chauffeurs"). The city queers swarm the streets like insects or rats ("saliendo en racimos de las alcantarillas)," both carnivalesque and repulsive. The poetic voice's disgust is clear here, with the image of queer pestilence connected implicitly to the feces, industrial waste, and foulness of the sewers. These images of bodily fluid and waste are especially significant to the abject, as Elizabeth Grosz explains in *Volatile Bodies:*

> Bodily fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside. They affront a subject's aspiration toward autonomy and self-identity. They attest to a certain irreducible "dirt" or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or the impossibility of the "clean" and "proper." (193-94)

The *maricas*' proximity to the bodily fluids represented by the sewers ties into a continuing escalation of contamination and a breakdown of borders. Fuss's examination of homosexuality as abject, we see how the *maricas*' depiction as unclean and tied to a breakdown of systemic order. It is even more horrific to the poetic voice that they identify with Whitman and have contaminated him through an identification with him:

> ¡También ese! ¡También! Y se despeñan
> sobre tu barba luminosa y casta,
> rubios del norte, negros de la arena,
> muchedumbres de gritos y ademanes,
> como gatos y como las serpientes,
> los maricas, Walt Whitman, los maricas
> turbios de lágrimas, carne para fusta,
> bota o mordisco de los domadores. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 268, 53-60)

The poetic speaker's horror at the *maricas* pointing is encapsulated in the cries of "¡También ese! ¡También!" One after the other, in a kind of Althusserian hailing of "hey, you!" they interpellate Whitman as one of their own. The *maricas* are sheer excess, a horde or a mob attacking the pure figure of Whitman, complete with "gritos y ademanes," (García Lorca, *Poeta* 268, 56), turning abstract as "muchedumbres" (56), and turning non-human as "gatos" and "serpientes" (57). This further connects the *maricas* to Dionysus, who Csapo describes as being an icon of both "ambivalent and theriomorphic sexuality" and whose followers are "somewhere between human and animal" (264). We can clearly see the animal-nature of the *maricas*, who shriek and roam in packs. The *maricas* fling themselves onto Whitman's beard, once full of butterflies ("tu barba llena de mariposas" [53-54]), contaminating its chastity. Their pointing and naming bring Whitman into the realm of the abject, threatening the boundaries between inside and out. Whitman, in his comparison to Apollo, with his reason and restraint, is shown peacefully isolated in previous stanzas, "hombre solo en el mar" (46), and is now swarmed by the pest-like and pestilent *maricas*. They are shown to be both lustful and effeminate: they are "trembling between the legs of chauffeurs," with their trembling invoking effeminacy as they perform oral sex, presented within a sadomasochistic context as "carne para fusta, / bota o mordisco de los domadores" (García Lorca, *Poeta 268,* 59-60), occupying a position of sexual submission. Against the "Adán de sangre, macho" (45) that is Whitman, the *maricas* are the "serpientes" (57) of the Biblical fall from sexual innocence and purity. Whitman's Eden has been forsaken in favor of kinky, depraved excess.

Condemning this lust, Lorca's poetic voice continues to show the *maricas* diametrically opposed to Whitman in terms of their public performativity of queer desire:

Pero tú no buscabas los ojos arañados,
ni el pantano oscurísimo donde sumergen a los niños,
ni la saliva helada,
ni las curvas heridas como panza de sapo
que llevan los maricas en coches y terrazas
mientras la luna los azota por las esquinas del terror. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 268, 67-72)

The *maricas* search out a decadent, painful sexuality of "ojos arañados" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 268, 67), with the imagery of sadomasochism continuing with the "curvas heridas como panza de sapo" (70), while the "luna los azota por las esquinas del terror" (72). These sadomasochistic images of the wounded body are abject, as they open the interior viscera of

the body to the contamination of the outside world. This abject wounding comes directly from nature itself. The moon, once gently fraying Walt Whitman's "hombros de pana" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 267, 31), now attacks the *maricas*, further highlighting both their clash with nature and their excessive public displays of sexuality.

The poetic voice turns back to address Whitman in order to highlight this juxtaposition further:

> Tú buscabas un desnudo que fuera como un río,
> toro y sueño que junte la rueda con el alga,
> padre de tu agonía, camelia de tu muerte,
> y gimiera en las llamas de tu ecuador oculto. (268, 73-76)

In contrast, the figure of Whitman looks for a different kind of sexual desire, a "desnudo que fuera como un río" (73), connecting him once again to the purity of nature, away from the cosmopolitan excess of debauchery and pain. To be divorced from the body, to be a lover of it "bajo la burda tela" (39), in the private sphere, or in the more celestial and ephemeral of Whitman, does not seem possible in the reality of New York's raucous nightlife and rampant industrialization. In *Lorca's Legacy*, Mayhew writes that "Lorca appears unable to envision a positive incarnation of homosexuality in the modern world" (153), and it is only in the creation of this poetic space that the speaker can begin to confront the abject. Horrifyingly for the poetic subject, he is – chronologically – a part of this grotesque scene: he is physically among the rat-like hoard of the city queers, despite his desperate desire to align himself with the chaste and Whitmanesque. This excessive material and corporeal embodiment of queerness produces a deep revulsion in the lyric subject. Whitman is able to avoid the corporeal, telluric sexuality of the *maricas*: while the poetic voice mentions the "thighs of Apollo," this is the body of a god, celestial, one that is transcendent rather than immanent. To elevate Whitman as "anciano hermoso como la niebla" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 267, 34) immediately denounces his corporality. Whitman is removed from the abject of this libidinous impurity, with the poetic voice standing with him.

This invocation of a masculine ideal casts non-normative gender presentation, specifically femininity, as the main object of disgust. This disgust is rooted in the fact that this effeminate queer body is *public* and any enactments of non-normative gender and desire are not confined to the private sphere: "Por eso no levanto mi voz, viejo Walt Whitman, /…contra el muchacho que se viste de novia /en la oscuridad del ropero" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 269, 95-96), or "ni contra los hombres de mirada verde/ que aman al hombre y queman sus labios en silencio" (99-100). The

color green represents their desire as exchanged in sexually-charged glances. For Lorca's poetic voice, being quite literally "closeted" in an expression of effeminacy and/or gender fluidity, such as the "muchacho que se viste de novia" is acceptable. To act on or actualize this desire, especially within the public sphere, is, for the poetic voice, a replication of heteronormative power relations. The poetic voice continues about who he will condemn:

Pero sí contra vosotros, maricas de las ciudades,
de carne tumefacta y pensamiento inmundo,

Madres de lodo. Arpías. Enemigos sin sueño
del Amor que reparte coronas de alegría. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 269, 101-104)

In these lines, Lorca's poetic voice sets himself (and Whitman) apart from them by calling them "vosotros," showing them as unaligned with *the maricas'* grotesqueness. The *maricas* are of "carne tumefacta" (102), grotesque in their state of swollen sexual arousal. Their abject effeminacy is further underscored by calling them "madres de lodo, arpias" (103). They are the fantastic and monstrous harpy, mothers only to dirt and defilement. The horror and disgust of this scene, and the consequences of the lyric speaker's lack of separation from this abjection plays into the poem's linguistic choices. The poetic voice's frank disparagement, as well as the ongoing use of the term *marica*, serves to make the reader uncomfortable about this vituperative tone, therefore reproducing the lyric self's discomfort.

"MARICAS DE TODO EL MUNDO": INSULT AND ABJECT NAMING

The discomfort of the poem is only further amplified in the next two stanzas, in which the poetic voice's condemnation of the *maricas* branches off into a scathing catalog of homophobic slurs and imagery that links them further to the abject. Lorca's poetic voice moves from denouncing the generalized *marica* to listing geographically specific slurs in a cartography of insult:

Contra vosotros siempre, que dais a los muchachos
gotas de sucia muerte con amargo veneno.
Contra vosotros siempre,
Fairies de Norteamérica,
Pájaros de la Habana,
Jotos de Méjico,
Sarasas de Cádiz,

Ápios de Sevilla,
Cancos de Madrid,
Floras de Alicante,
Adelaidas de Portugal

¡Maricas de todo el mundo, asesinos de palomas!
Esclavos de la mujer, perras de sus tocadores,
abiertos en las plazas con fiebre de abanico
o emboscadas en yertos paisajes de cicuta. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 269, 105-19)

The context of Whitman and New York has expanded to a broader panorama of the Americas, Spain, and Portugal. The poetic voice continues the refrain of "contra vosotros siempre" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 269, 105) to denounce the *maricas* who corrupt boys with "gotas de sucia muerte con amargo veneno" (106). The long chorus of different names are all terms used to refer to effeminate homosexual men, according to Anna E. Hiller (26). All of these different "fairies,"[7] "pájaros," and "jotos" are then combined into the opprobrious category of "¡Maricas de todo el mundo, asesinos de palomas!" (116). In their killing of doves, they murder a symbol of peace rooted in the natural world, only aligning themselves further with death. The stanza then continues to degrade the "maricas de todo el mundo" by means of their effeminacy, labeling them "[e]sclavos de mujer" and "perras de sus tocadores" (117). Misogyny is used to degrade the *maricas* by casting them as slaves to women: below them, submissive in nature, and subservient to effeminacy and rituals of femininity. They are continually public in this supposedly perverse nature, opening themselves up sexually "en las plazas con fiebre de abanico" (118). This attack is especially vicious coming from within, as the poetic voice uses slurs against those who he should in theory align with through shared queerness. Observing this fraught dynamic, Hiller contends that "Lorca is a privileged insider who therefore uses the language of the minority to deprecate homosexual men in an act of poetic shaming for those whose behaviors do not meet the sanctified standard in the Lorquian imaginary set by Walt Whitman" (26). This "act of poetic shaming" at the heart of the text is the main source of conflict in critical interpretations of the poem. This naming and cataloging the "maricas de todo el mundo" is more than a list of derogatory terminology, instead capturing the central tension of various readings of the poem: is "Oda a Walt Whitman" truly denouncing the *maricas,* or it is instead a poetic performance of insult?

The use of the slur "marica" in the poem might also be viewed as not simply a condemnation of those individuals, but as a textual performance of homophobic insult that in turn denounces said homophobia. This

potential contrary reading considers the poetic voice's disgust and homophobia instead as a kind of reflection of societal standard meant to show its harmful consequences. Through using such slurs and vituperative language, the poetic voice would instead be performing homophobia to show the world- and subject-altering capabilities of the insult as a "performative utterance." As Didier Eribon explains in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self,* "one of the consequences of insult is to shape the relation one has to others and to the world and thereby to shape the personality, the subjectivity, the very being of the individual in question" (15). The poem might then be an attempt to cast the poetic voice as kind of actor upon a poetic stage, denouncing homophobia through the use of homophobic insult. However, there are uncomfortable areas of overlap with Lorca's real-life comments on effeminate gay men. While the poetic voice is distinct from Lorca himself, the sociohistorical context that informs the poem's larger rhetoric cannot be disregarded. As Eribon notes, "[t]he act of naming produces an awareness of oneself as other, transformed by others into an object" (16). We can see this impact of naming and insult in Lorca's commentary. The sordid and hyperreal behavior of the *maricas* was something that Lorca disparaged beyond the world of the poem as well; Cipriano Rivas Cherif recalls a conversation from years earlier in which Lorca apparently declared: "Solo hombres he conocido; y sabes que el invertido, el marica, me da risa, me divierte con su prurito mujeril, de lavar, planchar y coser, de pintarse, de vestirse de faldas, de hablar con gestos y ademanes afeminados. Pero no me gusta" (Gibson, *Mundo gay* 455).[8] The effeminate mannerisms associated with the "invertido" and "marica" are cast as domestic and traditionally feminine, with their desires to wash, iron, and sew, and present themselves effeminately through both clothing and performance. This jarring description of his disgust at the "invertido" is consistent with descriptions of the *maricas* in the poem, with their effeminate mannerisms and perceived excessively. His description of them to Rivas Cherif recalls the depiction of the *maricas* as "[e]sclavos de la mujer, perras de sus tocadores" (117). They are, for Lorca, ridiculous, meriting laughter. For critic Greg Dawes, Lorca "objects to 'fairies' who take on the submissive and sexist gender role of 'woman,' particularly in the public realm" because, in his view, "[i]n assuming this role homosexual men unwittingly support unequal gender and sexual relations" (13). For Lorca, acting "as a woman" with another man is replicating the sexual and social domination of heterosexuality. This view is further perpetuated in Lorca's comments as quoted by Rivas Cherif:

> Lo normal es el amor sin límites. Porque el amor es más y mejor que la moral de un dogma, la moral católica; no hay quien se resigne a la sola postura de tener hijos. En

lo mío, no hay tergiversaciones. Uno y otro son como son. Sin trueques. No hay quien mande, no hay quien domine, no hay sometimiento. No hay reparto de papeles. No hay sustitución, ni remedo. No hay más que abandono y goce mutuo. Pero se necesitaría una verdadera revolución. Una nueva moral, una moral de la libertad entera. Esa es la que pedía Walt Whitman. (Gibson 455)

Lorca's philosophy is clear: in his idealized, Whitmanesque world, there is no hierarchy of power in sexual and social relations. He is not interested in heterosexual reproduction as espoused by the Catholic Church, nor in any kind of queer relationship that engages in domination and submission in its power dynamics. He proposes a type of queer egalitarianism, masculine comrade to comrade, that is sublimely revolutionary. This is the world that the Whitman of the poem belongs to, a world of a new morality and sexual freedom. Dawes's analysis ties this lack of sexual liberation to an anti-capitalist stance: "[i]n this and other contexts the poet makes it clear that sexual freedom is bound to egalitarian social relations which capitalism cannot offer. Thus sexual repression and capitalism are closely aligned in García Lorca's stance: to challenge the institutionalization of heterosexuality is, for him, to consider disarming capitalism itself" (13). In Lorca's poetic philosophy, capitalism and its tie to heterosexual domination is key to the effeminate abjection of the *maricas.* His search for a Whitmanesque ideal, in both a physical pastoral space apart and in queer sexuality, is a search for a sexual subjectivity unbound by capitalism and heterosocial norms. Rob Stone agrees with this perspective, writing that in "Oda a Walt Whitman," the attack on the *maricas* is in fact an attack on social norms":

Lorca's apparent homophobia here seems in reality to be more an attack on the established stereotype which was personified by those homosexual men that both Lorca and society identified as *maricas*: the "queers" whose behaviour constituted a caricature which, in turn, allowed society to signal the degeneracy of gayness and thus undermine the heroism which Lorca perceived in homosexual role-models such as Whitman. (503-04)

Stone's critique, while an astute examination of the larger societal structures of oppression and insult, falters only in labeling Lorca's poetic condemnation "*apparent* homophobia" (emphasis added). Regardless of its intention to combat established stereotypes, Lorca's gayness does not absolve him of what is homophobia. His scathing catalog of slurs is not attack *on* the insult, it is an attack *of* insult: the hailstorm of "faires/pájaros/jotos" and the constant refrain of "marica" is nothing if not homophobic, even if coming from a gay source. Lorca's vision of

Whitmanesque queer egalitarianism falters in its rejection and decided abjection of the unacceptable *maricas.*

This disgust over the *maricas* and their connection to death becomes even more violent and alarming in consideration of a stanza which Lorca suppressed. The autograph manuscript of the "Oda" reveals an even more unsettling diatribe against the *maricas*, one that is a direct call to violence:

No haya cuartel
Matadlos[?][9] en la calle
con bastón de estoque -
Porque ahuyentan a los
muchachos y les dan
la carne verde y podrida
en vez de alma.
Y la llave del mundo
está en dar la vida -
hijos hechos con alma -
y est[a]o [clave] que la sociedad
y la ciencia ignoran
es la clave del mundo
……
os iréis a la orilla del
río con la rata
y el esqueleto. (García Lorca, *Poeta en Nueva York y otras hojas* 184-85)[10]

This command to "matadlos [?] en la calle/con bastón de estoque" ("kill them [?] in the streets/ with a swordstick") is shocking; homophobic violence from a gay poet is difficult to reconcile. The phallic weapon points further to the recurring motif of masculine sexual domination against the submissive *maricas*. However, this eliminated stanza, as well as a stanza in the final version of the poem, help to illuminate one of the central tensions at the heart of "Oda" that contributes to the abject: resistance to heteronormative reproductive futurism.

### NO FUTURE: THE ABJECT IN NON-REPRODUCTIVE SEXUALITY

Lorca's turn to the Whitmanesque and imaginary pastoral and away from the urban tumult of depraved sexual excess reveals further tensions between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" queerness when considered in combination with reproductive futurism. Throughout the poem, the lyric speaker struggles with where the acceptable, pure queers fit into the fabric of modern society. Given his turn to the idealized, imaginary figure of Whitman as the paragon of homosexuality, it appears that there is no

possible space for masculine, chaste queerness within the contemporary social order. What is abject for Lorca, as particularly revealed by this alternate stanza, is the push by the *maricas* to disrupt the order and boundaries of heteronormative society, creating a space for themselves where "naturally" there should not be one. When the poetic voice calls for the murder of the *maricas*, his supposed justification for such disturbing violence is that the *maricas* peruse young men in order to give them "la carne verde y podrida/ en vez de alma": the sexualized and deathly body, represented by flesh that is "verde" calling back to "los hombres de mirada verde" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 269, 99), once again uniting the sexual with the abject of a body that is rotting and dying. Instead of giving the young men "alma," which is "la clave del mundo," they turn the "muchachos," (tellingly, not "hombres," indicative of their youth), towards death and disorder, away from society's order and away from procreation. In the rough draft of "Ode," there seems to be a strong contradiction: Whitman is non-reproductive, and yet the lyric voice praises him and suggests that it is permissible to not reproduce ("hay cuerpos que no deben repetirse") despite attacking the *maricas* for this very same non-reproductive sexuality, as they are not aligned with the expectations of "la sociedad y la ciencia." In the autograph manuscript, the locus of the of the poetic voice's disgust and call to violence, then, appears to be that the *maricas* are turning pure young men away from normalized society, taking away "esta clave" favored by society and science. Such behavior aligns with Lee Edelman's reading of the queer antisocial in *No Future*: it is impossible for queerness to function within heteronormative society due to an underlying systemic incompatibility with its norms and expectations. Specifically, one of these incompatibilities is what Edelman deems "reproductive futurism," which is "terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse … rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). Heteronormative society is organized around the future potential of the child. Unable to procreate,[11] "queerness names the side of those not 'fighting for the children,'" instead functioning in "the place of the social order's death drive: a place … of abjection" (Edelman 3). Lorca's *maricas* are the embodiment of this death drive: what they reproduce is not the future child, but rather the state of abjection.

While in "Oda," the *maricas* supposedly replicate the domination of heterosexuality through their effeminacy, they are paradoxically against the figure of the child. Instead of recognizing their antisocial state, they persist in these public expressions of queerness, forcing their supposed extravagant and sordid sexuality where it does not belong. Bringing this analysis full circle, concerns regarding reproductive futurism also intersect

with the comparison of the *maricas* to Dionysius, due to the circumstances of Dionysus' birth. The demigod was conceived in Semele's womb, but removed and sewn into Zeus' thigh until gestation was complete. According to Charles Segal, "Dionysus, in his first birth from Zeus' 'immortal fire' and 'male womb' acts out a fantasy of the male's independence from female cycles of menstruation and birth with their attendant uncleanliness" (181). The turn to the Whitmanesque-Apollonian ideal, therefore, is what the poetic voice views as the only way to enact queerness: to retreat from the social and from reproduction. The "acceptable" masculine queer man, then, does not seek to contaminate others, but yet is still unable to form a part of normalized society and reproductive futurism. This sentiment is expressed in the final version of the poem when Lorca writes:

Porque es justo que el hombre no busque su deleite
en la selva de sangre de la mañana próxima.

El cielo tiene playas donde evitar la vida
y hay cuerpos que no deben repetirse en la aurora. (García Lorca, *Poeta* 268, 77-80)

There is, in Edelman's words, "no future" for queerness, no searching for pleasure in the futurity of "la selva de sangre de la mañana próxima" (78). Queerness, the poetic voice sustains, should retreat to faraway "playas" where they may "evitar la vida" (79), and should not seek to multiply, to "repetirse" in the production of new queer bodies. Predmore observes that "[p]rocreation is part of a futile cycle leading irrevocably to death. In Lorca's poetic world this idea is widespread and inevitably becomes a kind of justification of homosexual love, by which new life is not engendered merely to satisfy the appetite of death" (68). In his "Ode," Lorca is in favor of those who do not reproduce as long as they retreat out of the public sphere. While they may not "satisfy the appetite of death" by giving the world new bodies, queers are always aligned with death in his space apart. Their eventual fate is Thanatos, the death drive. As Enrique Álvarez contends, "el deseo homosexual asociado a la masculinidad ocupa el no-lugar, un espacio utópico que no puede existir fuera de los límites del cuerpo y de su representación en el texto, de ahí su asociación con el silencio y la muerte" (38). The beaches in the morning sky are this utopian non-space. If the antisocial turn is the only avenue of enacting queerness that the poetic voice deems acceptable, it is abject to not only resist the antisocial turn, as the *maricas* do through their engagement in the social, but to also publicly perform this resistance, is abject. This is why it is specifically male homosexual effeminacy that is so repulsive to the poetic voice: their feminine embodiment is an imitation of the reproductive,

heterosexual social order. In heteronormative society, femininity is linked through biological essentialist principles to reproduction. The *maricas*, in their performances of the extravagant feminine, defy this supposed "natural" heteronormativity. The *maricas* are everything that shatters boundaries of respectability and gender binaries. Their sexuality is grotesque to the poetic voice because it is non-reproductive yet still feminine, pure Eros that strives towards pleasure instead of futurity.

To offer a simple, clean ending of Apollonian light to this discussion would not be in line with the discomfort and violence set forth by Lorca's queer texts. Queerness, specifically queer femininity/effeminacy, and its models of acceptable and unacceptable, becomes associated with abjection: specifically with death, non-reproductive sexuality, and the breakdown of societal borders. This is especially apparent in the final stanza:

Y tú, bello Walt Whitman, duerme a orillas del Hudson
con la barba hacia el polo y las manos abiertas.
Arcilla blanda o nieve, tu lengua está llamando
camaradas que velen tu gacela sin cuerpo.
Duerme, no queda nada.
Una danza de muros agita las praderas
y América se anega de máquinas y llanto.
Quiero que el aire fuerte de la noche más honda
quite flores y letras del arco donde duermes
y un niño negro anuncie a los blancos del oro
la llegada del reino de la espiga. (García Lorca Poeta 270, 127-37)

The ending here recalls the impossibility of futurity for the *maricas*: since "América se anega de máquinas y llanto," (133), there is no turning back from the ceaseless toil of industrialization, "no queda nada" (131) of Whitman's bucolic America. In the refrain of "duerme, no queda nada" (131) are echoes of other anti-capitalist, anti-industry poems in *Poeta en Nueva York,* such as "Ciudad sin sueño." Whitman, unlike the sleepless inhabitants of the toiling city, is able to find rest. Indeed, the world collapses: "América se anega de máquinas y llanto" (133). Whitman sleeps "waiting to be resurrected at a future time when oppressive regimes have been overturned" (Flint 192). In the final part of the stanza, Lorca imagines the potential futurity for the sleeping Whitman. Something like peace – though only peace for the Whitmanesque – is found in this "llegada del reino de la espiga" (García Lorca, *Poeta* 270, 137) as all construction of modernity is erased with the hope of removing traces of civilization ("flores y letras del arco" (135). There is no happy ending that allows for the *maricas* and

Whitman to exist in the same symbolic space – the so-called "arrival of the kingdom of grain" seems to be a return to a utopian, bucolic space that excludes the city and all of its public displays of queerness. Much like Lorca's *locus amoenus* in "Poema doble del lago Eden" (Álvarez 52), this imagined, utopian space leaves no room for the *maricas* and their expressions of desire. In "Oda a Walt Whitman," there is no poetic stage that can be set that has not already been broken apart by the realities of modernization and heteronormativity. When the reality of a homophobic society clashes with transgressive queer expression, it seems that there is no peaceful future for any form of queerness in the landscape of the "Oda."

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NOTES

1 See also Maurer, *Collected Poems,* note *Oda a Walt Whitman/Ode to Walt Whitman,* pp. 936 and Gibson (1989) pp. 362.

2 For an understanding of labels and terms that were contemporary to Lorca, particularly within the context of the cultures he navigated in 1920s New York City, George Chauncey's *Gay New York* serves as a key reference: "By the 1910s and 1920s, men who identified themselves as different from other men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves "queer"… while less visible than the fairies on the streets of New York, queer men constituted the majority of gay-identified men in New York in the early decades of the century" (101).

3 See the work of Carlos Jerez-Farrán.

4 See Christopher Maurer, Jose Antonio Llera, David Richter, and Jonathan Mayhew, among many others.

5 See Chauncey for an in-depth discussion of these queer scenes and sites, in particular chapters five through nine.

6 According to Matt Cohen and Rachel Price of *The Walt Whitman Archive,* modifications included the translation of "lovers" to "friends" [*amigos*] in "City of Orgies"; in "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," the phrase "manly love" is translated as "male affection" [*afecto viril*].

7 See Chauncey, chapter 2, for a detailed discussion of the "fairy."

8 Translation from Predmore, pp. 82-85, n15.

9 Martínez Nadal (211) and Mario Hernández (185) both find this word illegible. Gibson transcribes "matadlos" in the facsimile reproduced in *Lorca y el mundo gay* (333). I have followed Federico García Lorca, *Manuscritos neoyorquinos.*

*Poeta en Nueva York y otras hojas y poemas*, p. 185. For "ignoran", Martínez Nadal transcribes "persiguen." Neither reading is fully convincing. A facsimile of the rough draft of the "Ode" is available on the Biblioteca Nacional de España website (ms. RES/276(h.28-34).

10 My translation: "No mercy/kill them in the streets/with a swordstick. /Because they scare away the boys and give them/green and rotten meat/instead of a soul and the key to the world/is in giving life – /children made with souls – /and this key in that society/ and science pursue/is the key of the world/you will go to the bank of/the river with the rat and skeleton."

11 Heteronormative society conveniently ignores or denies the very real potential for queer people to reproduce, instead looking at a cisgender model of homosexuality that is deemed non-reproductive.

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