

# Singing to the Machine: Rodolfo García's Autobiographical Report\*

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My paper examines an autobiographical monologue which Rodolfo García, an elderly Mexican American vaudevillian from San Antonio, Texas, recorded on his home tape recorder. In the monologue, Mr. García moved from a temporally ordered story to a performance of several song parodies he once sang on stage. He thus brought diachronic and synchronic modes of apprehension of past events (i.e., narrative and list) into dialogue. By presenting a working-class masculine *mexicano* self grounded in a family tradition of performance, he responded creatively to social tensions within his community, as well as those inherent in the ethnographic encounter.

## 0. Introduction

In the summer of 1990, as an intern with the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, I began an oral history field research project on Mexican American popular theater in San Antonio which was intended to serve as a resource for a museum exhibit on Mexican American history in Texas. One of my principal consultants was Rodolfo García, a former comedian who had been active in his family's tent show, the Carpa García, during early 1940s. At the end of our first interview, Mr. García handed me a 3M AVX-90 cassette tape with nothing written on the label, saying only that he wanted me to have it. The tape contains a long monologue, which Mr. García calls, after some hesitation, a *reporte* ("report"). He begins the monologue by discussing his career and his family's history of involvement in the performing arts. Midway through the tape, he begins to sing parodies of popular songs that he once used to close his comic act. These song performances lead to other recollections and contextualizing comments. After singing several parodies, Mr. García is cut off in mid-sentence as the first side of the tape ends, and he does not continue the *reporte* on the other side of the tape. Several weeks later, he gave me a second tape which does not

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pick up where the first tape leaves off, but contains song performances and memories after the fashion of the second half of the first tape.

By giving me these cassettes, Mr. García profoundly influenced the direction of my research. All of my subsequent interviews with him revolved around material taken from the tape, as have many of my later writings (Haney 1995, 1997). Up to now, I have treated Mr. García's tapes as historical documents, focusing on the events they describe and the song texts collected in them. At this time, however, I will step back and examine the monologue as a move in a process of the discursive production. I suggest that the use of a taped monologue provided Mr. García with a kind of agency in this process that was unavailable through participation in interviews alone. This agency, however, was tempered by Mr. García's awareness of the conflicting demands of various sectors of his potential audience. For him, as for any autobiographer, the act of narrating the self emerged as a process of negotiation and compromise between social forces larger than the self being presented.

### 1. Rodolfo García's *reporte* and its market

One of the more important influences on Mr. García's monologue was the ethnographic research context from which it emerged. Indeed, Mr. García's statements must be considered in relation to the snowballing discursive production about Chicano/*mexicano* theater in San Antonio that began with the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s and continues to the present day. My own fieldwork was only the latest in a series of efforts to document and recover that city's theatrical past. By the 1950s, competition from Mexican films and later from television had sent the city's once-prosperous Mexican American theater industry into decline. Because few "Anglos" were willing to recognize the importance of *mexicano* artistic achievement, and because many members of the emerging Mexican American middle class sought to distance themselves from the Spanish-language theater, the subject remained largely absent from public discourse until the Chicano movement. During the *movimiento*, activists in San Antonio and elsewhere converted their childhood memories of the theatrical past into a proud cultural patrimony. Local Chicano performers used images of Mr. García's on-stage persona, don Fito or "el Bato Suave," as a symbol of that patrimony.

Since the end of the Chicano movement, efforts to revive and document the *carpa* have not declined but increased, both in academia and the public sector. In the 1980s, Chicano artists who had been active in the *movimiento* invoked San Antonio's theatrical tradition in the process of creating the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, which is centered on the restored Guadalupe Theater. In academia, a new generation of Chicano scholars engaged in impressive projects of recovery and documentation of the U.S. Latino theatrical heritage (e.g. Broyles-González 1994; Kanellos 1990; Ybarra-Frausto 1984; Ramírez 1990), some of which involved interviews with members of Mr. García's family. Chris Strachwitz and James Nicolopolous interviewed Mr. García himself for their biography of singer

Lydia Mendoza (1993:80-83). More recently, playwright José Manuel Galván wrote and directed a play titled *Las tandas de San Cuilmas—Los carperos* based on oral history interviews he conducted with Mr. García and other vaudeville performers (1989). At the first performance of this play at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, the *artistas* who served as Mr. Galván's sources, Mr. García among them, were publicly recognized. The play enjoyed such success in its first run that the Guadalupe staged a revised version of it in 1991. Recently, an organization called the Centro Alameda has begun the process of restoring a theater called the Teatro Alameda, and the Hertzberg Circus Museum, which is located in the middle of San Antonio's busy tourist district, has mounted a permanent exhibit on the *carpa*.

Not surprisingly, this small "heritage boom" has profoundly affected the small community of musicians and actors who were active in San Antonio's Spanish-language theater scene before World War II. These *artistas*, who lost their audience when the theater went into decline, have discovered in heritage culture a new audience and a new market in which their memories are valued symbolic goods. In telling their stories and participating in recovery efforts, they have brought tensions and rivalries that already existed among them into a new field. From the *artistas'* statements to me in interviews, it appears that many of these rivalries derived partly from a rift between *artistas de teatro* and *artistas de carpa* which was related to class tensions in the *mexicano* community at large. But whatever the reasons for friendships and rivalries, a complex interpersonal politics informs the *artistas'* decisions about whom to mention to whom and in what light. Academic research on the theatrical past has necessarily, if not always consciously, become involved in this politics.

For Mr. García, ethnographic and historical documentation also lends credibility to his statements.

Pero si alguna persona que  
 (.) que crea  
 que yo—lo que yo estoy  
 grabando  
 son (.) imaginaciones más  
 pos (.) no sé (.) eh cómo  
 podría él  
 averiguar de ese libro que  
 salió  
 que dice  
 uno que está hablando de  
 las carpas  
 teatro  
 de las (.) Spanish (.)  
 comedians  
 Así v—v—vi en ese libro

But if some person who (.)  
 who thinks  
 that I—what I'm recording  
 are my imaginations  
 well (.) I don't know (.) eh  
 how he could  
 find out about that book  
 that came out  
 that says  
 somebody who's talking  
 about carpas  
 theater  
 about the (.) Spanish (.)  
 comedians  
 That's what I s—s—saw in  
 that book<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The text here is transcribed according to the following conventions: Lines in the text indicate stretches of talk set apart from one another by intonation and pausing. Audible pauses occur at the end of each line. Audible intra-line pauses are indicated with a period in parenthesis. Words

Here, he marshals references to a book about the *carpas* and *teatro*, possibly one of Kanellos' edited volumes, as proof of the accuracy of his statements. This statement shows the extent to which the various efforts at reconstruction and documentation of the *carpa* that have occurred during the past thirty years have colored Mr. García's memories. Indeed, it confounds the common distinction between primary and secondary historical sources. Whatever influence historical research may have had on the content of Mr. García's recollections, that work has clearly affected his attitudes towards the events he describes. These representations thus mediate his own narrative presentation of self.

But the interaction between ethnographer and consultant in the production of narrative has other political implications. Arising as it does from the ethnographic encounter, Mr. García's *reporte* resembles a genre of narrative that has become known as in Latin America the *testimonio*. *Testimonios* are usually elicited autobiographical statements by subaltern individuals, usually identified as members of some community in struggle, which are then edited and published by academics as first-person narratives. Such mediated autobiographies have also been common in the United States, in the form of slave narratives and anthropological life histories (Padilla 1993), and even in folklore studies (e.g. Abrahams and Riddle 1970). Sociolinguist and literary critic Rosaura Sánchez has characterized the *testimonio* as a dependent mode of textual production, clearly implying an analogy to Wallerstein's world systems theory (1996:7). Sánchez argues that testimonials create a narrative space in which "the subaltern collectivity speaks, neither always hegemonically nor subversively, but always . . . in search of both voice and audience" (14). In what follows, I will show how this search plays itself out in Mr. García's *reporte*.

## 2. The *reporte*: structure and performance

### 2.1 The recording situation.

Although it is clear to me that Mr. García recorded the tape in his home on his personal tape recorder, the situation surrounding this action is less clear. Whenever I have asked Mr. García whom he recorded the tape for, he has claimed that he did it for me, but the text of the *reporte* itself suggests otherwise. At the beginning of the monologue, Mr. García states his place and date of birth and his parents names and frames the narrative itself as the answer to the questions of an unnamed interviewer, whom he calls, perhaps charitably, a *camarada* ("comrade").

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or syllables that are cut off are marked by a long dash (—). Unintelligible passages are marked with double question marks in parenthesis. Explanatory comments and descriptions of nonverbal actions appear in parenthesis. Where literary conventions for certain non-standard features of Mr. García's speech exist (e.g. "pa" for reduced "para"), I use them, but in general, I use standard Spanish and English orthography to avoid the appearance of caricature that clouds so many Conversation Analysis transcripts.

Nacido (.) aquí en San  
Antonio (.) Téjas  
en las calles (.) Comercio  
(.) y Santa Rosa

en la mera esquina  
'onde (.) estaba el Teatro (.)  
Nacional  
que antes de (.) "Teatro Nacional"  
se llamaba (.) el Morelos  
En ésa época  
de mil novecientos (.) diez  
y siete  
el siete (.) de enero  
fue (.) cuando nací  
el (.) Señor Rodolfo G.  
García

Nombres de mis padres (.) y  
mi madre  
el Señor Manuel V. García  
la Señora (.) Teresa (.)  
González de García  
Nacido (.) aquí en San  
Antonio  
ese—el jóven Rodolfo G.  
García

Bueno está hablando de  
jóven allá cuando  
el cuarenta cual—treinta  
el treinta y cinco  
Bueno

La razón (.) de dar este (.)  
reporte  
para un (.) camarada que  
está aquí (.) grabando  
todo ésto que yo 'stoy  
diciendo  
porque (.) quiere que  
primeramente diga mi  
nombre todo  
para después (.) seguir  
haciéndome preguntas  
tocante (.) a mi carrera  
artística

Born (.) here in San  
Antonio (.) Texas  
on the corner of (.)  
Commerce (.) and Santa  
Rosa  
on the very corner  
where (.) the Teatro (.)  
Nacional once stood  
which before (.) "Teatro Nacional"  
was called (.) the Morelos  
In those days  
In nineteen (.) seventeen

the seventh (.) of January  
was (.) when I was born  
Mr. (.) Rodolfo G. García

The names of my parents (.)  
and my mother  
Mr. Manuel V. García  
Mrs. (.) Teresa (.) González  
de García

Born (.) here in San  
Antonio  
ese—the young Rodolfo G.  
García

Well I'm talking about  
young back then in  
'forty fou—'thirty  
'thirty-five  
Well

The reason (.) for giving  
this (.) report  
for a (.) comrade who is (.)  
here recording  
all of this that I'm saying

because (.) he wants me to  
first say my name and  
everything  
so he can later (.) continue  
asking me questions  
about (.) my artistic career

Faced with social science's bureaucratic requirement that he identify and locate himself by surrendering "vital" background information, Mr. García answers in sentence fragments as if filling in blanks on a questionnaire. But he also goes beyond this requirement, bringing in a fragment of a story about his birth that circulates in his family.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not Mr. García was born on the actual corner

<sup>2</sup> In a recent interview, unfortunately while the tape recorder was not running, Mr. García told me that he had been born in a hotel near the Teatro Nacional, in which a group of people were

where the Teatro Nacional would be built, his linkage of himself to this building—in which, incidentally, he claims never to have performed—anchors his life story and his narrative authority in a place which symbolizes San Antonio's theatrical past.<sup>3</sup> In this way, he turns his interlocutor's demands to his own narrative advantage.

The use of references to the *camarada* as framing devices, illustrated in the previous example, continues throughout the monologue, although this comrade's voice never appears on the tape. I do not remember making any of the requests that Mr. García claims the comrade has made of him, and I therefore suspect that the person in question may have been a previous researcher. In lines 290-295 of my transcript, Mr. García states that he had asked the *camarada* if he wanted to do an interview, and that the *camarada* instructed him to record his memories as a monologue instead. The positioning of this statement within the text suggests a certain discomfort on Mr. García's part with the act of narrating without responding to questions, and a need to justify the uninterrupted monologue. This strategy of using the *camarada's* reported speech to introduce or retrospectively explain changes in topic continues after the song performances begin. In lines 314-318, Mr. García signals his intent to begin remembering and singing his song parodies by stating that the *camarada* had suggested this action. No such suggestion is audible on the tape, however, and there are no stops in the tape before this line. It is therefore unclear how or when the *camarada*, if he is indeed present, has made this request. Then in lines 321-329 Mr. García hedges his upcoming performance by saying that he has told the *camarada* that he is used to singing with a piano, implying that singing and remembering will be more difficult without accompaniment. Throughout the monologue then, he frames his statements not as independent productions but as responses to another's request. Perhaps most important, however, is the reference to the *camarada* in the third person, while the tape-recorder audience is referred to in the second person plural (line 466). This use of pronoun deictics complicates the frame, for it suggests that although Mr. García responds to the questions of the *camarada*, his statements are directed not at the questioner, but at posterity. If, as literary critic Gernaro Padilla has suggested, the editors of mediated autobiographies speak over the "invisible bodies" of

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running a gambling ring. He claims that while he was being born, a federal agent raided the building and one of the leaders of the gambling ring burst into the room. Mr. García's father hid the man under the birthing table. When the man's pursuers came into the room looking for him, the midwife upbraided them for disturbing a pregnant woman. They apologized and left, somewhat sheepishly. After they were gone, the fugitive came out of hiding, thanked don Manuel and doña Teresa, and ran out of the room, leaving a large wad of money behind as payment. Mr. García's parents did not know what to do with the money, so the midwife took it. Mr. García's sister Esther has told me another version of this story, in which pursuers and pursued are members of opposing armies fighting in the Mexican Revolution. I do not have a version of either story on tape.

<sup>3</sup> Neither Kanellos (1990) nor Ramírez (1990) mentions the location of the Teatro Nacional nor its existence under a previous name. Indeed, neither author mentions the existence of a Teatro Morelos in San Antonio. According to Kanellos, one of the earliest newspaper clippings about the Teatro Nacional, which announces its impending opening, is dated August 19th, 1917. Construction was not actually finished until November (1990: 80). It would seem, then, that Mr. García's birth actually occurred before the Teatro Nacional was built.

subaltern narrators (1993:9), then Mr. García has performed a small inversion of that dynamic by placing the researcher, presumably his co-present interlocutor, in the background.

## 2.2 The dialogue of narrative and list

Throughout his *reporte* Mr. García oscillates between two distinct ways of entextualizing past events: one which I will call narrative and another which I will call the list.<sup>4</sup> Following Labov, I take a narrative to be a “method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” (1972:360). Narrative creates a diachronic “story world” (Hill and Zepeda 1993:212) in which the rhetorical progression of the text mirrors the progression of events.<sup>5</sup> A list, on the other hand, is an utterance which, rather than mimicking past experience, describes a category by presenting a sequence of discourse units whose similarities justify their inclusion in that category (Schiffrin 1994:293). Although I adopt Schiffrin’s definition here, I would add to that definition a temporal aspect. In most lists, I suggest, the order of presentation of these items is tied more to the exigencies of memory in the present than to the sequence of any past events being related. If a view of the past emerges in a list, it is a synchronic sense of “the moment,” more like a daydream than a story. Although narrative and list, as ideal types, involve distinct senses of time, the categories are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in Mr. García’s monologue, narrative and list interact and blend with one another in various ways, so that in many cases, assigning a given stretch of discourse to one or the other category becomes problematic. In general, the temporal mimesis associated with narrative occurs primarily in the first half of the *reporte*, giving way to a list-like mode after Mr. García begins singing his parodies. At that point, the act of remembering the songs almost demands a list-like form of organization.

In the first half of the *reporte*, Mr. García presents his family’s history, beginning with a discussion of his maternal aunts and uncles who formed the Trio Hermanos González, and then a discussion of his father’s immigration to the United States with the Circo Hermanos Mantecón. This section includes numerous discussions of male relatives who are or were prominent *artistas*. A discussion of his family’s *carpa* and its activities in Corpus Christi follows. The succession of topics thus forms a rough chronology from 1917 to the 1940s, a chronology that generally coincides with the organization of paragraph-like stretches of discourse, each of which is introduced by explicit meta-statements, often beginning with the word “*bueno*” (“well . . .”). Although they are arranged in narrative order, many of the paragraphs are primarily made up of lists and many combine elements of

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<sup>4</sup>My use of the term list is distinct from, and incompatible with that of Goody (1977) and O’Banion (1992). My sense of the list also problematizes any attempt to link narrative with an essentialized orality or list with an essentialized literacy.

<sup>5</sup>Labov’s definition of narrative is somewhat narrow. Amendments may be necessary to account for narrative techniques in which the telling skips back and forth in or circles through the time of the story world. Nevertheless, it seems that some kind of temporal mimesis must occur in a text if that text is to be called a narrative.

narrative with elements of the list. In lines 227-244, for instance, Mr. García illustrates the point that the mainstays of the Carpa García were all his close relatives by listing his brothers who were musicians.

Después  
mi hermano Manolo García  
que era el pianista que tocaba el  
piano en la carpa  
él eh que nos tocaba las (.)  
variedades

y tocaba él su piano  
y (.) muchas otras cosas  
Mi hermano  
el más chico  
Raymundo García  
tocaba las baterías  
Mi hermano (.) Rafael  
él que tocaba la trompeta

Y luego teníamos  
a él que tocaba las maracas  
el triángulo el aclave las  
aclaves o la (.) clave  
y pa' los boleros danzones  
y muchas otras cosas.

Then  
my brother Manolo García  
who was the pianist who played  
the piano in the carpa  
the one eh who played the (.)  
(music for) variety  
shows

And he played his piano  
and (.) many other things  
My brother  
theyoungest one  
Raymundo García  
played the drums  
My brother (.) Rafael  
the one who played the  
trumpet.

And then we had  
the one who played the maracas  
the triangle the aclave the  
aclaves or the (.) clave  
and for the boleros danzones  
and many other things.

Interestingly enough Mr. García neglects to mention his sisters who were also performers. The general point of all of this, which Mr. García repeatedly drives home, is that art runs in the family and that his own performance skills are part of an implicitly male family tradition. The repetition of this point is a traditionalizing device in Bauman's (1992) sense, but it also represents a characteristic strategy of Mexican American autobiography. Padilla has suggested that Mexican American autobiographers tend to present a self which is "subsumed within a narrative of regional or cultural history." Narrating self-identity is thus not an egocentric activity but a "filial act" (1993:29). Mr. García's narrative, which subsumes the narrated self within a genealogical and professional sequence, fits this description quite well.

### 2.3 List as autotopography

Indeed it is remarkable how little time Mr. García devotes to his own actions. When he reaches the subject of his career, narrative quickly gives way to list and few referential stories of personal experience emerge. Instead Mr. García portrays the wild and glamorous years of his early adulthood through a series of song performances which stand metonymically for their context of origin. As he entextualizes and objectifies the songs (Bauman and Briggs 1990:73), questions of narrative authority and legitimacy mentioned earlier turn away from events and towards the authentication and ownership of the song texts themselves. Mr.



García's assertions of authorship, together with his already-established association with the San Antonio theater scene, anchor the performances and their author in historical concreteness in "an act of authentication akin to the art or antique dealer's authentication of an object by tracing its provenance" (Bauman 1992:137). Together, the songs form less of a narrative than a collection or better yet a re-collection. Unified not by topic or genre but by a more or less synchronic sense of "back-thenness," this re-collection moves easily from the song parodies Mr. García sang in the *carpa*, to those he claims not to have sung in the *carpa*, to songs his brother composed, to a narrative joke, to the popular songs on which the parodies were based, and back again.

The resulting assemblage of texts resembles what Jennifer González has called an "autotopography." González defines an autotopography as a "syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity" (1997:133). Although not explicitly material or spatial the monologue forms a collection of objectified stretches of discourse. Like the heirlooms and photographs that make up the home altars that González has studied, the songs serve as prostheses of memory, "props" which "maintain the structure of [a] . . . mental architecture" (1997:135). Note however that the autotopographical element in Mr. García's *reporte* is not limited to the section in which the song performances occur. Indeed the diachronic time of narrative and the synchronic time of list coexist in what I have called the text's narrative section. There, it is possible to speak of a series of autotopographical lists embedded in a narrative matrix. The process of re-collecting song performances, however, reverses this organization. Once the songs begin, the autotopographical list becomes the matrix in which small narratives and lists are embedded. With this switch, Mr. García begins to start and stop the tape, in marked contrast to the narrative section. There, no tape stops occur, and the speech event is geared to the objective, mechanical time of the tape counter. In the song performance section, however, Mr. García's focus on remembering the parodies accurately seems to have displaced a previous need to keep talking and fill the tape with discourse. Although the exact time frame over which the parodies were recorded is unclear to me, it is clear that the switch to the list as an ordering framework creates a new recording situation in which the act of remembering is paramount.

### 3.0 Summary and conclusion

Mr. García's *reporte* can thus be seen less as an autobiography than as a dialogue of autobiographical and autotopographical modes of constructing the self and its past. Of course, there is more to the life of an seventy-three year old man than can be summarized in a 45-minute cassette tape. Mr. García chose to tell not his life story but that part of his life that he wanted others to remember. The end of Spanish-language professional theater forced him to live the life of a laborer, working as a foreman on a cleaning crew for city of San Antonio until his retirement. In narrating his brief artistic career, Mr. García found that memory emerged most richly through an engagement with the picaresque genres of speech

that were his specialty as a performer than through narrative alone. As Crapanzano has suggested it is precisely through “conventionalized discursive strategies,” in other words through particular speech genres, that human beings can “‘meaningfully’ articulate . . . life—or past giving seemingly full expression to his (her) self” (1996:107). The song parodies re-collected in Mr. García’s *reporte* were themselves the vehicles of memory, mental traces of the past which he was able to make material by singing into a machine. As I have demonstrated, this action was intimate with power, both because it was imbricated in the asymmetries of the ethnographic encounter and because it necessarily invoked a community which suffered from asymmetries of its own. At many points in the narrative, Mr. García seems to have wanted an interlocutor, someone to ask him questions and guide his process of remembering. Whatever the circumstances of the *reporte*’s recording, however, Mr. García’s decision to give the tape to me ensured that he could make accessible to the public a record of his career which was uninterrupted by my questions. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the space limitations of this venue, which are not the fault of the editors, prevent my including the entire monologue with this paper. As it is, we must settle for a highly mediated version of Rodolfo García’s memories

de esos días tan gloriosos  
que fueron  
para mí  
y pa’ todos  
los que (.) traba—los que  
trabajamos en el arte  
las aventuras  
las decepciones  
las amarguras  
Bueno  
un sinfn

of those glorious days  
that were  
for me  
and for all of us  
who (.) wor— who worked  
in art  
the adventures  
the disappointments  
the bitternesses  
Well  
any number of things

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