

# A Hopeful Eulogy: Pablo Miguel Martínez's Poem about the Longoria Affair

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**T**he poet Pablo Miguel Martínez lives and writes in his native San Antonio, Texas. His poems often pay homage to geography and heritage, to the landscapes that bear their inhabitants' weight and the forebears who make their descendants' lives possible. The title of his award-winning collection, *Brazos, Carry Me* (2013), simultaneously evokes the Brazos River in Texas and the migrant manual laborers known as *braceros*, those who work with their arms, their *brazos*. With his poems, Martínez invites readers to remain attentive to languages' nuances, a careful act of interpretive consideration that could trace the connections among words and ourselves. His poem, "Tender," reminds us that "tender" simultaneously refers to the English adjective evoking a sense of gentle care and the Spanish verb that means hanging the laundry out to dry.<sup>1</sup> The act of doing laundry, in the poem, appears as an expression of care, just one example of how our forbearers' *brazos* carry us.

Martínez's chapbook, *Cuent@*, begins with a prelude in which a woman tells the poetic speaker, "Empieza por ti," or "Start for yourself." Such an initiating act of self-reflection causes the speaker to think of "Dirt. Earth. Dust. Land."<sup>2</sup> This list of words (synonyms, but not really) exposes the shades of nuance and competing connotations. We see a poetic voice struggling to find the right word as it searches within, a search that entails an immediate recognition of looking without and finding the links between self and context that dispel the notion of solitary self-making.

In April 2020, Martínez republished one of his poems, titled “Cuento,” in the form of a micro-chapbook, which comprises the single poem and drawings by Richard Arredondo. The poem had originally appeared in *Cuent@*, a title that resonates with both “Cuento” and the following poem on the next page, titled “Cuenta.” The chapbook’s title visually includes the –o ending of “Cuento,” a poem about the failure to bury an Army veteran named Private Felix Z. Longoria, and it includes the –a ending of “Cuenta,” a poem about the discovery of a mass grave of unidentified migrants. Both poems are thematically linked in their consideration of a notion of justice and its relation to burial, of memorializing the dead by properly interring their bones. When Martínez decided to remove the poem “Cuento” from its resonant placement within *Cuent@*, he highlighted the effects of *displacement*—what happens when we remove something from the context that helps enable its meaning.

The 2020 publishing date of the micro-chapbook *Cuento* honors the 100th anniversary of Private Longoria’s birth, and the poem’s republication provides a renewed opportunity for



Private Felix Longoria

readers to familiarize ourselves with what has been called “The Longoria Affair.” The early facts of this affair are relatively simple to summarize. In June 1945, Longoria volunteered for a dangerous patrol while stationed in the Philippines. He was killed in action, and his body remained on Luzon Island for three years until his remains were transported to his hometown of Three Rivers in south Texas. Longoria’s wife, Beatrice, went to the only funeral home in town to arrange for his burial.

The funeral home's owner, T.W. Kennedy Jr., did not agree to make the chapel available to the family.

The aftermath of Kennedy's decision is more challenging to describe. As Martínez's poem puts it, "what remains is never / easy—the known and the unknown, the truth shining / slant, like dim winter light" (*Cuento* 15). With "Cuento," Martínez steps into the fog of the past, thereby raising the perennial questions about the function of poetry and the problems of history. What role can a civilian poet play in telling a story about war's aftermath? What role can a poem play in conveying the truth? Wherefore *a poem* and not something else?

As I will show in what follows, Martínez's poem provides answers as only a poem can. We could begin to notice how the poet uses the power of the poetic line to *show* us something in the line breaks I quote above. A sense of epistemological ease is just out of reach ("never / easy") as the askew truth of the yet unknown shimmers and beckons ("shining / slant"). This mention of the "truth" shining "slant" echoes the famous poem by Emily Dickinson about how truth should be revealed. Truth as such, in her poem, is "Too bright" to be rendered without circumvention. "The Truth must dazzle gradually," states the speaker, "Or every man be blind." The speaker's advice, then, is to "Tell the truth but tell it slant," itself a meta truth about truth-telling that the poem's slant rhymes enact by only partially rhyming.<sup>3</sup>

But whereas Dickinson's poem would warn Plato's philosopher to be careful when leaving the cave, Martínez's poem implicitly urges us to stare directly at the winter-veiled sun. Dickinson's poem is directed at the writer/speaker because it presents a methodological problem (how to tell the truth) to which it provides a rhetorical solution (tell it slant). Dickinson's speaker assumes that one possesses the truth, the problem thus lying in its disclosure. In

"Cuento," the problem is one of access and perspective. This is a reader's problem that suggests that the truth is out there, as it were; our job is to try to see it.

The close interpretive attentiveness we must give to the poem is part of this epistemological enterprise. The one-word title alone demands our attention. *Cuento* is the Spanish word for "story," but it could also mean the verb "I tell" (as in the telling of an anecdote) and "I count" ("to be included" and also "to matter"). The title thus simultaneously declares its poetic voice's role in telling Longoria's story, and it demands that this story be included because it and the speaking voice matter. But even as the title emphasizes the singular role of the speaking first-person *I*, the poem's central voice provides quotations from several sources. Like Walt Whitman's speaker, who while singing of itself declares, "I am large, I contain multitudes,"<sup>4</sup> and like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (originally titled *He Do the Police in Different Voices*), Martínez's poem constitutes its voice by coalescing multiple, conflicting voices and rhetorical modes. Ultimately, the poem is an elegy that honors Longoria by bringing together various voices. This poetic uniting provides something like a model of democracy in action, a vision made possible by our shared responsibility to mourn the dead and honor their legacy.

### **The Longoria Affair**

Part of the difficulty of narrating the effects of the Longoria Affair stems from the complex interplay between psychological motivation and social pressures. Kennedy gave different reasons for declining Beatrice Longoria's request, prompting a town-wide debate about what kind of place Three Rivers was. Watch the award-winning documentary *The Longoria Affair* and notice the stark discrepancy among the townspeople's memories.<sup>5</sup> Some maintain that Three Rivers is an exemplar of racial harmony and equality of opportunity. Others

remember the “No Mexicans” signs that ensured Mexicans stayed on their side of town. Three Rivers was intentionally designed, divided by the proverbial train tracks that separated the side with the Spanish street names and the side with names in English. Such a line divides Three Rivers Cemetery, in which Longoria would have been buried among the Spanish surnames. He ended up not being buried in this cemetery because, as Kennedy told a Corpus Christi reporter, “We never make a practice of letting Mexicans use the chapel and we don’t want to start now.”<sup>6</sup>

The incident became national news, and the local debate became part of a broader conversation about the country. The benefits of a representative democracy committed to equal opportunity were on global display after WWII—as were the failures to live up to the ideals that American soldiers had championed abroad. As Americans learned about what had happened in Germany, it became more challenging to maintain the belief that separation based on skin color could result in equal opportunity. Maintaining legal and de facto segregation could support the erroneous belief that class status is a fixed, natural condition that corresponds to various identities. If the country were to progress and improve its quality-of-life standards, it would need to do so collectively.

The Longoria Affair highlighted the belief that one’s participation in the military could demonstrate one’s meritorious ability while providing a pathway into the middle class. The GI Bill offered access to subsidized education, financial compensation, and low-cost mortgages. The GI benefits were especially important to American veterans of Mexican descent who came from the parts of small towns called “Mexican Town.” In Three Rivers, 67.2% of the Mexican Town population lived without indoor plumbing.<sup>7</sup> Poverty was rampant, as were cases of tuberculosis and infant mortality. Access to education and the possibility of buying real estate was limited.

In 1948, Dr. Hector P. Garcia created the GI Forum to advocate for veterans after seeing how many of his patients were impoverished Mexican American veterans who were denied their rightful health benefits. According to the author of *The American GI Forum*, some of their disability checks “were reduced or totally eliminated without the due process of review.”<sup>8</sup> The GI Forum received national attention when Garcia ensured that the Longoria Affair became a cause célèbre. He contacted various news outlets and sent telegrams to any politician who would listen. He caught the attention of a newly-elected senator, Lyndon B. Johnson, who further ignited the story by decrying Three Rivers and transporting Longoria’s body to Arlington Cemetery to be buried with full military honors.

The incident drew attention to the GI Forum’s efforts, thereby increasing its membership and influence. The GI Forum became a catalyst for the Mexican American civil rights movement by encouraging local civic participation, advocating for voting access, and serving as a bridge to Washington. Garcia and Johnson developed a working relationship, and Garcia helped form Viva Kennedy Clubs to help sway the 1960 presidential election. The narrow results of the election suggest that such efforts were decisive. Some critique Garcia and Johnson for self-interestedly using a local, personal incident for political theater. The residents of Three Rivers continue to debate the meaning of the Longoria Affair, and historians continue to track its ripples of influence.

### **What a Poem Can Do**

Martínez’s poem captures some of these conflicting voices by including quotations from the funeral home owner, who told Dr. Garcia, “You know how the Latin people get drunk and lay around all the time...I’m sure you’ll understand” (*Cuent@* 15). While Kennedy presents the

reasoning behind his decision by characterizing it as widely accepted common sense, the poem contrasts his sentiments with a quotation by radio personality Walter Winchell. Upon learning of Kennedy's decision, Winchell said to his nationwide audience, "The State of Texas, which looms so large on the map, certainly looks small tonight" (16). When considered alongside each other, Winchell's assessment exposes the parochialism of Kennedy's conventional wisdom.

So even though the poem does not offer an explicit evaluation, it does not present such voices neutrally. Instead, it enables readers to notice the unstated discrepancies and to understand what is not said. The poem includes the following statements: "A then-young U.S. Senator from Texas, Lyndon B. Johnson, intervened, and Pvt. Felix Longoria was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. The funeral took place on February 16, 1949...Arlington National Cemetery is 1,600 miles from Three Rivers" (17). From the specificity of the dates to the economy of their articulation, these sentences could appear in a history textbook or newspaper article. The meaning of the bluntly stated facts appears to reside on their surface, yet their full significance lies in the unspecified implications. The simple factual statement, "Arlington National Cemetery is 1,600 miles from Three Rivers" (17), prompts us to consider, say, Longoria's family's inability to visit his grave regularly.

The poem brings to the foreground a fundamental difference between the facts of a history textbook and the meaningful implications a poem makes available. Nowhere are these implications made more salient than in the following paragraph included in the poem:

Later that year, the Texas House of Representatives formed a Special Committee on the Reburial of Felix Longoria. The Committee concluded that no racial discrimination had taken place. This was never incorporated into the legislative record. The records of the

Committee, cited in a majority report, “are not held at the State Archives, and their whereabouts are unknown,” according to the Texas State Historical Assn. (17)

The documents that would be considered the official voice of history—providing the interpretive verdict voiced by elected officials operating as the representative voice of their electorate—are tellingly absent from the legislative record. This gap in the history of the Longoria Affair highlights the cracks within the Committee’s verdict. Whereas the Special Committee could not see the underlying causal factors, the poem enables us to identify them. The poem thus implies that the truth is there within the unknown and the unstated. We need only look through the gaps to try to see it.

### **A Hopeful Eulogy**

Against what might be considered the official documents of history, “Cuento” presents a competing historical narrative captured by south Texan folklore. The poem begins with an epigraph from a corrido, a ballad form with a long tradition of narrating the oral histories not provided in textbooks. Corridos tend to start by specifying the time of the narrated events, the place where they occurred, and the protagonist(s).

En Tres Ríos sucedió

It occurred in Three Rivers

en los tiempos de la guerra:

during wartime

Félix Longoria murió

Felix Longoria died

peleando por esta tierra.<sup>9</sup>

fighting for this land<sup>10</sup>



The corrido follows a rhythmic a/b/a/b rhyme pattern that establishes a set of meaningful relationships in which historical facts resonate with a sense of poetic order. The quatrain's rhymes (sucedió/murió, guerra/tierra) ensure that the event of Longoria's death is not arbitrary or forgotten, its meaning residing in war and land.

The very use of the corrido form to tell Longoria's story highlights the extent to which Mexican Americans continued to be mistreated even after they were some of the most decorated veterans to have fought in WWII.<sup>11</sup> Although corridos originated centuries ago when European *trovadores* sang of love, the anthropologist Américo Paredes stresses the role of conflict in motivating the genre's efflorescence during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Paredes notes how new Mexican Americans, a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, were too often treated as second-class citizens. Their corridos narrated the border conflicts faced by an archetypal border hero: "the man fighting for his right with his pistol in his hand" (*Pistol* 149). Longoria, like the paradigmatic corrido heroes, died with his pistol in his hand.

The conclusion of Longoria's corrido, however, identifies critical historical differences. Whereas the heroes of the corridos from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s fought against Americans such as the Texas Rangers, this corrido's conclusion emphasizes Longoria's citizenship and includes other American veterans into the hero category.

Murió en la segunda guerra

He died during WWII

por defender su nación,

defending his nation

Hoy lo cubre la tierra

Today the soil of the most famous

del mas famoso panteón

cemetery covers him

En el panteón nacional  
descansa Félix Longoria,  
donde descansan los héroes,  
que Dios lo tenga en La Gloria.<sup>13</sup>

In the national cemetery  
Felix Longoria rests  
Where heroes rest  
may God keep him in His Glory.<sup>14</sup>

Corridos tend to conclude with a moral, and here, this moral suggests that Longoria's death be understood *within* an American narrative. Indeed, the very title of this corrido, "Discriminación a un Mártir" ("Discrimination against a Martyr"), emphasizes the beliefs for which Longoria, as a "martyr," died. Longoria's corrido thus functions not only as a historical record but as an elegy that ensures that his story will be remembered and honored.

That the corrido serves this elegiac function is not surprising considering how corridos tend to be understood as early forms of what came to be understood as a distinct Mexican American literature. This literature, argues Bruce-Novoa, tends to represent "the death or disappearance of a person, a group, an area, the traditional ways, or some period of time."<sup>15</sup> This is why Bruce-Novoa argues that the *elegy* provides the "paradigmatic model," the "deep structure," that underlies all of Mexican American literature (7). Like elegies, which "seek some transcendent presence" by offering "consolation in the contemplation of some permanent principle," Mexican American literature offers a "hopeful eulogy," a projection of a people into the future even as they tally and mourn the various forms of loss (7).

But in this description of the specificity of Mexican American literature—which he offers in a book titled *Chicano Poetry*—Bruce-Novoa fails to mention how poetry qua poetry often serves the elegiac function he describes. For what are Dickinson's many poems about death if

not an attempt to plumb its mysteries and offer a formal testament that remains long after the poet? Consider Whitman's most powerful account of the emergence of the poetic voice after the experience of loss and "Death, death, death, death" in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."<sup>16</sup> Recall Eliot's speaker in *The Waste Land*, who, on a more optimistic reading of the poem's conclusion, imagines constructing an enduring principle out of culture's wreckages.

The poem "Cuento," I am arguing, performs this elegiac function and thus gestures toward an unstated, hopeful horizon. The final voice the poem presents is Beatrice's, as she wonders what will happen to her husband.

Forever you'll be so far  
from me, Felix—alejado [removed or banished]  
de tu tierra [from your land]. Who will  
watch over you, querido [loved one]? (*Cuent@* 18)

"Cuento" includes Beatrice's futile call to her deceased lover and merges her voice to its central poetic voice. Her question to her lover can thus become a question for the reader, who has been taught how to understand the unstated. Notice how the poem's lines once again spatially display what their content describes. A line break separates the spatial distance of Arlington Cemetery from Beatrice's presence ("so far / from me"), a separation reemphasized in the concluding line breaks. Felix Longoria's body has been separated from his homeland ("alejado / de tu tierra") and from those who would watch over his remains ("Who will / watch over you"). The poem has taught us how to understand the significance of this spatial separation, and it has

prepared us to consider what an answer to her question could be. One answer would involve exhuming his remains once again so that Longoria could be buried in Three Rivers. This solution would suggest that Arlington is somehow not part of the homeland for which Longoria fought, and it would suggest that only his family members are in a position to honor his remains and legacy. The poem's elegiac function, however, offers a different solution, one that the reader has been primed to accept. To Beatrice's concluding question (Who will watch over the dead?), the poem offers the possibility that the answer is something like, "We will."

Insofar as we assume the responsibility of mourning the dead, of honoring their sacrifice, of remaining vigilant so that the arc of justice bends in our collective favor, we should consider just who constitutes this collective "we." This consideration of who "we" are should be agonizing and ongoing. Recall how Whitman, who, however democratic his poetic imagination may have been, too quickly celebrated the American annexation of Texas, arguing that Mexicans got what they deserved because "America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand!"<sup>17</sup> I would not turn to Whitman for political advice, but I would turn to his poetry to see a model of how discordant voices constitute a poem's democratic vision. We might think of our country—naively perhaps, but also full of hope—as an ongoing project akin to a poetic work of art.

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo Miguel Martínez, "Tender," *Brazos, Carry Me* (San Francisco: Kórima Press, 2013), 24

<sup>2</sup> Pablo Miguel Martínez, "Preludio," *Cuent@* (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Dickinson, "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant - " *PoetryFoundation.org*, Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263).

<sup>4</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself, 51" *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, [poets.org/poem/song-of-myself-51](http://poets.org/poem/song-of-myself-51).

<sup>5</sup> John J. Valadez, *The Longoria Affair*. PBS Distribution, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Carl Allsup. *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution* (Austin: The University of Texas at Austin Center for Mexican American Studies, 1982), 41. Allsup cites a notarized statement by George Groh, the reporter in question, dated Feb. 18, 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Allsup, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Ramos, *The American GI Forum in Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Conjunto Tamaulipas, "Discriminacion A Un Martir," The Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings, [frontera.library.ucla.edu/tag/world-war-ii](http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/tag/world-war-ii).

<sup>10</sup> Translation my own

<sup>11</sup> Ramos, xvi-xvii.

<sup>12</sup> "Corrido," *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, eds. Ilan Stavans and Edna Acosta-Belén, W.W. Norton, 2011, 2463.

<sup>13</sup> "Discriminacion A Un Martir"

<sup>14</sup> Translation my own.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Walt Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" *PoetryFoundation.org*, Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48858/out-of-the-cradle-endlessly-rocking](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48858/out-of-the-cradle-endlessly-rocking).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Allsup, 2-3.