

Chapter 19

Specters of Mine:

Musicological Research in the Desert of the Opera

Carlo Lanfossi

On November 25th, 2014, I was driving through Ash Meadows Road in the state of California, the fastest way from the biggest town near the Death Valley desert, Pahrump, Nevada, to the place where I was supposed to meet with some of the ghosts I had been hunting for some time. I was headed in the direction of Death Valley Junction (current population, 4). There—I was told by friends and colleagues—I would find a theater in the middle of the desert, the Amargosa Opera House and Hotel, run by an almost mythological figure who, back in the 1960s, decided to quit her career as a ballerina in New York to establish her art in the middle of nowhere in Death Valley. As soon as I arrived at Death Valley Junction, and as if on cue, the rented car I was driving got a flat tire.

In the Spring of 1967, a 43-year-old ballerina from New York, Marta Becket, and her husband, Tom Williams, were driving through Death Valley as part of a performance tour. They were headed in the direction of Death Valley Junction. There—as told by the park ranger—they would find the only garage who could fix their car’s sudden flat tire. While the car was being repaired, Marta found what looked like an abandoned building. As she walked down a colonnade, she noticed a mysterious back door and peered through a tiny hole in it, revealing what looked like an abandoned theater. She immediately felt as if she was “looking at the other half of [her] life.”¹

Like many writers, journalists, and graduate students before me—and as an Italian scholar living on the East coast—I left the Las Vegas Strip and drove through the desert to leave behind the fantasies of a life modelled around academia and meet with the fantasy of another life, an Other life of musicological research where fieldwork and history, present and past, me and non-me would somehow be entangled. Marta left the Los Angeles highways to meet the fantasy of a real life in the

¹ Most of the background on Marta Becket’s life comes from her autobiography *To Dance on Sands: The Life and Art of Death Valley’s Marta Becket* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press, 2007), esp. the section “Act Four: My Ship Comes in—in the Desert,” 282–328.

desert and the Desert of the Real, where her performances would entangle with haunted histories and otherworldly spaces.

In the end, almost fifty years later, she met me.



[Figure 1 – The Amargosa Opera House and Hotel. Death Valley Junction, CA.
Photo credit: Tuxyso / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0]

My obsession for the quirky story of a ballerina and her theater in the middle of the desert stems from my interest in and understanding of opera as a genre inherently “haunted by instances of recurrence that had little to do with linear influences and more with issues of memory, replacement, and repression.”² Moreover, opera houses are frequently imagined as haunted buildings, “powerful repositories of cultural memory” whose allure for audiences is built on the phantasmagoric quality of the experience of attending the re-enactment of an ancient tradition.³ This peculiar hauntological framework is thus inherently bound to overflow into the realm of the very subjects and objects of my “historical fieldwork,” as ghosts seem to inhabit pretty much every theatrical space and time I have been researching—from the Orphic birth of opera to Lacanian insights on opera

² Carlo Lanfossi, “Ghosting Agrippina: Genealogies of Performance in Italian Baroque Opera,” *The Journal of Musicology* 36, no. 1 (2019): 7.

³ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 144.

historiography, from the ghosting of previous music in Handel's pasticci to the Benjaminian *flâneries* of nineteenth-century Milan's galleries. I did not choose to stay among specters: we both failed to leave.

The Amargosa Opera House and Hotel lies at the intersection of SR 190 and 127, close to the border of California and Nevada, far enough from Vegas's loathing allure and near enough to live in fear of the ghost stories surrounding the valley's casinos and roadhouses. No wonder the place is called Death Valley Junction: much like the cathedral in the desert it conveniently hosts, the village is pure threshold; it is the place where you can only go left or right, as U-turning brings you back to the Other threshold—i.e., the desert. In 1967, Marta Becket did what Orpheus could not: she chose not to turn back. She decided to stay.

Over the first few minutes of *Amargosa* (2000), an Academy-Award finalist documentary dedicated to the story of Marta's theater in the desert, the voice of Mary McDonnell narrates the magical site as a "state of mind," a "deserted crossroad in the badlands of an uncertain future" reachable only "amongst the rubble of another time."⁴ Of all the possible uncertain futures, Marta chose the most solitary one: entirely by herself, she renovated the lone Death Valley Junction building (once known as Corkhill Hall) and transformed it into a theater where she could perform her ballets and plays (also written by herself) for an audience yet to appear. And spectators did make an appearance: between 1967 and 1974, they (im)materialized as shadowy thirds over the walls of the opera house, thanks to the relentless work of this New York ballerina (by now in her fifties) who painted her own imagined community of simulacra. The uncanny interiors now display an array of present and past visitors, from Spanish rulers to local pets, with the aim of filling the empty theater with the ghosts of the valley's colonial histories and genealogies.

Back then, the few Mormon families living in the area showed little interest in Marta's plays and only asked for ballet classes for the kids. The crowded murals were thus conceived not only to fill the void of an empty space, but also as a sort of artistic oddity to quench the thirst for those 1970s desert travelers seeking curiosities and out-of-body experiences. Rumors about this bizarre performance site in the middle of the desert began spreading, and in 1970 both the *National Geographic* and *Life* had articles and photographs about Amargosa.⁵ The myth had started.

⁴ *Amargosa*, documentary written and directed by Todd Robinson (Triple Play, 2000), transcript of 02'14" to 02' 35".

⁵ Rowe Findley, "Death Valley, the Land and the Legend," *National Geographic* 137, no. 1 (January 1970): 69–103; "Ballet in Death Valley," *Life*, April 17, 1970, 42–43.

By projecting a fictional collection of characters taken from the stories she used to dance to (kings and queens, ambassadors, nuns, and so on), Marta was gazed upon at first by only a multiplicity of her own selves but then eventually was observed by national discourse and wandering customers. This conflation of different times became one of the topics of conversation when I finally had the chance to speak with her during my stay at the Amargosa Opera House and Hotel in November 2014.



[Figure 2 – The interior of the Amargosa Opera House. Photo credit: Carlo Lanfossi]

It was Thanksgiving week: roads were empty, and Las Vegas was cheap—one of the main reasons why a graduate student like me could afford such remote and elaborate fieldwork. I decided to stay at the hotel connected to the opera house, hoping to speak to as many people as I could about the place and its owner. I did not really know what I was trying to achieve, other than collecting voices and acting like a more informed visitor than I actually was. On Thanksgiving Day,

the telephone rang as I was reading in the lobby. It was Marta (recently turned 90), asking if she could have lunch with the women who were running the business. Suddenly, the atmosphere inside the hotel had turned from timeless stasis to frenzied action.

I was the only guest invited—mostly because I was the only one available. Marta Becket arrived in a wheelchair accompanied by a woman in her 40s; she was dragging the “cart,” thus leaving Marta facing towards the back, in the opposite direction of the opera house. The ballerina was a pale, skin and bone reflection of the dancer she used to be. She barely talked. But when she did, her low voice seemed to come out of another dimension. “Life is a disappointment,” was one of her refrains during the two hours we spent together. As I was listening to her voice during our conversation, I could hear her own younger voice juxtaposed by the speakers of the television that was showing non-stop the documentary *Amargosa*. It was as if an audible past kept breaking into our present. The effect was spooky, to say the least. “I like being alone,” she said; to which one of the workers added “but you always have all the crowd around you when you’re performing, so you’re still around a lot of people.” “Yes, but they’re too tame ... in an invisible world...” were Marta’s closing remarks.



[Figure 3 – Marta Beckett, November 2014. Photo credit: Carlo Lanfossi]

During the Thanksgiving lunch I was seated with three women other than Marta. They volunteer to run the hotel and promote the business around the place (the gift shop, tours of the opera house, etc.). Together they create a community that worships Marta and her art, as I can tell by the tears they still shed every time they glimpse a dramatic scene from the documentary screening in the hall. Over the years they have promoted online campaigns and fundraisers to keep the business running, as Marta quit performing in 2011 and the place can only rely on the income from hotel revenues and tax-free donations. During our conversations I could tell that, even though I stated from the very beginning the reason why I was there, the attention I received hinged upon a silent request of economic support on my behalf. Soon, I realized that this sort of women-run “gift economy” permeated more than the walls of the hotel and opera house.

The economy of the valley was at the center of every conversation I had during my three days there. I was sent to the nearest town, 20 miles south of Death Valley Junction, called Shoshone Village (population, 31) which still hosts a post office, a working gas station, a saloon, and the Shoshone Museum. As I entered the museum, I was greeted by Ethel, the local guide, who tells me everything she knows about Marta and points me in the direction of an entire wall devoted to the “Death Valley Women,” which includes explorers, teachers, composers, and of course Marta Becket. Among the memorabilia, a playbill of one of the first event at the Amargosa Opera House: Marta was apparently dancing over nineteenth-century European classical music. The museum overflows with historical newspapers and articles which testify to the extent and relevance played by women’s spheres and communal economy in Death Valley since the end of the nineteenth century. A few of them are dedicated to three of the major economic activities of the valley at the time: brothel management, mining companies, and stock markets.⁶ Marta’s family participated in such a narrative not only because she managed to run an art business almost by herself, but also because her mother “was addicted to the stock market,” as she told everyone at the Thanksgiving lunch.

In the discourses surrounding women’s cultural sphere in the valley, men are constantly described with a condescending tone. During our lunch I am briefly joined by two men who I understand are regular handymen and also their partners: anytime they would take the floor, the women looked away with embarrassed faces. The stories of their male companions all follow this narrative of acquiescence and failure. Men are nullified to the point of being rendered as ghosts:

⁶ See Sally Zanjani, *A Mine of Her Own: Women Prospectors in the American West, 1850–1950* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Robin Flinchum, *Red Light Women of Death Valley* (Charleston: The History Press, 2015).

across and aside from the “Women of Death Valley” wall at the Shoshone Museum, the gift shop shelves have on display a few biographies and essays explicitly emphasizing the spectral quality of male discourses. Among them, I was able to spot titles such as *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, or *These Canyons are Full of Ghosts*.⁷ The most recurring stories dealing with the ghosts of Death Valley center around the mining industry and the hard life conditions in which workers had to live. One of these is directly related to the Amargosa Opera House and Hotel. As indicated by the plaque still hanging outside, the theater “was originally built by the Pacific Coast Borax Company in 1924 ... and was the social center for Death Valley Junction between 1924 to 1948.” The sign was placed in 1988 by the fraternal organization “E Clampus Vitus,” a “historical drinking society” whose “obsession” with plaquing is part of a larger mission to mark sites at the intersection of reality and absurdity, in line with the brotherhood’s motto *Credo Quia Absurdum*, generally understood as “I believe because it is absurd.”⁸ It is certainly telling that a men-only organization was the one responsible for labelling one of the most special buildings in Death Valley as a liminal place, where even ghosts have to deal with sublimation though artistic means.

Back at my lunch at the hotel, Marta kept repeating how her husband was a complete disappointment (their troubled relationship had in fact ended in 1983). The person who replaced him as both stage assistant and lover was Tom Willett (friendly referred to as “Wilget”), a local character who started performing with Marta by playing the piano, then by entertaining the audience with all sorts of jokes, and finally by being Marta’s dancing partner, almost always cross-dressed. In her autobiography, she recalls how Wilget “created a music machine. A sort of mechanized pipe organ that played several instruments at his commands. Wilget would put on a little show of his own. He loved the attention and people loved him. He didn’t steal the show, I gave it to him.”⁹ In such emasculating narratives, even their musical instruments and music is soulless, mechanic, haunted. It is Marta who grants agency to men. In the desert, it is the female gaze that defines men.

One of the items that struck my curiosity at the Shoshone Museum was the vocal score for an “Ode to Death Valley.” Song and lyrics were composed by Pauline Frederick, a woman who ran

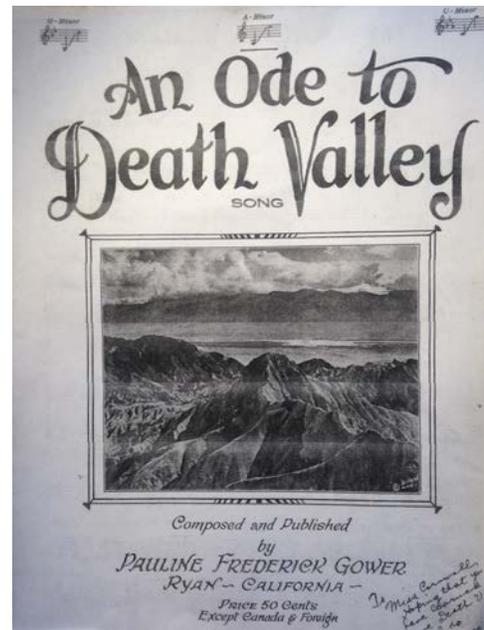
⁷ Michael K. Ward, *Ghost Riders in the Sky: The Life of Stan Jones, the Singing Ranger* (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2014); Emmett Carl Harder, *These Canyons Are Full of Ghosts: The Last of the Death Valley Prospectors* (San Bernardino: Real Adventure, 2001).

⁸ Jesse McKinley, “Promoting Offbeat History Between the Drinks,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/14/us/14california.html>. See also Lois Rather, *Men Will Be Boys: The Story of E Clampus Vitus* (Oakland: Rather Press, 1980).

⁹ Becket, *To Dance on Sands*, 325.

the Death Valley View Hotel and later our Amargosa Hotel, long before Marta did.¹⁰ The piece starts with an eerie prelude consisting of sixteen arpeggios of dominant and diminished seventh chords and unfolds in *durchkomponiert* (or through-composed) style.

You are a land of mystery
Far, far away from the sea
Grim mountains meet grey desert sand,
Oh haunting, fascinating land
Where sand dunes play
And soft breezes stray,
Oh land of mystery;
Many have perished [long pause]
While fanned by your breath,
And thus you are called the Valley of Death!



[Figure 4 – Pauline Frederick, *An Ode to Death Valley* (1928). Shoshone Museum, Shoshone, CA.]

The song is mentioned as “inspired by scenes such as the one reproduced on the cover,” a black and white shot “looking West from Zabriskie Point,” without any trace of human activity.¹¹ Even though the Mojave Desert is certainly not home to the deadliest place on the planet, death here nevertheless informs every corner and discourse. For the women of the valley, coping with the trauma of living in such a hostile environment meant collectively disembodiment and producing art. A handwritten dedication on the front page of Pauline Frederick’s score at the museum affectionately mentions one “Miss Cromwall, hoping that you have learned to love Death Valley as I do.” The official, printed dedication is instead to Christian Brevoort Zabriskie, vice president of Pacific Coast Borax Company and thus the boss of Harry P. Gower, Pauline’s husband. His name still resonates in the valley at Zabriskie Point, named after him as representative of a haunted mining company. It is also still home to some of the best known out-of-body experiences, from the

¹⁰ Richard E. Lingenfelter, *Death Valley & the Amargosa: A Land of Illusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 456.

¹¹ Pauline Frederick Gower, *An Ode to Death Valley* (Ryan, CA: published by the author, 1928), 6.

protagonists of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 movie *Zabriskie Point* who "have no resonance as human beings"¹² to Michel Foucault's famous 1975 acid trip listening to Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, a trip mythologized as a turning point in his reflections on being and sexuality. "Is this perhaps death?"¹³

I left Death Valley Junction with much less self-transforming thoughts and with certainly less historically burdened music than Richard Strauss and local odes to the valley. The drive back to Las Vegas occurred almost entirely in complete darkness. "There's no such thing as a bad coincidence," I must have told myself as I stubbornly tried to weave together my flat tire with Marta's, operatic ghosts with the desert, even David Lynch's 1997 film *Lost Highway*, as not only did I know his non-linear movie had been filmed at the Amargosa Opera House and Hotel, but also because its most iconic scene was literally unfolding in front of me.



[Figure 5 – Ash Meadows Road, Inyo County, CA. Photo credit: Carlo Lanfossi]

¹² Roger Ebert, review of *Zabriskie Point*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, *Chicago-Sun Times*, January 1, 1970, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/zabriskie-point-1970.

¹³ The reference is to the last line of Richard Strauss's *Im Abendrot* as mentioned in the trip's memoir by Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2019), 69. The actual relevance of the Death Valley trip within Foucault's philosophy has been recently critiqued and questioned by Kurt Borg, "Foucault on Drugs: The Personal, the Ethical and the Political in *Foucault in California*," *Foucault Studies* 28 (2020): 142–64.

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