

Speech Lessons

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Speech Lessons  
by Jesse Saldana

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I.  
Meadows and Mesas  
*New Mexico*



We received the land on the condition that the meadows and watering holes would be free for all.

The grasslands had a different name, before the first settlers beat back Apaches:

*Nuestra Senora de los Dolores de Las Vegas Grandes.*

We built the garden first. Digging up the grama grass. Clearing the soil for the corn to be planted before the summer. By August we had first sight of the stalks, still a year away from bearing corn.

Juan Dios Maese and others petitioned for a grant of land with the following boundaries: On the north, the Sappello River; on the south, the boundary of the grant made to Don Antonio Ortiz; on the east, the Aguage de la Zegua; and on the west, the boundary of the Grant to San Miguel del Bado.

Pray to Nuestra Señora  
Pray to Our Savior  
Pray for rain  
Pray for good crop  
Pray for neighbors

April 6th, 1835

*List showing the number of individuals who occupy the new settlement, known as Las Vegas, and the number of yards of land each has received:*

|                           |     |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Citizen Acensio Baca..... | 175 |
| Citizen Simon Blea.....   | 100 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Citizen Jose de Jesus Ulibarri.....                     | 150 |
| Citizen Santiago Ortegam selected in Balen-<br>dre..... | 150 |
| Citizen Juan de Dios Maese.....                         | 250 |
| Citizen Juan Jose Baca.....                             | 200 |
| Citizen Francisco Lopez.....                            | 100 |
| Citizen Tomas Baca.....                                 | 225 |

Flat grass fills the horizon—  
browened against scattered Yuccas,  
the looming mesa to the east,  
creased earth rising.

Horse breath fogs  
in the spring morning,  
night frost holding on  
to the flanks, ribs sharp  
against the skin, ready  
for renewed pasture.

\*

Yes, Mexico must be thoroughly chastised! Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush as well as expand!

—*Walt Whitman*

February 2nd, 1848

The Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement with the Republic of Mexico

In the name of Almighty God:

The United States of America and the United Mexican States: desire to put an end to the calamities of war, which unhappily exists between the two republics; to establish upon a solid basis relations of peace and friendship, which shall confer reciprocal benefits upon the citizens of both and assure the concord, harmony, and mutual confidence wherein the two people should live as good neighbors.

Five townswomen kneel in the juniper pews facing the altar of the adobe church, the back wall filled with a carved altar piece, images of La Señora De Guadalupe and Jesucristo among the gilded wood.

from the *Whig Intelligencer*

We take nothing by conquest... Thank God.

Article X

Mexicans who, in the territories aforesaid: shall not preserve the character of citizens of the Mexican republic; shall be incorporated into the Union of United States; and be admitted at the proper time to the enjoyment of all rights of citizens of the United States, according to the principles of the constitution; shall in the

meantime, be maintained and protected in the free enjoyment of their liberty and property, and secured in the free exercise of their religion without restriction.

Mesas and Meadows, ours for more than a hundred years, theirs now.  
The grasses primed as the site of expansion.

Homestead Act of 1862

Said entry [must be] made for the purpose of actual settlement and cultivation, and not either directly or indirectly for the use or benefit of any other person or persons whomsoever.

\*

April 3rd, 1880 from the *Daily Optic*:

Reporter: How is Albuquerque panning out?

Mr. Otero: The New Town, I suppose you mean.

A town company has laid out more than a hundred acres in town lots, which are selling rapidly and many buildings are going up.

Reporter: When will the Santa Fé Railroad get there?

Mr. Otero: The 6th, possibly a day sooner.

Reporter: How about the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad? Will they build out of Albuquerque soon?

Mr. Otero: Yes. The money has been secured and there will be little delay.

First their fences cut off our schools  
then our churches—

built of the best brick we could find,  
painted white, seven pews, an altar- piece  
built up to the flat roof, filled with paintings  
of Nuestro Salvador y Nuestra Señora—  
built to lay claim to their land.

Barriers that cut us off from  
our buildings and watering holes.

Miguel Otero, son of Mexico,  
man of America, carried the Atchison,  
Topeka & Santa Fé railroad to Las Vegas.  
Today, he rests aboard the fourth car  
flat on his back and full of finery,  
imortelles formed into “rest,”  
the casket westward, towards the sea.

The steam engine’s pierced  
air clips our ears—  
the announcement of arrival—  
followed by the sound of metallic  
hooves trampling toward us.

\*

Phillip Millhizer v. Juan Padilla  
Cross-examination of complainant  
May, 1888

Judge: Who took possession  
of that land there at La Monilla first,  
you or these defendants?

Millhizer, Plaintiff: The bill states that the  
defendants are in possession, and I want  
possession and can't get it...there are no  
improvements on the land except the fence  
made by the defendants.

Judge: Do you own the Las Vegas Land Grant?

Millhizer, Plaintiff: I claim an undivided interest  
in it.

Documentary evidence introduced by  
defendants

A part of the Las Vegas Grant; being 160  
acres situated at a place known as "La  
Monilla," and bounded on the north by  
property of Andres Martinez; on the south  
by property of Francisco Padilla; on the east  
by the summit of the hill, and on the west  
the "Laguna de Piedra." Claimant [Padilla]  
alleges that he has made improvements  
thereon of the value of \$1,500.00; and that  
he took possession of said land in the month  
of February 1879.

*Oral evidence introduced by the defendants*

*Jose Leon Padilla:*

I have an interest in the Las Vegas Grant  
which I hold by deeds of conveyance made  
to me and others.

*Final conclusion of law on the whole case*

The complainants in this action have no legal or equitable right, title or interest, in or to the lands in controversy in this suit, and there is, therefore, no merit in their bill.

Thumb the ear's end  
for roundness and full kernels,  
signs of harvest.

Ears piled, pull back  
the husks of each,  
discarding the rotten ones,

and stacking the full and yellow  
ears for drying. Hang the ears  
until the kernels harden.

\*

Workers, light and dark-skinned,  
 set the railroad tracks, laying wood  
 and iron into the hard earth.  
 The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fé  
 always inching towards the sea.

Pray for our land  
 Pray that fences fall  
 Pray that we have water  
 Pray that we keep the land

*The First Signs, San Miguel County*  
*Juan Jose Herrera*

Herrera met his Americano neighbor,  
 asked about the fence he built,  
 that cut off common grazing land  
 to Herrera and his neighbors.

Push came to shove and the Americano  
 ended up in the half full rain barrel.

When night came, Herrera led some men,  
 all capped in white, towards the neighbor's  
 barbed barricades. Cut the fences,  
 the masked men sure to rattle the cattle.

A hundred men, on horseback,  
 covered in white, ran through  
 town last night. Woke me up  
 as they yelled in English and Spanish,  
 before riding to burn haystacks  
 and steal five cows, four sheep,  
 and chickens from the coup.

From the *Las Vegas Optic* Newspaper  
February, 1890

While the Optic does not approve of the acts of those who have been engaged in the cutting of those unlawful fences on the grant, yet we do not wholly condemn their course.

*Nuestra Plataforma*

Not wishing our declaration  
to protect rights and interests  
to be misunderstood:

we want no “land grabbers,”  
must hazard against race agitators.  
All knavery must be stopped.

Justice is watchword:  
the double-dealing difference  
between law and justice.

We are human brethren under  
the same flag—that favors  
enterprise and tends to monopolize—  
our lands watered by the corrupt.  
Streams hold the peace  
that irrigation obstructs.  
Come and see hunger and desolation.

Retribution will be the reward;  
watch the grudge bulldoze tyrants,  
intimidate and indict enemies—  
the only relief to our sufferings  
the fair and just treatment of the people.

*Las Gorras Blancas*  
*1,500 Strong and Growing*

Pray that the Mexicans  
 don't run us off our land  
 Pray that they don't cut  
 our fences and burn our barns  
 Pray for our safety.

*August, 1890 San Miguel County*

To All Section Foreman and Operators,  
 You are advised to leave here at once  
 otherwise you will not be able to do so.

Men, brown and white, took off from their  
 post, scared to be seen tying railroad tracks  
 down across the meadow's dying grass.

Sir Waddingham,

This notice is with the object of requesting  
 you to coil up your wire as soon as possible  
 from the North and South Sides. They are  
 fences which are damaging the unhappy  
 people and we request you further to coil up  
 your wire as soon as you can to the  
 agricultural land, and if you do not do it, you  
 will suffer the consequences from us.

*Your Servants,  
 Las Gorras Blancas*

"The American Race" is marked by a brown  
 complexion, long, black, lank hair, and deficient  
 beard. In their mental character the Americans  
 are averse to cultivation, and slow in acquiring  
 knowledge; restless, revengeful, fond of war,  
 and wholly destitute of maritime adventure.

Reversing the day's work: pull up the stake,  
dislodge the ties—disperse wood and iron.

*From a letter from Benjamin F. Butler, Attorney  
and landholder of 400,000 acres in New Mexico*

You must recollect, that these are Mexicans; that  
the Mexicans in New Mexico, with  
the exception of perhaps five percent,  
are the most ignorant people on  
the face of the earth.

\*

*Juan Jose Herrera's closing remarks to the  
New Mexico House of Representatives*

Gentleman,  
I would like to say that the time I spent in  
the penitentiary was more enjoyable than the  
time I have spent here.

Without a word a deputy sheriff shot  
Juan Jose Herrera, unarmed, through the heart  
in front of the San Miguel court house.

Ready, scrape the kernels off of the cob,  
mix with lime and water. Mill the corn into  
masa ready to be pressed and formed.

\*

*Nuestra Senora de los Dolores  
de Las Vegas Grandes, a name forgotten,  
just as we have lost the land and the land  
has lost us—histories of our progress.*

\*

## II. Speech Lessons

## Mother Tongue

I come home to the smell of fish  
and ask my mother what kind—  
she says sal-men, instead of sa-men,  
a pronunciation I learned  
while ordering the fish on a date.  
I correct my mother,  
careful to annunciate the s-a.

Like my mother I mispronounce words,  
except I am in a college classroom  
and say bore-gwa instead of burzh-wa,  
unaware of the silent ending.  
Heads turn and a corrective is issued.  
I nod and smile uncomfortably,  
having only seen the word in print.

My mother and I are at the market,  
where the elderly Honduran grocer  
weighs out our beef and potatoes  
while talking with him in rapid Spanish,  
as I barely hang on to the conversation.  
¿Esta es su hijo? Sí, my mother smiles.  
¿Como estás? the man asks—  
in my response I forget to roll my Rs.  
This time she turns towards me,  
her smile waning. Outside she rolls her Rs,  
tells me that I really should practice.  
Unsung in Spanish and misfiring in English  
I nod my head to agree.

## The Prisoner's Son

Hug or handshake? Smile or straight-face?  
He talks first, smiles, asks where I've been.  
I know not to ask how he's been,  
or ask how it feels to be out.

Driving home I don't point out new landmarks,  
still, he tells me the best way to get to mom's.  
In the silences I can't stop glancing at him—  
his arms and gut smaller, his hair whiter.

I tell myself that this is the only time  
I'll wonder how it was for a man of his age.  
Did someone look out for him? Watch his back  
for shanks and shivs? Shoves and fists?

He'll never say—  
those are seven years I'll never know.  
He only tells me that he never got touched,  
something he says without query.  
Oddly, I wonder who'll touch him now.

At mom's there's chicken with rice and beans,  
and an ugly cake, and like seven years ago  
he watches t.v. in the recliner—  
still commenting on all the women.

## California King

A Father gave the eulogy,  
a man I'd never met, despite leading  
the church two blocks from my Grandmother's.

Days later her pillbox would be thrown out  
from below her paper portrait of Jesus.  
His fair-skinned, blond hair, and blue eyed  
face peeking out at you. His heart, thorned  
and adorned with a halo, visible on his tunic.

As a boy I'd sleep on my  
grandmother's bed, a California king.  
Now, upon returning, I talk to  
the house's new resident  
who gets up at five in the morning  
and after I brush my teeth  
he tells me about Zetas hanging  
woman and children from bridges,  
calls the president a pejorative,  
and shows me what he's done to the place,  
taking me through the house pointing  
at freshly plastered ceilings and new counters.

By noon my grandfather is asleep  
in his lazyboy, Telemundo still playing.  
I find myself in his room, sitting on  
the California king, staring at Jesus  
and a Virgin of Guadalupe candle.  
I try and pray but get up halfway  
noting Jesus' inaccurate depiction  
and remembering the way my  
Grandmother affixed a crucifix  
to her neck every morning—  
how she centered the cross  
three times before she left the room.

## Lake View Terrace

I ride my bike at dawn,  
drunk and still a little high,  
speeding home bricked by  
visions of Edgar and Homer  
among pale columns and Virginia clay  
before the last turn home,  
just past the bridge.

On that same May morning  
some brother of mine tears down the street,  
sounds of morning traffic drowning out  
the whirl of bike tires, the shots  
clustered across the torso.

A couple of days after  
I read the homicide report,  
see my own name in print  
—hyphen, the only difference—

Two years later, under the overpass  
my grandfather points:  
that's where those fuckers shot him.  
The unadorned spot is unlike  
any roadside memorial I've seen,

there's no picture and cross here,  
no roses forever fresh, just patches  
of dead grass and dusty cans.

Perhaps I'll have an obituary  
to mark the intersection of my death—  
south of a cluster of gunshots  
and east of a stabbing—

Just past the overpass  
I flash the rental's brights  
while trying to put on the turn signal.  
My grandfather chides me,  
asks if I know what that means.  
It means you're about to shoot.

## Nickeled and Dimed

i.

Half a block past a guy, cloaked  
in camouflage against the Chinese  
Garden's brick walls, asks for change  
that I don't have. The man's white hair  
makes him too old for the war on terror—  
so I place him in Vietnam.

ii.

Ten years previous, boys who watched  
tanks skirt across the Middle East nightly,  
shots broadcast in eerie green, lobbed  
*towelhead* and *Muslim* as insults  
without ever wrapping cloth around my head.  
Even the fair-skinned Cuban kid joined in—  
sure to mention the border—  
afraid to be found out.

iii.

Now winter skin means Hispanic  
and Middle Eastern; spring brings  
Southeast Asian and Filipino into the mix;  
dark summer tones adds black and Indian,  
along with halfie; fall skin, with summer's  
fading tan, calls for a different name each day.  
All seasons bring glee to the namer, cycling  
through their rolodex of color—brownie points  
for guesses of *Paraguayan* or *Laotian*.

iv.

Just past the entryway,  
it hits—the *n*, always a surprise,  
followed by the slow *g*'s, *r* seals  
the name among the garden's  
petals, wilted against the brick.

## A List of Facts

The only thing I've ever stolen  
was a figurine of a Franciscan monk.  
Shoved the plastic man in my coat pocket  
as my mother paid for the styrofoam walls,  
meant to replicate the San Jose Mission,  
a school project. I've been to jail twice:  
once by force, once to see my grandfather.  
My parents forgot the ñ, and so did I. I  
was the communion boy. I held an AK-47 once,  
watched it pass hands around the room,  
followed by a pistol. I grew up in a house  
with a deck and a fence, automatic sprinklers  
kept the lawn green. Once, when visiting  
my grandfather he offered me a corona, marijuana,  
and coca. I'm still not sure if he was kidding.  
I mowed lawns one summer, had an internship the next.  
I have forgotten the mother tongue.

Self-Portrait while eating in a Mexican restaurant with mis tias

Prayers precede the meal,  
my Negra Modelo christens it.  
Here, in Acapulco—complete with buffet,  
the top tiled with rounded red clay,  
where refried beans turn cakelike, heated for hours—  
the Olive Garden of Mexican restaurants,  
I am too skinny. Need to eat more frijoles  
mi tia says as I sip the only beer on the table,  
unchristian. This is a clip I've forgotten.

Food interrupts, the sharp smell of sizzling  
mixed meat fajitas, the handle too hot to touch  
warns the waiter. Mis tias say my mother must  
miss me, while my cousins perk up when I talk  
about being away from home. I want another beer  
but know it would make me a borracho.  
Instead, I consider the décor: the textured faux  
adobe walls adorned with multi-colored ponchos  
and black sombreros, the rounded yellow doorways.

## Self-Portrait through the eating habits of my family

Fast food until twelve meant taco bell.  
Sometimes my mom would talk to the cashier  
in Spanish, point to me and say es mi hijo.  
Always, three hard shell taco supremes for me.

As a teen I first had Creme Brûlée,  
the singed custard crackling  
as I tapped it with my spoon.  
This quarterly routine became my favorite.

This is also, when I noticed, that sometimes  
we were the only brown people in a restaurant,  
besides one or two of the waiters.  
This too became routine.

The last time I ate out with my family  
the owner greeted our table, asked where  
we were from. Here. Mother said Honduras,  
Owner thought Middle East, her son having visited.

Self-Portrait through an email titled “Need help with ‘Imposter Syndrome?’”

Is this in the DSM-IV? Imposter as a: student? American? Hispanic? Male?  
Is this diagnosable? If so, what are the symptoms? Am I exhibiting them?  
Did I overdo it on the Spivak in that last class? Imposter or Imposer?  
According to the census I would have been white in the early 1900s.  
According to the Times I’ll be white in 2050—am I brown going on white?  
Is brown politically correct? is white? Statistically speaking, does that mean  
I’ll be less likely to go to jail? Sometimes while walking down the street  
some brother will give me the head bob, you know, that quick glance  
of shared experience? Another day, this Arabic dude did the same thing.  
And another day, this Vietnamese lady gave me a hug and a free spring roll—  
she thought I was Pacific Islander. The last time a Caucasian person spoke  
to me on the street she yelled at me as I chased a lost dog behind the fence of a closed  
park. *What are you doing? You know you’re not supposed to be behind there right?*

Self-Portrait while walking down the sidewalk

Today, the street is unkind to me. Prospective  
students and their parents hog the walkways  
following u-guides pointing out secret societies.

One mother pauses and stares, then points at me  
as she whispers to her daughter. I'm not sure  
if she's arrested by my shoulder length hair  
or my brown skin. I want to say, call me  
if you want beer next year. I look at a dogwood instead.

## Self-Portrait in Transit

This time, the eighth consecutive time,  
I'm waved aside after exposing myself—  
arms up and bent to the head and legs  
spread apart facing an outline  
modeling the proper position—  
the TSA's new body imaging machine  
whirs as it scans you, an encased  
bar a blur as it encircles the body.

I'm not armed or dangerous  
just browned with my shoulder-  
length hair pulled back. This,  
I'm sure is the mark of Jihad.

So goes the routine:  
*raise your arms, spread your legs.*  
*Do you have anything in your pockets?*  
The kneeling man's blue-gloved hands  
start at the feet, pressing the denim  
of my jeans as he rises up the leg,  
pauses at the torso, before patting  
up along the back. Eye to eye now,  
arms the final site of suspicion.  
Head nodding, his dark brow  
wet with sweat. Now, here I am,  
no longer a potential threat.

## Submission

means body first: skin  
 scanned two shades off  
 means everyone friends feverishly; skin scans::  
 skin scams—just so skin  
 can skin skin. There doesn't  
 mean here—know what I mean?

Mother: there                  father: here  
 Me: here                          Grandparents: there.  
    Police say:  
    White; Black; Hispanic;  
    Pacific Islander.

I mean I'm from there, but came here  
 my mother is from there but came here,  
 my father was born here. Technically, I'm from here,  
 my grandparents aren't. The police have marked me.  
 Go ahead: stop-and-frisk.

## Notes on the Text

*Meadows and Mesas* is partially built out of the following sources. Notably: The Treaty of Hidalgo-Guadalupe, which marked the end of the Mexican-American war; The Homestead Act of 1862; transcriptions of the Phillip Millhizer v. Juan Padilla—a case that opened the door for large land owners to claim land that was originally granted to Mexican citizens—fragments include documents submitted by the plaintiff and the defendants; snippets from the *Daily Optic* newspaper and the *Daily Whig Intelligencer*; the “Proclamation of Las Gorras Blancas,” which appeared in the *Daily Optic*, and the group’s threats, issued to land owners in New Mexico; a letter from Benjamin F. Butler; Samuel George Morton’s nineteenth-century writings on the correlation between skull shape and character from his book *Crania Americana*; and lastly, an article by Walt Whitman in the *Brooklyn Eagle* during the Mexican-American War.