

Liliana Valenzuela, A Contemporary Malinche: On Being a Bilingual and Bicultural Creative Scribe

Interview by Claire Joysmith*



Nico Tucco

Liliana Valenzuela smiles broadly, her blue eyes twinkling happily beneath a mass of naturally curly blonde hair. As we talk, she moves easily from Spanish into English and back into Spanish, and we joke about her as a contemporary Malinche “*güera*” figure. As I glean by conversing with her and glancing at her card and website (<http://www.lilianavalenzuela.com/Home.html>), I am aware she readily identifies with la Malinche, a maligned historical figure, and more recently reconfigured (particularly in Chicana writings) as an icon of trans-cultural/linguistic creative production and politics.

Liliana laughs candidly as she responds. “La Malinche has been my alter ego since the days back in 1988 when I was studying anthropology and folklore at the University of Texas. I was attracted to La Malinche, wanted to study her in more depth, find out what was really true and what was slapped onto her as the ‘Mexican Eve.’ I found that many indigenous communities saw her as a powerful being, a duality with Cortés, since they were represented as such in the codices. La Malinche was, after all, one of the first interpreters of the Americas, since she was fluent in Náhuatl, Mayan, and was quick to learn Spanish. I found that La Malinche is also a fertility dance enacted, curiously enough, by men with lizard masks in a remote village in the state of Guerrero. So, I realized that

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a lot of extraneous meanings, including that of traitor, had been layered on her throughout the centuries. I sought to reclaim her legacy and give her back her true power. Later, when I became a translator, she seemed like a most fitting symbol for me. Malinalli, *la lengua*, the tongue, she who has the power of the word in several languages.”

Few people are truly aware of the innate talent and skills needed to develop as a translator. So what special skills or combination of skills does Liliana herself bring to the table, particularly as a literary translator? “Our job and our particular talents and skills are often invisible, especially for those who are monolingual. I feel fortunate that, after many years of study and of living in the U.S., I acquired language skills translating from English into Spanish; but I also had a background in anthropology and, as you know, one is translating not only the language but also the culture. That, in addition to my developing as a poet and writer, made literary translation a logical choice for me. It helps enormously to also be a writer, or to have a musical ear.”

Clearly, literary translation is an art in itself. “Translation involves analysis —structural, semantic, cultural, and linguistic— but it also brings in inspiration, the desire and abil-

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Liliana Valenzuela was awarded the 2006 Alicia Gordon Award for Word Artistry in Translation for her version into Spanish of Nina Marie Martínez’s novel *¡Caramba!* And she has translated into Spanish a considerable number of literary works by renowned U.S. Latina/o writers. Among these are Sandra Cisneros (*El arroyo de la Llorona*, *Caramelo*, and *Hairs/Pelitos*), Julia Álvarez (*Devolver al remitente*, *Había una vez una quinceñera: De niña a mujer en E.E.U.U.*, *En busca de milagros*, *Un regalo de gracias*, and *Cuando tía Lola vino de visita/a quedarse*), Cristina García (*Las caras de la suerte*), Denise Chávez (*La última de las muchachas del menú*), Alex Espinoza (*Los santos de Agua Mansa*), Raúl Fernández (*Latin Jazz: La combinación perfecta*, Association of American Museums Best Book Award), and several Latina/o authors in the anthology edited by Cristina García, *Voces sin fronteras*.

Literary translating is a laborious, subtle, punctilious, and time-consuming trade requiring an inborn talent with words. So, when it comes to translating an entire volume, how does she pace herself, what steps does she follow to reach the final publication stage? “Good question. I usually allow four to six months for translating a full-length novel or short story collection. I usually do four thorough revisions, top to bottom. The first one is for accuracy, comparing with the source text, line by line. The second one is for fluency, putting the original away. The third one is for queries and research, finding out all the details that are pending. The fourth one for readability, grammar, and punctuation. It has to be print-ready, even though it usually goes to a copyeditor first, then two or three proofs. By the time the book is published, I have nearly memorized it!”

And what about her relationship with the author whose work she’s translating? “I usually highlight the terms I’m not sure about in the digital document and funnel them to lists, for the author or for friends and colleagues. When I’ve a good page or two of questions, I ask the author. Most have been very

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agreeable and interested in the translation. So, many solutions have been the result of brainstorming on the phone or finding something relevant on the Internet, or asking third sources.”

Liliana Valenzuela was named by Univisión as “Orgullo Latino de la semana” (Latino Pride of the Week) in 2007. Publishing in Spanish within the U.S. must surely involve particular challenges. “Spanish is the second un-official language of the United States, with a large reading public, many of them recent immigrants. And even some long-time immigrants prefer to read in their native language, and they want their children to keep the language. So, it makes sense to publish both translations and original works in Spanish in the U.S. The challenge is that many editors and publishing houses are not fluent in Spanish and are not as well-informed about the different Spanish-speaking cultures, and typesetters often don’t know Spanish, so that process is often lengthy and new mistakes are introduced. Right now, the publishing industry is in flux, so there are fewer commissioned translations at the moment.”

Latina and Chicana authors in the U.S. have had considerable publishing success there in the last few decades. Their work brings together a crossroads of political, cultural, social, and identity issues that speak directly to and inform not only Chicana/os and U.S. Latinos/as, but other readers on a global scale. In this sense, what kind of political statement is being made when you translate U.S. Latina/o work into Spanish and these are published in the U.S.? “Well, the publishing model is changing, so nobody really knows how the content is going to be transmitted in the future. As the recession deepens, there is less money to publish and less money for people to buy books. But then you have the Internet and content being provided even via cell phones, so everything is changing. Politically, though, publishing in Spanish today flies in the face of the nativist currents dominating public discourse nowadays. It is an act of defiance.”

Very few translations into Spanish of Chicana/o and U.S. Latina/o writings are available in Mexico and Latin Ameri-

ca. It is highly unusual, even, to find Sandra Cisneros’ novel *Caramelo*, much of which is set in Mexico City, on bookstore shelves in Mexico City itself. What might explain this? “This is a very good question, because it’s not only cultural neglect or ignorance that produces this situation in which many Chicano/Latino authors are still unknown in Mexico and Latin America; it’s also a question of publication rights. The way it works, so far, is that Spain buys the translation and publication rights for Mexico and Latin America. When these books published in Spain are imported to the Americas, this makes for very expensive books, considered imports from Europe. And for some strange reason, books published in Spanish in the U.S. cannot be legally imported into, say, Mexico, because of the way publication rights are sliced up at the beginning. It makes no sense and, in my view, stands in the way of greater dissemination of this new literature, in Spanish translation, in the Americas.”

As a committed translator, what routes has she taken to remain true to the original in English, that is, a loyal *traduttrice*, yet without betraying the text’s essence and becoming a *traditora*, one of the main challenges translators must face. How to offer the Spanish-speaking reader the true essence of English-language written Chicana cultural and linguistic experience and expression? Liliana smiles as I pose the question and as she responds, “Depending on the background of the author—say Chicana or Dominican or Cuban—I try to imagine how a particular character would speak, if he/she were to speak in Spanish, mixing in some English. It’s like being a ventriloquist. You have to make speech realistic, and yet it’s an interpretation, using words as signs.”

When she deals with interlinguism—that is, the deliberate mixing of both linguistic codes, perhaps in a single sentence, even, which is possibly one of the main hallmarks of Chicana/o literary texts—what specific translation strategies does she resort to? “Well, I can give you an example to illustrate this from my translation of Sandra Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek/El arroyo de la Llorona*:

Micaela, puedes esperar afuera con Alfredito y Enrique. La abuela enojona siempre anda hablando en puritito español, que sólo entiendo si es que pongo atención. ¿Qué? le pregunto en inglés, aunque no es propio ni educado. ¿What? Lo que la abuela enojona oye como ¿Guat? Pero ella sólo me lanza una mirada y me empuja hacia la puerta. (Translation by Liliana Valenzuela)¹

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Micaela, you may wait outside with Alfredito and Enrique. The awful grandmother says it all in Spanish, which I understand when I'm paying attention. "What?" I say, though it's neither proper nor polite. "What?" which the awful grandmother hears as "¿Guat?" But she only gives me a look and shoves me toward the door. (Original by Sandra Cisneros)²

Liliana Valenzuela's Mexican and Tex-Mex-flavored translations have been published in Spain and read in Mexico. What has the response been? "Well, Grupo Planeta from Spain bought my translation of Sandra Cisneros's novel *Caramelo*, breaking a pattern of commissioning their own peninsular translations. They wanted the more authentic flavor of a Chicana/Mexican translation, but that would still remain understandable and enjoyable to them. I mostly used regionalisms for the dialogue, sometimes weaving in the mean-

ing in other sentences, to avoid using footnotes. Some of the translations have also been well received in Mexico, at least from the audience responses I encountered in Monterrey and Mexico City. I'm sure what Mexican critics have to say about this type of literature or its translation."

—*Zo-rraight, my friend?*

—*Zo-rraight* —contestó Inocencio. —*Zenc iús. Meny zencs.*

—*Iu are moust güelcome* —dijo el hombre del frac con un acento muy curioso, como una escoba barriendo un piso de piedra.

—*¿Espic spanish?* —se aventuró Inocencio.

—¡Por fin! ¡Alguien que hablaba el idioma de Dios! Wenceslao Moreno para servirle —dijo orgullosamente el hombre del frac y se quitó el sombrero de copa, relampagueando por un momento una calva. (Translation by Liliana Valenzuela)

—*Zaw-rright, my friend?*

—*Zaw-rright*, Inocencio answered. —Thank yous. Many thanks.

—You are most welcome, the tuxedo man said with a most curious accent, like a broom sweeping across a stone floor.

—*Spic Spanish?* Inocencio ventured.

—Finally! Someone who speaks the language of God! Wenceslao Moreno to serve you, the tuxedo man said proudly and tipped his top hat, flashing for a moment a bald head. (Original by Sandra Cisneros)³



Liliana Valenzuela



In addition to being a well-known translator, Liliana Valenzuela is a writer and poet in her own right. She has previously written of herself, “Through my poetry and essays in two languages, I seek to voice the experience of a Mexican woman who lives in Texas, yet is a citizen of the world.” Her own writings as poet and author have surely been informed and inspired by her interest in translating Latina authors, haven’t they? “I became acquainted with Latina authors while in college, and their work spoke closely to me, as a woman and as a Mexican. I could relate to it. And I admired their bravery and innovation. Still do. I wanted to write with as much courage and musicality as they do. And in the process I’ve become a Mex-Tex, or Chicalanga (Chicana-Chilanga)⁴ or, according to Sandra Cisneros, a ‘reverse Chicana,’ writer.”

Liliana, who also writes poetry, non-fiction and essays, has won several writing awards, such as four first prizes sponsored by the Austin Poetry Society, among them, The Spoken Word Poetry 2009 Award for the poem “son cubano” and The Mary Oliver Award in 2009 for the poem “Sirena Cómica/Cosmic Siren.” Among her publications we find *Bocas palabras* (Poetry Chapbook competition winner); *Mujer fronteral/Mujer Malinche*, *The Poetry of Rice Fields*; “Reflexiones post 11.7.02: un nopal y una banderita estadounidense,” “Una escritora chilanga texana” (*Blanco Móvil*, Mexico); “Nov. 2, 1988: On the Eve of Becoming an American Citizen” (poetry finalist in the first Panliterary Awards Competition); “Virgencita, give us a chance” (essay in *God-dess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, edited by Ana Castillo); and “Sinvirgüenza” (poem in the video-poem *Ella es fronteral/Border She Is* by Pilar Rodríguez). She has recently completed a full-length poetry manuscript entitled *Codex of Desire/Códice del deseo*.

So, in what concrete ways has the practice of literary translation served as a writing apprenticeship for her? She again smiles charmingly as she muses, “Well, I’ve learnt, for instance, how to craft a well-written sentence, paragraph, chapter. Good writing holds its shape, even when you pour it into a new language, while bad writing falls apart and you have to rewrite it so that it makes sense. Good writing can stand strong winds, intense glare, and icy temperatures and still shimmer. Also, I’ve learned that chapter opening and ending paragraphs are very important. It’s worth spending extra time with them, both as a writer and as a translator.”

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Liliana Valenzuela has been translating fiction, non-fiction and poetry for many years and has earned herself a high reputation in the field —no easy task in the art of translation’s competitive circles. As a writer, however, this poses a true challenge, perhaps we could call it a risk, in juggling both her personal creative urge and her job translating/re-writing the work of others. “I do compartmentalize a bit, especially if I’m translating a novel. I could write poetry or essays, but not fiction. It would hard to hold two imaginary worlds together in my head, and still function in my daily life.”

In some of her work, Liliana’s own particular style is revealed, for instance, in her usage of a singular intentional bicultural interlinguism. This brings up an inevitable question begging to be asked: which of these two writing worlds is closest to her heart? “Well, I’ve become known for my published translations of well-regarded Latino authors, but in my heart I’m a writer first and foremost. I could live without translating, but I couldn’t live without writing.”

As she says this, Liliana smiles that engaging smile of hers, *una Malinche contemporánea y güera*, happy in both languages, in both cultures, ready to juggle linguistics, culture and creativity. And although the interview has come to a close, our conversation carries on, as it were, off the page. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Sandra Cisneros, “Mericanos,” *El arroyo de la Llorona y otros cuentos*, Liliana Valenzuela, trans. (New York: Random House-Vintage Español, 1996).

² Sandra Cisneros, “Mericanos,” *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, (New York: Random House First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, 1992).

³ Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (New York: Random House/Vintage Español, 2003), simultaneous English/Spanish publication.

⁴ *Chilangalo* is a term used by and for those who are born in Mexico City and those living there who become identified with it.