



Cantar de espejos. Poesía testimonial chicana de mujeres

(Cantar de espejos/Singing Mirrors.
Chicana Testimonial Poetry)
Claire Joysmith, ed.

CISAN/Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana
Mexico City, 2012, 222 pp.

Cantar de espejos (Singing Mirrors) is not a book “written in pencil” because, as one poet would say, “[That] is for those / who would / erase.”¹ Since editor Claire Joysmith began the project, her full intent was to leave a mark. This is a book we must not “erase” from our library because, in addition to being an excellent selection of the most representative voices of Chicana women’s testimonial poetry of the three final decades of the last century, *Cantar de espejos* is the first anthology of Chicana poets translated into Spanish published in Latin America.² No one is missing: Lorna Dee Cervantes, Demetria Martínez, Bernice Zamora, Gina Valdés, Pat Mora, Cherríe Moraga, Norma Cantú, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and many others.

Cantar de espejos is testimony to the honesty, madness, and freedom of women who are daughters or granddaughters of Mexican women, who grew up in the 1970s amidst feminism, Xicanism@, Black Power, and the peace movement.

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These are women of Mexamerica, gazing through the memories of their parents, between Tin Tan romances and the songs of Pedro Infante. Their longings are siren songs of something lost that they never knew, but that the poet recognizes, recreates, and appropriates through her words: poem-testimony, a reflection that seeks a reflection, an eye/voice that hears the duplicities of her identity. As Joysmith herself says, *Cantar de espejos* is an anthology of texts smuggled across the border “back to” Spanish, written by women who in this way give us the wisdom of their mothers and grandmothers:

Never write
with pencil,
m’ija.
Write with ink
or mud,
or berries grown in
gardens never owned,
or, sometimes,
if necessary,
blood.³

Claire Joysmith, also the translator of many of the songs included in this compilation, has spent years with her eyes on the bicultural experience, particularly that of Chicana women.⁴ Claire is from an English family and, with those blue eyes and “corn-stalk hair,” nobody would believe she is 100-percent *chilanga*, or Mexico City-born and bred. She must have seen her own experience reflected, she must have felt like/known herself to be foreign/rejected and “the other” in her own country. Since she received the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture fellowship to do this book, Claire has traveled a long road, fording that wide wild river where so many microcosms swim: academia, writers, agents, publishing houses, budgets.⁵ Thanks to her persistence, she finally brought this singing mirror into the light, giving it texture and sonority.

One of the first things lost in migration is the original mother tongue, since it is used less and less frequently and more and more “incorrectly.” Many stories that used to be told in that language will never be told again. That’s why it is so

important to continue to write testimonials, through corridos, poems, songs, and stories to revitalize the collective memory. It doesn't matter if the Spanish sounds "strange." As a poet with a forked tongue, Claire Joysmith appreciates all the nuances of the humor or the image the poets play with, regardless of which language they do it in. She writes, "In these poetic texts, we can also see some spelling variations...like the lack of accents and question or exclamation marks at the start of sentences, deliberate absences in this edition, whose intention is to make clear in the final text in Spanish the Mexican legacy in the U.S. background."⁶ One poem reads,

When I couldn't pay the rent
the landlord came to see me.
Y la pregunta, que ofende:
Ain't you Meskin?
How come you speak
such good English?
Y yo le contesto:
Because I'm Spanglo, that's why.⁷

Chicana women have a different relationship with each of the languages and cultures that traverse them. In the case of Spanish, "the pool of deep emotions, silent tracing-scar of its forced crossings and its de-re-territorializations, where the American Dream lives, fails, and creates the worst nightmares;"⁸ it is "a safe, homely murmur, compared to the English-to-be-conquered in the outside world. English is also the public language, a weapon of defense, with which to face U.S. society, even when you're part of it. It is a subtle poetic language that also incites certain intimacies...forbidden in Spanish... the language of intricate theoretical bastions...in which her consciousness is forged."⁹ In it, "Spanish then constitutes a language/resistance, a celebratory differentiating mark, a banner of forked-tongue speech, a wink of the eye, and a shared code."¹⁰

The first part of this compilation is made up of two chapters, "Mirrors I" and "Mirrors II," that multiply with pain like the pinch of nostalgia, the —untranslatable?— *saudade*, or, as Joysmith would say, "the nopal thorn in the heart."¹¹ The first chapter is a reflection of "Borders and Mexicos," because there, up north, multiple little versions of Mexico are created. Tortilla mills, sandwich shops, even tetrapacked hot sauce and tamarind candy with chili powder are sold in the supermarket; but the border between our countries continues to be an arid, violent desert, and also a river, a river that

takes its toll
It hungrily devours brown bodies
The tale of two rivers
Told in two languages
Misunderstood in both.¹²

But it's not two rivers; it's one with two names; in Mexico it's the Río Bravo, but on the other side, in "the other Laredo," they call it the Grande.

Mi Río Grande crawls
towards the Gulf,
with dreams bound
by nightmares
for those bloated
bodies shrouded
in dark weeds
like mummies.¹³

Whether river or desert, the border is an enormous symbol that weighs on them, poets, women, equally: "Llega entonces la niebla / llena de tantas manos / y aves peregrinas, / ... acallando la indocumentada angustia / del ilegal en su propia tierra" (Then comes the mist / full of so many hands / and migratory birds / ... silencing the undocumented anguish of the illegal in her own land).¹⁴ The second mirror (chapter), "Crossings and Pathways," offers the image of the crossroads, that Anzaldúano "land-in-the-middle" of being and not being from here nor there, of having grown up wandering the tightrope of the identity limbo; and nevertheless, these poets managed to forge ahead where there was nothing. "Their songs and poetic crossings testify to their singular experiences; they are mirrors in which the past, always in sight, is the harbinger of the present, reminding them that their work is to leave a mark for future generations."¹⁵ The twenty-first century mestiza's path will be easier, since the song of her grandmothers is kept alive, documented, and transferred/mirrored in other languages and geographical spaces.

The history of these poets' ancestors begins
and transpires in Mexico, in Spanish;
and yet, Mexico shows disinterest or frank contempt
for what goes on in the Mexican cultural
community in the U.S.

The second part is made up of two songs. The first, “Women, Mothers, Myths, and Icons,” is a look at the construction of their persons, gender, and other variations, and the second song and final chapter is the subsequent recounting, a song to themselves in their multiple incarnations, “Rewrites and Re-creations”:

...blessed be the *relámpagos*...
the illegal citizens of American lit.
The syntax-leapers.
The language-benders.
The cross-pollinators.¹⁶

To paraphrase, blessed be the flashing syntax-leapers that Joysmith has included in this scenario of her book that is almost a circus, and offers the reader, with the voice of a carnival barker, women with serpents’ tails, transgressors, shameless, reckless, and undoubtedly marked before man and poetry, between the country of their mothers and that of their daughters: women who with their voices stand up/stop themselves to then be destroyed in a constant cycle.

The history of these poets’ parents and grandparents begins and transpires in Mexico, in Spanish; and yet, Mexico continues to show disinterest or frank contempt for what goes on in the Mexican cultural community in the United States. *Cantar de espejos* makes it possible for the words of these Xicanas to finally be read by those men and women compatriots of their ancestors, and by others avid for knowledge of the voice and *testimonio* of Chicanas, whose poetry, voice, and history are also ours, that of Mexicans. Without a doubt, Anzaldúa would say that *Cantar de espejos* is “work that matters.”¹⁷ **MM**

Pilar Rodríguez Aranda
Poet, videopoet, writer, and translator

NOTES

¹ Carmen Tafolla, “Marcada” (Marked), in Claire Joysmith, ed., *Cantar de espejos. Poesía testimonial chicana de mujeres* (Mexico City: CISAN/Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 2012), pp. 194-195. [Editor’s Note.]

² Despite this, one poem is published in its original form: Inés Hernández-Ávila’s “Espejos/Mirrors,” which is bilingual. Op. cit., pp. 45-46. [Editor’s Note.]

³ Tafolla, op. cit.

⁴ Her research areas are literary, cultural, border, and gender studies, as well as Chicana and Latino/U.S. cultural production and cultural-linguistic translation. Joysmith is the editor, among other books, of *Las formas de nuestras voces: Chicana and Mexicana Writers in Mexico* (Mexico City: CISAN/Third Woman Press, 1995, and *Speaking desde las heridas. Cibertestimonios*

ransfronterizos/Transborder (September 11, 2001-March 11, 2007) (Mexico City: CISAN/Whittier College/ITESM, 2008).

⁵ The “wide wild river” is an allusion to the Río Grande (“wide”) and the Río Bravo (“wild”), the U.S. and Mexican names, respectively, for the river that forms the border between the two countries. [Translator’s Note.]

⁶ Joysmith, op. cit., p. 29.

⁷ Ángela de Hoyos, “La gran ciudad,” Joysmith, ed., op. cit., p. 141.

⁸ Joysmith, op. cit., p. 23.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 31.

¹² María Herrera-Sobeck, “Historia de dos ríos” (A Tale of Two Rivers), in Joysmith, op. cit., p. 47.

¹³ Raquel Valle Sentíes, “Río de sueños malogrados” (River of Lost Dreams), in Joysmith, op. cit., p. 50.

¹⁴ Lucha Corpi, “Indocumentada angustia,” in Joysmith, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁵ Joysmith, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁶ Sandra Cisneros, “Oración para el nuevo milenio” (Prayer for the New Millennium), in Joysmith, op. cit., p. 189.

¹⁷ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, quoted in Joysmith, op. cit., p. 32.

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