

Through the Looking Glass and Under the Magnifying Glass Interview with Chicana-Latina Writer Lucha Corpi

Claire Joysmith*

Claire Joysmith (CJ): As poet and fiction writer, Lucha Corpi is fully aware of the highly textured intricacies of poetic language. As a Chicana and Latina writer who resorts to English and Spanish, Corpi has a singular sense of the nuances in contemporary identity politics *vis-à-vis* the usage of English and/or Spanish in her writing. How does she identify as a writer?

Lucha Corpi (LC): I have no trouble calling myself a Chicana poet, a Mexican or a Latina poet, or simply a poet. Each designation is based on a variety of reasons, some cultural and some political. My personal reason for calling myself a “Chicana poet” has to do with my political affiliation with the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in general and, in particular, with causes that aim to fight racism in all its manifestations, that are in favor of employment, gender, and ethnic equality and educational opportunities at all levels for children of color, regardless of ethnicity. I encourage solidarity among the many Mexican and Latino communities toward the achievement of these goals at a national level.

CJ: You are well-known and highly respected for your crime fiction novels in which Gloria Damasco, the protagonist, is a Chicana detective.

LC: I consider myself a writer and a Chicana writer. In the literary hierarchy I’m also considered a “genre” writer because I write crime fiction. Being tagged as a genre writer avails me little opportunity to be considered for awards or fellowships in fiction. By the time I published my second Gloria Damasco crime novel, I knew I was willing to pay the price for doing what I love to do. So far I haven’t changed my mind.



Photo courtesy of Lucha Corpi

CJ: You write poetry in Spanish and narrative in English. What is your relationship to your poetry and your narrative, since each is expressed through different linguistic and cultural codes and optics?

LC: In the creative process of poetry, there is interplay between incongruous elements drawn from the consciousness, the subconscious, and the subliminal (unconscious) mind. When they come together in the poem, they provide its internal rhythms —measure and tone. They may provide the imagery for a lyrical poem or the story for a narrative poem, as well as the structure that supports a poem’s emotional weight. It’s the emotional content of the poem that to a greater extent dictates my language of choice. Simply stated, the language of feeling

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and emotion is the language I learned on my mother's and grandmother's lap, in the midst of Mexican culture. It's the intimate and familial "mother tongue." So, for me that tongue is Spanish in all its linguistic modalities—essentially Mexican Spanish.

English—American English—is the language of my narrative simply because my characters in the novels express their daily thoughts and feelings and describe events in their lives in that language. They speak to me in English and sometimes also in either Mexican Spanish or Chicano Spanish. I have no choice but to try my best to set down their stories in English, my second language.

CJ: Could you tell us more about writing in a second language that you learned, moreover, in early adulthood?

LC: It isn't easy to write in your second language. It requires courage and humility to accept your language limitations and cultural gaps, and still try your best to overcome them, and improve by apprenticing with every new work. But it also requires a certain degree of arrogance, if you will, and single-mindedness of purpose to ignore the inner and outer voices telling you you're not good enough, that you're simply not up to the task you've set for yourself.

In narrative, like any other writer and everyone else engaged in any kind of creative endeavor in the sciences or the humanities, I begin with the famous spark of an idea: the "what-if...?" But all writers must answer to the degree necessary—although in no particular order—six pertinent questions: What? Who? Where? When? Why? How? (Why? and How? being of paramount importance to a crime fiction writer).

I let the characters pursue the answers to those questions. My job as a writer is to select and record in writing what is important to them. I make sense of their perceptions, feelings, and experiences and their mental comings and goings. I acknowledge and appropriate their voices in English and tap into their cultural memories as members of a particular family and larger community or communities, which in most instances are Mexican-American, Chicano/a, Latina/o, but all within the context of the dominant English-speaking U.S. culture.

CJ: During a Spanish-language poetry reading at the Eighth International Chicano conference held in Toledo, Spain, in May 2012, you mentioned you have found it difficult to translate your own work because there are two egos at work and a kind of tug-of-war ensues between them.

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LC: As a translator, my ego is interested in doing a good job with what I'm given. It isn't my job to improve the original poem or the story in its original language or alter its meaning to render a good translation. I don't presume to know what motivated the poet or writer to create a particular work, although some textual interpretation is necessary. My ego as translator is always subject to the author's ego. It's like borrowing a car from a dear friend. You tend to take better care of it than if it were your own, but you don't replace the fender or paint it a different color. When it's yours, you have every right to change or improve it as you please.

When you translate your own work, your egos—author and translator sharing the same conscious and unconscious mind—are equal; neither is subject to the other. It's easier then to give yourself permission to change the original to aid the translation process. You end up going back and forth, tweaking the original and then the translation over and over, until it actually becomes another version or in fact another poem or story in the other language as well as in the original. It's a never-ending, burdensome, and frustrating process. For that reason, I don't translate either my poetry in Spanish into English or my narrative in English into Spanish.

CJ: You mentioned—and this is fascinating—how you have found the translating process useful in testing a poem's strength. Would this mean the translation might become stronger than the original?

LC: Indeed, translation tests and highlights the strengths of a poem, but also exposes its weaknesses and identifies them for the poet. If a poem is not strong enough, it won't withstand the process of translation; it won't retain its integrity as a unit. As you say, there are times when the poem in translation is stronger than the original. Sometimes I rewrite that poem, not to fit the translation but to make the original stronger.

CJ: Where does it go from there?

LC: If I'm successful, it's included in a collection or eventually published as an individual piece. If not, I question my reasons for writing it or wanting to keep it as is. If there are sentimental reasons attached to it, I put it in my "unfinished poems" folder. Every so often, I dig poems out of that folder to see if I finally have the experience, skills, perceptions, or intuitions lacking in me when I first wrote them. If I can't work out the kinks in a poem at all and have no special reason to keep it, I don't throw it away; instead, I burn it.

CJ: When the poem or narrative is being translated by someone else, do you have any particular strategies during the translation revision?

LC: A way of making the translations "mine" —a process I refer to as a re-appropriation of voice— requires reading the translated texts aloud. I do this often until my intuition kicks in, takes over, and I begin to sense the language rather than just read it, to feel its rhythms, the measure and tone of the spoken line, and listen to the characters speak in their second language as if they had been doing it since birth. The translated texts become as much a part of my "voice" as the originals.

CJ: Some of your poetry has recently been published by the CISAN, for the first time in Mexico, in the volume *Cantar de espejos. Poesía testimonial chicana de mujeres*.¹ How do you feel about this as a bilingual/bicultural writer and could this been regarded as a source of inspiration?

LC: *Cantar de espejos* is a beautiful and inspiring anthology. Personally, since I know most of the poets and have read most of the poems included in *Cantar* in the original, I have now had the double pleasure of reading these well-rendered translations of the work. Having our work acknowledged by a different audience/readership is always welcome. It validates the work and personally encourages us to continue along the paths chosen. But most of all, *Cantar de espejos* in particular provides the connecting tissue where two cultures, languages, and literatures safely join together in meaningful and essential ways. And that is always a source of inspiration and celebration in any culture and any language. *Gracias*.

CJ: Your first novel, *Eulogy for A Brown Angel*, has been recently translated into Spanish as *Loa a un ángel de piel morena*.² How did the translation process and your relationship with the translator work?

LC: When Cristina Crespo Palomares from the Instituto Franklin in Spain got in touch to notify me *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* had been selected for translation, she also asked if I would be willing to be available to Nuria Brufau Alvira, the translator, for consultations. I was excited about providing Nuria with any assistance or information she needed. Our collaboration and communication took place via e-mail across seas, continents, and, of course, cyberspace.

When I got the first digital draft of the novel from Nuria, I read each chapter in Spanish aloud. I did the same with the last draft. My main objective on both occasions was to internalize each character's distinctive voice and manner exclusively in Spanish. I referred to the English text only when I had to check the accuracy of content, specifically as it pertained to Mexican-Chicana/o culture in the U.S. or to verify historical and factual data. When necessary, I provided her with clarifications and some suggestions.

CJ: What kind of translating and other skills would you say Chicano/a or Latino/a texts demand?

LC: I reiterate my firm belief that translation, particularly of a literary text, be it poetry or narrative, is truly as creative an art as any other. In general, the process of translating a novel into another language is by the mere complexity and length of the original work an enormous and daunting task. Implicit is the pressure on the translator to interpret accurately the culture that forms and informs the language that provides it with its voice.

As to the linguistic aspect, the translator must find a way to express, as faithfully yet as intelligibly as possible, what is accessible and in plain sight in the work, as well as what is inefable, what cannot be assigned meaning or is unchangeable, between two cultures and language systems.

As if these tasks weren't difficult enough for any translator of a Chicano/a or Latina/o text, every one of these languages is both directly and indirectly nourished by two greatly heterogeneous U.S. cultures. The Spanish language that allows

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one of them verbal or written expression is an amalgam of several linguistic modalities that share a common linguistic source but not a single homogeneous culture. We Chicanos/as and Latinos/as face this linguistic reality every day when we communicate in Spanish, a language that reflects the diversity of Latin American cultures, while we also try to express our daily thoughts and feelings in American English, a language in constant flux, reflecting cultures undergoing transformation even now, as I speak.

In a nutshell, this is also the reality the translator has faced and dealt with quite successfully.

CJ: Would you say that a translation is a re-writing of the original?

LC: Undoubtedly, each translation is in some ways, as you say, a re-writing. I often refer to translations and the original works as fraternal—not identical—twins. The Spanish-English twins in the case of my poems, and the English-Spanish in the

case of my novels. Each work in translation must be able to stand on its own as if it were the original. *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* now stands in a parallel cultural world as *Loa a un ángel de piel morena*. They both stand on their own merits. The test will be aced, of course, when a Spanish-speaking monolingual reader finds herself/himself situated in the story's action and feels as satisfied with it as a reader who reads it only in English. I've had positive comments from a couple of such monolingual readers. Perhaps when *Loa* is reprinted by Arte Público Press in October, 2012, and it becomes accessible to a wider Spanish-speaking readership in the U.S., and perhaps Mexico, I might be able to provide further answers to this. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ Claire Joysmith, ed., *Cantar de espejos. Poesía testimonial chicana de mujeres* (Mexico City: CISAN/Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 2012).
- ² *Loa a un ángel de piel morena* (Alcalá de Henares, Spain: Instituto Franklin/University of Alcalá de Henares, 2012).



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