

METAMORPHOSES

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TRANSLATION AS CULTURAL FUSION

REVIEW: XÁNATH CARAZA. *CORAZÓN PINTADO: EKPHRASTIC POEMS*. TL PRESS. KANSAS CITY MO, 2012. ISSN 1094-0154  
XÁNATH CARAZA. *CONJURO*. MAMMOTH PUBLICATIONS. LAWRENCE, KS. 2012. ISBN 978-0-9837995-6-6

Xánath Caraza's trilingual poetry, like her own identity and charismatic personality, is a fusion of three different cultures--Mexican, Aztec, American. Most often, she writes in Spanish and recreates the poem in English. In the case of, "Mujer", she has also translated the entire poem into Nahuatl, in close collaboration with her mother, Rafaela Enríquez Mejía. In a number of poems, she incorporates Nahuatl into an otherwise Spanish poem (and into its English counterpart), sometimes with glosses. But the best example of this linguistic and cultural fluidity and fusion, is the trilingual poem "Amiquiztli," one of my favorites. Caraza's easy interweaving of her Aztec-Nahuatl and her Mexican heritage together with the language and sensibility of her adoptive North American home makes reading, and especially hearing, her poetry a unique experience. *Amiquiztli* is "thirst" in Nahuatl. A note unobtrusively tucked at the bottom of the page glosses the title and also tells us *atl*=water, *tlajtollis*=word, *tleti*=fire, *tlasojtlistli*=love. This is useful to the reader ignorant of Nahuatl, and ideally it is good to know Spanish as well as English, but the poem communicates, indeed sings, even to the monoglot reader:

AMIQUIZTLI

Leo tus tlajtollis y me da sed  
I read your words and I am thirsty  
Tomo un trago de agua para apaciguarla  
Tomo un drink of atl  
Sin prisa baja por mi garganta  
I am still thirsty  
Todavía tengo sed  
Amiquiztli  
Tomo otro trago de atl  
I have another drink of water

Siento tu nombre  
Tlasojtlistli  
Un trago más de atl se desliza por mi garganta  
Siento tus tlajtollis  
Tus palabras  
El fuego no se puede apagar  
Tletli  
Amiquiztli  
Still I am thirsty

Much of Caraza's poetry sings and dances its way off the page; it cries out to be performed and heard. "Yanga," dedicated to Louis Reyes Rivera, is an invocation, a rhythmic casting of a spell:

Yanga, Yanga, Yanga,  
Yanga, Yanga, Yanga,  
Hoy, tu espíritu invoco  
Aquí, en este lugar.

Este, este es mi poema para Yanga,  
Mandinga, malinga, bamba.  
Rumba, mambo, samba.  
Palabras llegadas de África.

Esta, esta es mi respuesta para Yanga,  
Candomble, mocambo, mambo  
Candomble, mocambo, mambo  
Hombre libre veracruzano.

These are only the first three stanzas, but they suffice, I think, to show how the repeated sounds and rhythms of the refrains create a sense of urgency, intensity, momentum, as they continue to pulse through the poem. The incantatory refrains are unchanged in the English version, and create the same effect.

Caraza uses word-music in a variety of ways. The spell-binding music of "Yanga" is Afro-Caribbean, but the notes and melody of "Música Acuática" ("Water Music") are soothing, subtly mesmerizing:

MÚSICA ACUÁTICA

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Música acuática sobre la superficie del lago  
Gotas de sonidos naturales  
Vibraciones de lluvia entre los pinos  
Sonidos del bosque  
Murmullos celestiales que perforan el lago  
Tic, tic, tic, tic, tic, jiiish, jiiish  
Círculos de plata en crescendo  
Reflejo de nubes grises  
Sinfonía de musgos y líquenes  
Superficie de agua interrumpida por la música  
Pasión sonora suave y abrumadora  
Tic, tic, tic, tic, tic, jiiish, jiiish  
Sonidos asaltando las fosas nasales  
Sentidos exaltados al ritmo de la lluvia  
Tic, tic, tic, tic, tic, jiiish, jiiish  
Sinfonía acuática  
Pintura musical  
Lago impresionista

### WATER MUSIC

Water music on the surface of the lake  
Drops of natural sounds  
Vibrations of rain among pine trees  
Sounds of the forest  
Celestial whispering that pierces the lake  
Tic, tic, tic, tic, tic, hiiish, hiiish  
Circles of silver in crescendo  
Reflection of gray clouds  
Symphony of moss and lichen  
Surface of water interrupted by music  
Audible passion soft and exhausting  
Tic, tic, tic, tic, tic, hiiish, hiiish  
Sounds assaulting the nose  
Senses running high to the rhythm of rain  
Tic, tic, tic, tic, tic, hiiish, hiiish  
Aquatic symphony  
Musical painting  
Impressionist lake

“Pintura musical” (“musical painting”) in fact describes much of Xánath Caraza’s poetry, which is intensely visual. “Last night I dreamt about the fog/It came into my memory/It traversed my recollections/Filling them with red fireflies/Blue butterflies approached me/Possessed spirits fluttering in the wind” [“Anoche soñé con la niebla”] The opening lines are tame, even borderline trite, but almost immediately the reader’s comfortable assumptions are wrenched away and jettisoned. No familiar, misty, white-gray fog but a bearer of red fireflies and blue butterflies that invade and take over the poet’s recollecting mind.

This explosion of colors characterizes much of Caraza’s poetry. Because her poems are word-paintings, and because she has a gift for limning a scene, suggesting a mood and a story with a few strokes, I am particularly fond of the elegant little chapbook, *Corazón Pintado* (Painted Heart), which includes beautiful reproductions of paintings by Israel Nazario and Tom Weso, The poems in this selection are “ekphrastic” in the true, larger sense. They are not so much descriptions of a work of art, but verbal paintings that stand on their own, even when they are responding to visual art. Consider, for instance, Nazario’s haunting untitled oil painting of a tree in a flooded landscape. Nazario’s canvas is a harmony of subtle, muted hues, gradations of brown and gray with a subtle hint of purplish blue. But Caraza’s poem “after” this painting grabs our attention immediately with something that is not in the painting at all: a “red snake slithering toward me/ Silhouette in the morning mist/ Purple shadows protect it from the light”. Nazario’s landscape may evoke a range of moods or scenarios; to me it seems melancholy, but for the moment tranquil. The storm may that caused the flooding may not be over--the sky may be getting lighter or darker--but for now there is a respite. The poem, however, focuses on the menace and danger lurking in the scene, the “red snake” whose “snake eyes” watch for a victim from beneath the water’s surface, whose “breath of red snake/Slithering along the waves,” sets a “mortal trap.”

While Caraza’s work is almost always visual and pulsing with intense colors, the adjective that keeps coming to mind is synaesthetic: there are poems in these collections to be heard, seen, touched, smelled and tasted. For instance, “Tomando té en Victoria Island”/“Having Tea on Victoria Island” gives us “small ocean waves of tea” that flood the speaker’s senses; “my palate fills with pistachio green and honey/musical perfume of cardamom/The tea leaves dance with me/Songs of lavender blooms”; and, as the speaker looks out at the blue sea and a sunset tinged

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with gold, and feels “Ocean waves of tea touching my feet” we have been transported effortlessly from a tea cup to the ocean. There is a kind of magic trick in this deceptively simple and straightforward poem, and this conjuror’s sleight of hand is another feature of many of Caraza’s poems. The tea has left the confines of its cup to flood the speaker’s senses, but in entering her body it becomes embodied, born with a body of its own out of her sensuous pleasure, so that the tea leaves “dance with” her. And what are the songs of lavender blossoms that accompany that dance, if not also color and an intense aroma? By the end of this short, deceptively neat little poem, the “little waves of tea” have been transformed into the vast Pacific Ocean, that moves to touch the speaker’s feet. We don’t quite know what hit us, but it feels awfully good.