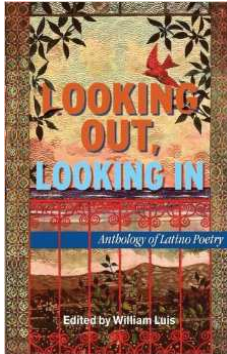




Looking Out, Looking In: Anthology of Latino Poetry

William Luis, editor

Houston, Arte Público Press, 2012, pp. 329



Reviewed by Verusca Costenaro¹

When we think of the United States' population, one of the images which immediately comes to our mind is that of a multicultural society including large groups of people of non-English-speaking descent. Among the most numerically relevant groups of this kind is surely the Spanish-speaking community, which is estimated to grow by roughly one million per year. An interesting consequence of such an increase is the growing Latino literature available on the market place – including poetry.

The present volume is a poetry collection bringing together more than eighty Latino poets from the four largest groups in the U.S. – Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans and Dominican Americans – from the mid-twentieth century to the present days; they were either born in the United States from families of Spanish-speaking origins, or migrated with their families from a Spanish-speaking country to the United States.

This collection offers a variety of themes – ranging from the most intimate sense of dislocation and loss linked to the experience of migration, to more universal and traditional topics such as love and familial bonds.

Being born and raised in the United States doesn't seem a sufficient condition for feeling more comfortable in the language and culture of one's homeland. Both the poets who were born in the U.S. from families of Hispanic descent, and the poets who migrated with their families share a sense of living in an "in-between space," a borderland or *frontera* where different cultures come together and coexist. The result is that the identity of these poets is no longer defined in unique and fixed terms, but comes to symbolize the "liquid identity" which Zygmunt Bauman uses to define the fluid condition of those who do not belong to a single and well-defined identity/culture/country. Due to their hybrid condition, they are required to re-shape themselves on a daily basis on different cultural levels, and seem to keep experiencing what Édouard Glissant terms as "the shock of elsewhere".

Language becomes a crucial and distinctive feature of every poem in this collection, taking on shapes and *nuances* belonging to the most varied cultures. Latino poets seem to prefer writing in English rather than Spanish (there are only a few examples of poems written in Spanish only), but most of them use a variety of

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Spanglish in such an innovative manner as to give birth to an authentic post-modern, post-first generation (of immigrants) intercultural voice.

Language as a symbol of one's main identity is still an issue for most of the poets included in this collection. *Code-mixing* and *code-shifting* in and between English and Spanish are found in most poems, as in Gloria Anzaldúa's opening lines "To live in the Borderlands means you are neither *hispana india negra española ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed*" (33), or in Franklin Gutiérrez's "Helen," where cultural and linguistic shifts are ironically tackled by the author as identity shifts from the "Helena" of the Dominican Republic to "Helen" in the United States, or in Julia Alvarez's "Bilingual Sestina," where Spanish is associated with her cheerful childhood, whereas English is connected to her present adulthood: "Gladys, I summon you back by saying your *nombre*/Opening up again the house of slated windows closed/since childhood, where *palabras* left behind for English/stand dusty and awkward in neglected Spanish" (18).

Themes of exile and alienation are also found in some poems. Parent-child relationships emerge in the memories of those poets who were "uprooted" by their parents' decisions to leave their homelands, as in Julia Alvarez's words "The night we fled the country, Papi/you told me we were going to the beach" (19). In contrast to such nostalgic tones are those of some Cuban authors haunted by their exile condition. In Pablo Medina's lines, for instance, return to the places of origin brings with it the splendor of childhood, as well as the awareness that by closing the gate of one's abandoned house behind oneself, one is also leaving past memories behind. What's meaningful is that such past memories come to be viewed as a new powerful tool to help their move forward new realities. However, mourning the past is not always the answer, as the present can unexpectedly take on new interesting forms, as Richard Blanco writes: "[...] that night/I hung like a chrysalis/realizing I lived in a country/I didn't know/waiting for a home/I never knew, and a name to give myself" (52).

What is common among this group of Latino poets is the urgency to bring along their own individual changes. Women poets, for instance, are surely bolder about sexual topics and other traditionally taboo subjects. The new homeland seems to give these women a sense of freedom they had never experienced in their native cultural environment. This new awareness of their bodies and sexuality makes their voices raise bold and outspoken, as in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's explicit references "If I could taste/the bread, the blood, the salt/between your legs" (94) or "My shell is pink and gray/like a clam or a vagina" (95).

Yet, where the real innovation resides, when compared to the works by the first-generation Latino poets, is in style. Innovation comes from experimenting with the language, the line and white space, the stanza, rhyme, form, and syntax (that is, the structure of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences). Epic poems such as Rodolfo Gonzales's "I Am Joaquín" intermingle with long prose poems such as Tato Lavera's "jesús papote" where the author obsessively reminds himself of whom he is by repeating the first line "My name is jesús papote" over again, as if its poem were an intimate prayer to his "Self of origin." Poets such as Tato Laviera, Lucha Corpi, and Gloria Anzaldúa play with language as if it were a toy in their hands: they don't use traditional punctuation, they leave white space within lines, they create images with lines – as in Lucha Corpi's "Caminando a solas," (71) where stanzas suddenly turn into what looks like a pair of wings ready to take off from the new homeland – and her circular thoughts. Stanzas and lines are visually arranged as if to form a fascinating yet complex music score, deciphered only by those who are experiencing such songs of lost affections and memories themselves, while leaving the others to only imagine how it feels like to be "half-breed" (33).