De acá de este lado: Musings on Latina/o Poetry

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welcomed the opportunity to gather poetry by contemporary poets in a special issue of Diálogo, for poetry has been at the center of my personal and I would say my professional life. As a child in Laredo, Texas—that border that is a “wound that will not heal” (25) as Anzaldúa claimed—I learned to declamar, memorizing poetry almost as soon as I learned to speak. I must say that all this was in Spanish, mi lengua materna. Our poetry, our games, our jokes—we lived it all in Spanish. Aun yacen en mi memoria los versos de aquel entonces, si vieras Mamita, qué lindas flores, amarillas, azules, de mil colores, along with other childhood rhymes such as, Un día por la mañana me decía mi mamá, / levántate Norma Elia, si no, le digo a tu papá. / Yo siendo una niña de carta cabal, me quedaba calladita. / ¿Qué no me oyes lucero? / ¿Lucero? Si ni candil soy. As I grew older, I left behind the children’s rhymes and then it was the longer poems such as El seminarista de los ojos negros, or Porque me dejé del vicio, that found a home in me. My cousin Magdalena (todos la conocen como “Mane”) declamaba con tal intensidad that she moved many listeners to tears. All of these cherished memories and the rich poetic experiences helped me resist the beatings and the fines for speaking Spanish in the south Texas classrooms of my childhood. They did not erase these poems from my memory, from my being.

I might even claim that poetry is in my genes. My maternal grandfather, he of the poetic name Maurilio Ramón, penned a romantic poem to my grandmother, Celia, that I discovered in my mother’s things. How I marveled at the fading penciled poem on the back of a picture she had given him. It is no wonder, then that I was writing poems in third grade and all through high school. But somewhere along the way I stopped writing poetry altogether. Yet, as an older student, I sat in a graduate English class reading Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, and I became a scholar of poetry. In the 1970s at the height of the Chicano Movement, when I was in graduate school, I returned to poetry with a vengeance, to the political and engaged poetry of the time but also to the masters that my education in the United States had denied me: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Neruda, Lorca, and Machado, claro está. Pero también, Storni, Agustini, and Mistral. I became an avid student of these and many other poets. But it was through the Movimiento poets, though, that I learned the strongest lessons. Several of them, Alurista and Abelardo “Lalo” Delgado I met when I was in graduate school in Lincoln, Nebraska. It was Lalo, the “people’s poet” as he was known, who taught me a life-changing lesson about the power of poetry. At the off-campus event sponsored by the University, la gente (mostly working class along with some of us students), were gathered to hear Lalo read his poetry. The small hall was crowded, and as Lalo began to read in his booming voice, my trained “ear” discerned and judged using the critical tools I was learning in my doctoral classes: how can that be called poetry? It is bombastic, it is sentimental, it is definitely not poetry, I concluded. But then I glanced around at the audience and became unsettled in my assumptions. Here were elders, viejitas y viejitos, listening intently. One old woman wiped away tears as Lalo read. And then he read “Stupid America,” his signature poem that is an indictment of the educational system of the United States that does not recognize the knowledge and abilities Chicana and Chicano students possess, and I too was crying thinking of my siblings back in Texas who were experiencing exactly that, crying for my own experiences in the racist system. He got a standing ovation and I learned an invaluable lesson about the power of our poetry.

Poets are the conscience and they are called to speak truth to power. The Tejano poets like Cecilio García Camarillo, Raymundo “Tigre” Pérez, and Raúl Salinas, and the Tejanas who were writing at the time, Carmen Tafolla, Evangelina Vigil, Inés Hernández-Ávila, and Angela de Hoyos, inspired a generation of writers. Poetry constituted one of the key elements of the Chicano Movement; I attended a Floricanto—a gathering of artists, muralists, singers and poets—in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1979, and met Lorna Dee Cervantes who mesmerized me with her reading of: “Poem for the young white man who asked how I an intelligent well-read woman could
believe in a war between races.” I heard Dorinda Moreno recite her poem on “La Llorona.” Subsequently, Lucha Corpi, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and many, many other poets came into my life; they too were part of the Movement but it was no longer the Chicano Movement of the 60s and 70s, it was a Movimiento that had room for all kinds of poetry. I remember Adela Allen’s Haiku Chicano in Arizona, and the collection, Three Times a Woman, with the poetry of Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Maria Herrera Sobek and Demetria Martínez, as well as the numerous chapbooks, like Bad Boys by Sandra Cisneros, and Women Are Not Roses by Ana Castillo. Because the major publishers were not publishing our work and as a form of resistance, independent publishers sprung up, such as Relámpago Books in Austin, Texas. Nicholas Kanellos’s Arte Público and Gary Keller’s Bilingual Review published some of these early works along with Third Woman Press with Norma Alarcón at the helm. Each of them started out publishing a journal that included poetry.

The early Movement poets and those that followed were not by any means the first Latina and Latino poets in the United States—many had come before, including those who had spent time in the U.S., like José Martí or Julia de Burgos, but also others who had been here all along or who had come fleeing the Mexican Revolution, such as Sara Estela Ramirez, the poet whose “¡Surge!” a feminist call to women to rise, published over 100 years ago, still inspires me. And what of the future? It is promising. So many young poets like Amalia Ortiz and Leticia Hernández will continue writing poems about social justice, writing truth to power. I wish I could mention each and every member of the CantoMundo poetry community and the hundreds out there who are writing and passionately living as poets. The exciting work by Chicana/o LGBTQ poets such as Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Verónica Reyes, Eduardo Corral, Rigoberto González, Pablo Miguel Martínez, and Kristin Naca is at the vanguard of where poetry is headed.

Out of the desire for a space where we could come together and share our experiences as Latina/o poets in the United States, CantoMundo was born. It hosts craft workshops every summer, led by Latina and Latino poets: Martin Espada and Demetria Martínez led the very first workshops. When we gathered around my dining room table and discussed a name, a vision and mission statement, and made decisions that we have honed over the years, co-founders Celeste Guzmán Mendoza, Pablo Martínez, Deborah Paredez, Carmen Tafolla and I envisioned to some degree what this volume does on the page: a conversation among poets speaking a common language across our Latinidades, in English and in Spanish with our own distinctive Spanglish and Tex-Mex, and all the variations that make us and our work unique.

My heart rejoiced as I read the many poems and essays submitted in response to our call; I am especially happy about the way the works engage in conversaciones transfronterizas, that is, across our many borders. It was a consummate pleasure to work collaboratively with the Editor of Diálogo, Elizabeth C. Martínez, and with my coeditor for this special issue, Juana Goergen, and the incredible Cristina Rodríguez. But none of our work would have been possible without the submissions by the scholars and the poets. ¡Gracias!

WORKS CITED