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Nancy Morejón. Black Womenand Other Poems / Mujer negra y otros poemas

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Nancy Morejón. *Black Women and Other Poems / Mujer negra y otros poemas*. Trans. Jean Andrews. London: Mango Publishing, 2001. 243 pages.

Caribbeanists and poetry lovers alike should welcome the bilingual edition of Nancy Morejón's poetry, *Black Woman and Other Poems / Mujer negra y otros poemas* (Mango Publishing, 2001), translated by Jean Andrews of the University of Nottingham, England. The winner of Cuba's National Literary Prize in 2001, Morejón is considered one of Cuba's best poets, with the distinction of being the first black woman to achieve critical acclaim for her art. As one of only five women to have received this honor in the twenty-odd years of the prize's history, she follows in the footsteps of Nicolás Guillén, the inaugural winner of 1983.¹ It is not surprising that Andrews includes ample mention of Guillén in her introduction, given Morejón's contributions to the literary criticism of his work, as well as for continuing Guillén's legacy of Afro-Cubanism. Of the sixty-five poems included in this anthology, almost half explore the complexities of being black in a racist world, whether the setting is Santiago, Pretoria or New York. The title poem, "Mujer negra / Black Woman," closes the anthology with a harrowing account of a slave's ocean voyage, suffering, rebellion and escape, culminating in a celebration of the Cuban revolution: Those who would forgo reading this collection to avoid the political content might spare themselves some ideological irritation, but they risk denying themselves the pleasure of a vibrant poetic voice with much more to talk about than Fidel Castro.

This is not to say that few of the poems address political issues; many do. As in real life, there are times when it is impossible to separate political history from the way it shapes the experience of being non-white. In "Un manzano de Oakland / An Apple Tree in Oakland," from her 1979 collection *Parajes de una época* (Places in a Time), Morejón explores the racial violence inherent in the U.S. policy of Manifest Destiny and asks the reader to look beneath the veneer of suburban west-coast prosperity to see the exploitation and tragedy upon which it was built:

¿Sabes que ese manzano fue plantado
con la tierra robada a los Rodilla-Herida
por el gobernador del estado? (28)

Did you know that this apple tree was planted
with the earth stolen from the Wounded Knee
by the state governor? (29)

The poem ends with lynched victims swinging from the tree's branches, calling to mind Abel Meeropol's poem "Strange Fruit," made famous by blues singer Billy Holiday. Morejón addresses more recent events in "Elegía a Maurice Bishop / Elegy for Maurice Bishop" and pays homage to the murdered Marxist leader of Grenada, a country in which over two-thirds of the population is black. Bishop was murdered shortly before the U.S. invasion of the island nation in 1983, a war that inspired Morejón to write *Cuadernos de Granada (Grenada Notebook)*, published the following year. In the remembrance of the slain revolutionary, she views the Reagan administration's military action as just one more strike against people of color:

Ay, Mar Caribe, he visto
sangre de negro bullendo en las calderas,
sangre emanando de sus pulmones negros
.....
¡Qué llanto y qué soledad,
qué soledad y qué llanto! (54)

Ay, Caribbean Sea, I have seen
the blood of blacks bubbling in the cauldrons,
blood emanating from their black lungs
.....
What lament and what aloneness,
what aloneness and what lament! (55)

Black Woman / Mujer Negra is, above all, a useful introduction to Morejón's poetry. First-time readers of her work will appreciate the breadth of the collection: it represents nine of her thirteen books that span the years from 1967 to 2000. The volume is divided into five parts, three of which are labeled with roman numerals. After the introduction by Jean Andrews, the poem "La claridad / Clarity" stands alone, opening the collection. Giving the reader an immediate sense of Morejón's earnestness to be a faithful witness to all that she has seen, it is a tribute to the enriching but ephemeral beauty of the forest clearings, sunlight and summer rain of her native country. The poetic voice has no other mission than that of inviter and observer, and in the

first three lines Morejón captures the human longing to travel as birds do with heartbreaking lucidity:

*Cántame, pájaro que vuelas
sobre el espacio austral
que desconozco*

Sing to me, bird who flies
over the souther space
I do not know (16-17)

According to Andrews, all the poems were chosen and arranged by Morejón, including the previously unpublished “Merceditas.” They are not in chronological order; poems from her 1986 work *Piedra pulida* (Polished Stone), for example, are found in four of the five sections. The last of these is unnumbered but set apart by two blank pages, perhaps because of the thematic emphasis on family members, domestic reminiscences and Havana landmarks like Manrique Street, the Martín Pérez River and Coral Island. This final section of the book closes with the title poem cited above, which is preceded by “Persona / Person,” a charged inquiry into racial identity and female personhood:

¿Cuál de estas mujeres soy yo?
¿O no soy yo la que está hablando
tras los barrotes de una ventana sin estilo
que da a la plenitud de todos estos siglos? (220)

Which of these women am I?
Am I not the one who is talking
through the bars of a nondescript window
which gives onto the plenitude of all these centuries (221)

Here Morejón embraces the connections that women of color share by virtue of the discrimination and exploitation they have suffered. The crescendo of the intersections between history and “herstory” through Morejón’s eyes as a black patriotic Cuban woman culminates in “Persona / Person” and “Mujer negra / Black Woman,” making it easy to see why Morejón saved them for last. No matter what one’s political views or opinions about art for art’s sake, Morejón’s poetry – at times eloquent, rhythmic, sonorous, and angrily in-your-face – is an important testimony to the complex realities of sex, class and race from a country uniquely hinged between the twentieth century’s most antagonistic economic systems.

In addition to the informative and inspiring introduction, Andrews states for the reader her approach to translating Morejón’s work. Her priority is to have the poems make sense in English while keeping as much

of the original syntax as possible. Hers is not a Benjamin or Venuti-esque exercise designed to shock the reader into appreciating how different Spanish is from English. She admits that readers of Morejón's native tongue have the advantage of being able to appreciate the original's rhythms and rhymes, and offers her English versions as a gloss or "as a kind of easy-access dictionary" (11). Andrews consistently meets her goal of rendering the poems readable, and even better, uses the syntax-drive sense-for-sense approach to achieve memorable moments of poetic beauty. She has the greatest success in "Renacimiento / Rebirth," "El ruiseñor y la muerte / The Nightingale and Death," "Baas," "Soliloquio de un colono / Soliloquy of a Colonial." "Epitafio para una dama de Pretoria / Epitaph for a Pretoria Lady," "Dibujo / Drawing," "Piedra pulida / Polished Stone," "Intuición / Intuition," "Madre / Mother," and "Fábula de albañil / Fable of a Builder's Labourer." It must have been her experience with poems like "Ritornello," "Nana silente para niños surafricanos / Silent Lullaby for South African Children" and "El Tambor / Tambor" – all poems that beg to be chanted out loud – that made Andrews warn her readers that she "in no way attempted to emulate rhythm or rhyme" (11). Nevertheless, her choice to present the meaning of the Spanish first and then to follow syntax structure works very well with these poems.

Andrews also admits to deforming English at times in order to conserve things in Spanish that could not be easily replicated; she calls it "[stretching] English beyond its familiar idiomatic boundaries, to preserve the cadence or the literal meaning of a phrase" (11). Andrews shows some inconsistency when trying to strike a balance between these two aspects of her translation practice, most often in her choice of adjective placement. Returning to "Un manzano de Oakland / An Apple Tree in Oakland," we can see how she finds an optimum (albeit less than literal) translation at the beginning, but struggles with a word-for-word rendering later on:

¿Ves ese suave y firme manzano
dando sombra sobre una acera gris de Oakland?
¿Los ves bien? (28)

Do you see this smooth and firm apple tree
shading a grey sidewalk in Oakland?
Are you looking closely? (29)

Instead of a direct transposition of "*dando sombra sobre*" as "giving shade over," Andrews uses the gerund form of the noun with elegant effect. The question she fashions is more effective than others that might mirror Spanish word order more closely; it slyly beckons the reader insinuating that the tree holds something more than meets the eye. Yet toward the end of the poem she insists on the syntax-based sense-for-sense method, resulting in

a particularly awkward translation of the possessive adjective “*suya*“ into English:

Y a ti, viajero, te dará sombra siempre,
pero detén tu marcha pesarosa ante esa
sombra *suya* (30)

And to you, traveller, it will always give you shade,
but halt your sorrowful step before that
shade belong to it. (31)

Andrews chooses to keep the repetition of the noun instead of using a synonym, which could have given her adjectival alternatives like “before its own shadow” or “before its very shade.”

Translators and perennial students of Spanish grammar might find themselves both moved and vexed, sometimes by the very same poem. “*Ante un espejo / In Front of a Mirror*” is one of the most lyric and haunting pieces in the book, but one in which Morejón uses the future tense to describe a situation that is contrary to fact. Andrews then steps in as editor, taking the liberty of changing the verbs to the imperfect subjunctive throughout the poem. Yet readers should be prepared to suspend their criticism when they see how perfectly the English and Spanish fit together at the end of the following lines, as if Morejón and Andrews had choreographed it together from the poem’s inception.

Aunque hayas montado el mundo entero

....

Habrás desgastado tu vida un poco
inútilmente... (92)

Even if you were to have hunted to whole
world over...

You would have spent all your life a little
uselessly... (93)

Andrew’s combination of adjective and adverb communicates the gentle insult with magisterial simplicity, and expertly preserves this moment of dramatic climax for the English-only reader.

There is only one mistranslation worthy of mention here. In the “Elegy of Maurice Bishop,” the word for “plain” is confused with bed linen: “*El muerto ruge en la sabana*” (52) becomes “The dead man roars in the sheet” (53). It seems obvious that the translation should read “roars in the savannah” for contextual and orthographic reasons. The easy association of the verb “to roar” with lions would seem to suggest one of their natural habitats, grassland. Secondly, within three more lines the author mentions

both “*salinas*” (salt marshes”) and “*colinas*” (“hills”), and the use of the word for a treeless plain would fit logically with these other landscapes. Finally, the word for bed covering (*sábana*) has an accent, while “*sabana*” without one – just as it appears in the original – does indeed mean “savannah”. There are other word choices that might give pause, such as the third person pronoun “them” instead of the second person plural “you” for the vocative context of “Mujer negra / Black Woman” cited above: “*Iguales míos, aquí los veo bailar*” (230). Since Andrews had the great gift of Morejón’s guidance and personal review of the English versions, it would be fair to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Given the high quality of Andrew’s translation, it is a shame that there are more than a couple of typographical errors. They range from absent signs of interrogation (one of which is reproduced above in “Persona / Person”) to the misspelling of the name of Amadeo Roldán, the famous Cuban composer, in the very useful glossary at the end of the book (241). A deserved second edition of *Black Woman and Other Poems / Mujer Negra y Otros Poemas* would provide the publisher an opportunity to correct these errors. In the meantime, they should not discourage readers from this volume of engaging and provocative poetry.

NOTA

1 The four other winners are Dulce María Loynaz (1987), Dora Alonso (sharing the honor with Cintio Vitier) 1988, Fina García Marruz (1990) and Carilda Oliver Labra (1997).

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