Mexican Poetry Today

Mexican Poetry Today
20/20 Voices

Bilingual edition
edited by

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Introduction

Open this book and you will spend time with twenty original voices: twenty poets with a clear vision of what poetry should be and do. Their perceptions—what they think, feel, and question—and the way they craft them ensure that many of these poets will be talked about not just today, but tomorrow and long into the future.

Mexican Poetry Today: 20/20 Voices offers readers a snapshot of contemporary poetry in Mexico, but a single photo could never capture the country's renowned and vibrant poetry scene. Given the abundance of talent, many respected and frequently anthologized poets remain outside the frame. A "definitive" anthology, which this most definitely is not, could easily run to more than a thousand pages.

20/20 Voices is intended to be compact enough that you might carry it with you, but "roomy" enough for the writers to demonstrate their range—each poet has, on average, five pages in English. No poet likes to be reduced to one or two short poems, and few poems can withstand the burden of summing up a career in a couple of pages.

Mexican Poetry Today is not a box of chocolates. It doesn't pretend to provide English language readers with a sampling from each school or style of poetry found in Mexico today, or to represent even the "new wave" or next generation of Mexican poets. Like most of the bilingual anthologies since *New Poetry of Mexico,* the ground-breaking volume edited by U.S. poet, Mark Strand, and published in 1970, *Mexican Poetry Today: 20/20 Voices* features poets born after World War II. This means, of course, that it does not include such luminaries as Eduardo Lizalde, Rubén Bonifas Nuño, José Emilio Pacheco, or Jaime Sabines. While Sabines died in 1999, the rest are still writing and winning major prizes.

The poets in this anthology are members of what some have dubbed the post-Paz generation; they began publishing when Octavio Paz was alive and his fame threatened to eclipse younger Mexican poets. All of the poets included in *Mexican Poetry Today* are alive and publishing, with the exception of Manuel Ulacia, who drowned at 47 (I almost wrote "tragically," but what drowning isn't?).

So who are the 20 poets in *Mexican Poetry Today*, and how were they chosen? The 20 voices presented here are mature. All of them over 40, these poets are, by and large, well established. Each has published several books of poetry. But in order to introduce readers to some

poets relatively unknown outside of Mexico, a number of important contemporary poets fortunate enough to have several collections in English have been excluded.

The poets in *Mexican Poetry Today: 20/20 Voices* write in a variety of tones and styles, from introspective to concrete and quotidian. While a number of the poems are "meta"—poems about poems and the process of writing—even these appear to be preoccupied with something other than exploring consciousness. Most of the poems are firmly rooted in objects, people, place and time—from Manual Ulacia's moving lyric about a father's death and the speaker's forging of identity to Luis Miguel Aguilar's persona poems (reminiscent of U.S. poet, Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology)*.[1] These are poems that refuse to waft away in puffs of abstraction; they enter the weightless atmosphere of symbolism sparingly and therefore to greater effect.

Except for two U.S. anthologies of Mexican poetry devoted exclusively to women,[2] women tend to be under-represented. *Mexican Poetry Today*, like *Reversible Monuments: Contemporary Mexican Poetry* before it, achieves a better balance: eight of the 20 voices belong to women. That said, the issue of gender is rarely addressed by the women writers in *Mexican Poetry Today*, who for the most part prefer to be thought of as poets rather than as "women poets." Silvia Tomasa Rivera's powerful poem is one of the few exceptions:

> *My grandfather came to visit*
> *and brought my brother a rifle*
> *to kill rabbits; he didn't give me anything;*
> *I may be older but I'm female.*
>
> *Ever since he got the rifle my brother doesn't talk to me;*
> *he's 10 and I'm 12.*

Mexican Poetry Today does what any good anthology should do: it opens a door to the strangely beautiful and resonant, bringing the news that

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[1] Luis Miguel Aguilar's persona poems are from *Chetumal Bay Anthology*—the title alone a homage to Edgar Lee Masters.

[2] *Mouth to Mouth: 12 Women Poets* (1993, Milkweed Editions, edited by Forrest Gander) and *Sin Puertas Visibles: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry by Mexican Women* (2003, Pittsburgh University Press, Edited by Jen Hofer)

people die every day for lack of. It also invites readers who know little of Mexico or its literary traditions to discover that richness. The poets in this collection come from all over Mexico and, as editor, I feel compelled to sing their diversity: they are cosmopolitan and provincial; they write in free verse and in traditional forms; they are straight and gay, of the academy and of the street; they are the grandchildren of fishermen, bankers and Russian revolutionaries. In this Mexico, *pan dulce* (Mexican pastry) shares a plate with swallow's nest soup, and the rosary is said while observing Rosh Hashanah.

The poets write in Spanish, of course, but they also write in Zapotec and English. Natalia Toledo from Oaxaca says in her poem 'Flower that Sprouts': "I write in Zapotec to ignore the syntax of pain." Jennifer Clement has lived her whole life in Mexico but writes in English. According to U.S poet, W.S. Merwin who wrote the introduction to her book, *El Próximo Extraño/The Next Stranger*, her "first language, the language of her poems, and I suppose her dreams, is English . . . Her fluent knowledge of Spanish can never altogether clarify the relationship between the two languages in her mind and imagination."

If you read *Mexican Poetry Today* straight through, from cover to cover, as if it were a novel, you may find that it tells a story. A story of snakes, stones, tongues, mirrors, moons, knives, feet, bones, and sea. Always the sea—hardly surprising given that Mexico has over 9,000 kilometers of coastline. And a world of characters populates this story, cohabiting the slender volume: from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Buñuel to Schumann, Marx, Lewis Carroll, Freud, Dylan Thomas, and Basquiat.

Clearly, the influences and imagination of the 20 poets featured in *Mexican Poetry Today* are in no way circumscribed by geography, the 21st or even the 20th century. As has been said elsewhere, Mexico is a country where intellectuals matter and where poets appear on the evening TV news, commenting on current events. This may explain why poets born in the smallest, most remote villages of Mexico sometimes have a more sophisticated sensibility than some of the biggest names in U.S and British poetry.

Many of the poets in this anthology are also important translators of poetry, which partly explains their relative worldliness. José Luis Rivas, born in the "backwaters" of Tuxpan, Veracruz, has translated, among others, Rimbaud, St. John Perse, and the collected works of T.S. Eliot; the title of his book, *Tierra nativa* (Native Land) playfully echoes *The*

Waste Land. Marco Antonio Campos, in addition to being a prolific translator, is a member of the Mallarmé Academy in Paris, occupying the seat once held by Octavio Paz.

But as much as these poets look outward, headlong into the glaring headlights of the world, they also look inward, sharing with us their most puzzling and penetrating concerns. In describing the poet's dilemma, Gloria Gervitz also captures our own: ". . . I can't escape myself/yet only in myself do I know and feel others/an invention that begins every morning as I tediously learn how to wake up/and become myself . . ."

Gervitz's 'Shaharit,' which is really a section from her 30–years-in-the-making poem 'Migraciones,' suggests a collapsing of time and memories. Its central theme is awakening, and it is suffused with an intense, almost suffocating sexuality. In fact, there are many erotic poems in *Mexican Poetry Today,* including Efraín Bartolomé's 'Heaven and Earth,' Pedro Serrano's 'Lustral,' Manuel Ulacia's 'In the Ritz in Meknes,' and Jennifer Clement's pirate poems ('Awakening,' 'The Pirate,' 'The Ship,' and 'Bathwater'), which explore the thin membrane separating pleasure and danger. Similarly, Víctor Manuel Mendiola's 'Your Hand, My Mouth' breathes new life into the sex/death dichotomy with his wonderful riff on plates, glasses and cutlery, which a reviewer in *The Sunday Times* has called a "crazily entertaining fantasy." He uses the imperative and an accretion of numbered koan-like assertions in prose to construct a poem that brims with passion, paranoia, and sexual hunger. The poem closes with, "Your plate is a delicious grave. Bury me." If the speaker in Gervitz's poem seeks to invent herself, the speaker in Mendiola's poem longs for the extinction of self.

Death is a frequent visitor in the anthology, but this being a selection of Mexican poetry, death's presence is neither depressing nor cause for putting the book down. Quite the contrary. As Octavio Paz famously wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*:

> Our relations with death are intimate, more intimate perhaps than those of any other people. The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican in contrast, is familiar with death; jokes about it, caresses

it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.

In *Mexican Poetry Today,* loved ones are depicted in the act of dying, the dead window-shop and go to cafes, and suicide is spoken about as casually as a friend who might drop by on Monday or maybe Thursday. In Héctor Carreto's 'Some Nights My Father Visits Me,' the speaker implies, to use popular jargon, a co-dependency between the dead and the living. If the dead father were to reconcile with his son and cease visiting him in his dreams, the speaker would ". . . be left waiting/night after night,/at the crossroads or at the foot of a pedestal."

Nostalgia is another way of looking at death and dying, and *Mexican Poetry Today*—in spite of its title—is rife with poems that bring to life the yesterday of the imagination, such as Efraín Bartolomé's 'Siempre!' and Jorge Valdés Díaz-Vélez's 'Bolero of the Garden of Delights.' José Luis Rivas' 'A Season in Paradise'—with its lines that move across the page like waves—conjures a childhood on a tropical coast in all its sensuality and tedium.

Rivas' poem 'A Season in Paradise' is one of only a handful of poems in the anthology where the lines begin at varying distances from the left-hand margin. Most of the poems are visually restrained though the majority are in free verse. If formal verse is under-represented, it is partly due to the challenge of translating it and doing the rhyme and/or meter justice.

Luis Miguel Aguilar's 'The Narrow Bed' is the only villanelle in *Mexican Poetry Today,* and it is adroitly translated by Kathleen Snodgrass who says of her decision to honor the form in English, "I loved Luis Miguel's poem but what would be the point of translating it as free verse?"

The translations come from a variety of sources. Some were made expressly for this book, some have appeared in print previously, and still others are what the poet could provide, having been prepared for a bilingual reading. The translators include well-known English-language poets such as Ruth Fainlight and Reginald Gibbons as well as other Mexican writers. Some of the translations are by lesser-known translators and some have been a cross-cultural team effort. Not all of the translations were from Spanish to English: Jennifer Clement's poems were translated from English to Spanish, and Natalia Toledo's were translated into Spanish from Zapotec and then rendered into English.

Regardless of translator, the quality of the original verse always shines through. In 'Epitaph,' Marco Antonio Campos writes of "poetry that falls in the pitcher," and we, the readers, are urged to "raise and drink," indulge in its "freshness." Campos crushes the grapes of his own life and travels, and we drain our glasses, thirsty for more.

Efraín Bartolomé, in his poem 'Invocation,' speaks of verse's power to shuck "the dark clam of my heart." As editor, I would like to add my own humble invocation or blessing before sending you on your way: May the vision of these 20 voices forever change you and change the way you see the world.

Brandel France de Bravo,
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