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# Poetry as Mother Tongue? Lorna Dee Cervantes's *Emplumada*

Erika Scheidegger

The only poem entirely written in Spanish in *Emplumada* faces its corresponding autobiographical poem "The Refugee Ship," composed in English except for the last line. Although many Chicano/a writers regularly perform such code-switching routines or translate passages for the sake of their largely English-speaking readership, Lorna Dee Cervantes offers a yet different insight into such practices: the English version of the poem was actually printed many years before the Spanish one. As a consequence of linguicide, the poet was prevented from learning her mother's tongue as a child. This essay examines how the trauma of being "raised without a language" (41) is inscribed formally, through rhythm and syntax, in the collection of poems *Emplumada*, and suggests ways in which poetry can surmount difficult social and linguistic obstacles.

"In my language, 'tongue' means 'language'"  
(Ozdamar, *Mutter Zunge* 9)

When can one begin to appreciate and rejoice in evidence of healing without minimizing repercussions of the initial trauma, discarding it by imposing a redemptive narrative which may mask, alter or worsen the memory of tragic experiences?<sup>1</sup> Freud's work testifies to the caution re-

<sup>1</sup> "We impose hope because it allows us to contain a horrific story" (C01). Philip Kennicott in his article "From a Distance, Hope Glimmers Like a Mirage Amid the Misery" writes about media reaction towards the December 2004 Tsunami disaster. He notes how rapidly, in the near aftermath of the tragedy, American journalists began setting eyes on numerous "bright sides" to the catastrophe (astonishing survival stories are among the favorites and the sense one gets of a concerned global community united in its efforts for collecting financial aid or in providing logistic help also ranks high). According to Kennicott, this phenomenon, the need to "impose hope," puts minds at rest and, worse, leads to forgetfulness and indifference (C01).

quired by positing that the end-results of healing processes lead to ultimate curing. Trauma theorists also deal with issues related to healing vigilantly and subtly. Intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra, for instance, writes:

[*To the Lighthouse* is a narrative] that both traces the effects of trauma and somehow, at least linguistically, tries to come to terms with those effects, so that they will be inscribed and recalled but perhaps reconfigured in ways that make them not entirely disabling. (*Writing History* 180)

These lines express caution and uncertainty. Three adverbs, “somehow,” “perhaps,” and “not entirely” weaken the verbs they accompany, as does the adverbial phrase “at least.” It seems that the unpredictable characteristics of trauma leave no room for inflexibility and poised assurance. What’s more, trauma resists upfront explicit representation. Repeating twice the word “effects,” LaCapra insists on this aspect of trauma, the fact that it can only be apprehended and represented by means of its persisting and recurring effects. Cathy Caruth has commented on this specificity of trauma, brought to light by Freud (“Remembering” 145-156), reflecting on the delayed nature of a traumatic shock, “the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). For Caruth, it is the “narrative of a belated experience, [which] far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on life” (7).

Caruth’s contention that trauma has an “endless impact on life” strikes me as fatally defeatist, whereas LaCapra evokes options of resilience (7). In the above quotation, he suggests that the texture of a literary narrative itself, the way a writer shuffles and organizes the signifier, might indicate resilience (*Writing History* 180). His contention adds an element to a commonly assumed conviction, the fact that the mere wording of trauma may be effective in reducing the effects of trauma. One reads, on so many back covers of so many novels, that such and such a writer has overcome trauma thanks to the sheer possibility of expressing pain. LaCapra seems to go a step further by proposing that it might be the staging itself of the trauma, its poetics, which can reduce the “acting-out” stages, those uncanny and painful resurfacings of the memory of – or sometimes, an experience akin to – the initial trauma.

In his reading of *To the Lighthouse*, LaCapra observes that traumatic events which take place in the course of the narrative, for example the death of Mrs. Ramsay or references to the First World War, are bracketed (*History, Politics and the Novel* 138). Some of these events are literally bracketed, that is, enclosed in lengthy parentheses. Other traumatic incidents are coupled and placed on the same level of importance, but always in the background, as if to prevent the main narrative, which is filled with seemingly unimportant events, from being chaotically disrupted. This strategy appears to keep trauma in check, to maintain it at a distance so that life, as it unravels uneventfully in *To the Lighthouse*, can go on.

Which poetic means and devices compose resilient spaces for Lorna Dee Cervantes's persona in *Emplumada*? Among obvious historical losses, the distressing and deeply seated trauma of never having been taught Chicano Spanish, her mother's language, is shared by Cervantes and her persona. The speaker portrayed in *Emplumada* grows up speaking English exclusively, just as Cervantes did. During the epoch of the U.S. termination policies and because of acculturation and assimilation practices, Cervantes's mother and grandmother never spoke Chicano Spanish to her (Anderson website). Silencing oneself, one's origins and one's culture appears to be the only option to survive in the dominant Euro-American world. "I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates / whose history reveals what words don't say" (Cervantes 45). How are the "acting-out" effects of this intergenerational trauma inscribed thematically and formally in Cervantes's collection of poems *Emplumada*? Moreover, how and to what extent are the overcoming of such silence and the "working-through" phases of such linguistic and social limitations staged?<sup>2</sup>

Cervantes's *Emplumada* has been hailed as the first influential book of poems published by a Chicana poet in English (Scott 190). When viewed as an ensemble consisting of a coming-of-age collection of poems, a distinct historical and thematic progression is noticeable (Seator 25). The young persona, whose voice is often set in the first person, but who is also in places represented by an omniscient narrator, appears to

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that acting-out and working-out stages are never opposed in such a dichotomised fashion. As LaCapra posits in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, these experiences often emerge hand in hand; in order for the working-out process to gain strength, acting-out interludes must occur and interact with the distancing of the trauma. For the sake of this paper however, I find it interesting to separate the two instances in order to get a clearer view of certain literary techniques brought into play.

be the same throughout the thirty-nine poems. *Emplumada* revolves around themes related to the representation, without the slightest tinge of victimization, of lives shaped by indentured slavery, social segregation, extremely precarious economical constraints, discrimination and racial profiling. Also, as suggested by Cervantes in the first poems of *Emplumada*, the likely outcomes of such an accumulation of traumas are violent behavior at home or in the community, domestic abuse, machismo and various forms of child abuse.

The worst tool of oppression, in *Emplumada*, appears to be language. Linguistic genocide is defined in the United Nations draft of the 1948 *Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* as “prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group.” This basic right was voted down and excluded from the final Convention (Skutnab-Kangas, *Linguistic Genocide* 316). It was not until June 1992 that ethnic and national minorities gained the right to “use their own language” or to “freely speak their own mother tongue” but, as Skutnab-Kangas writes, “. . . this [1992] Declaration is only a recommendation and not a covenant: states do not need to comply” (*Linguistic Genocide* 533). Her research points to the long and unsuccessful struggles for language rights and the way these basic rights consistently get pushed aside or are dealt with in a most ambiguous, contradictory and obscure manner. For instance, no international declaration has successfully been ratified and all attempts to include language rights in the *Declaration of Human Rights* have waned. Skutnab-Kangas explains how issues linked with language maintain and carry on hegemony. Linguicism can “legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (“Multilingualism” 13). Minh-Ha Trinh likewise insists on the fact that language issues play an especially important role in the colonizing process: “Power [ . . . ] has always inscribed itself in language . . . language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation” (52). After reminding readers of the over 200 tribal languages once spoken on former Native American U.S. territory, Kimberly Blaeser also draws attention to this often overlooked link between power and language:

Although generally not viewed in these terms, the history of the relationship between the United States government and Indian nations has frequently revolved around issues of literacy. The making of treaties, for example, in-

volved an assertion of the dominance of the English language over tribal languages and the dominance of the written over the oral. (2)

Many Native American and Chicano/a writers entertain a particular relation with language and associate it with traumatic memories. Gloria Anzaldúa, for instance, realizes that at the heart of her work lies the need to deal with the fact that her mother tongue was prohibited: "And you're right . . . my whole struggle has been against the colonial legacy of this language being imposed on me and Chicanos and other marginalized groups" (Reuman 11). She adds that *Llorona*, her last work-in-progress, is also "very much connected with finding voice, with speaking, with uttering, with crying" (14). Poet and historian Naomi Quinonez has also drawn attention to the impact of linguicide on Cervantes's life. "Lorna relates the fact that her grandmother lost her land to language. She spoke no English, only some Spanish and she could not fight for her land" (273). The effects of such a loss are most obvious in the poem "Refugee Ship," in which a grandchild is portrayed as unable to communicate with her grandmother:

Like wet cornstarch, I slide  
past my grandmother's eyes. Bible at her side  
she removes her glasses.  
The pudding thickens. (41)

The child, as she slides past her grandmother, is described as a gelatinous ectoplasm, more transparent than alive. Cordelia Candelaria notes that Cervantes's characters are often ever changing, difficult to grasp, fluid and adaptable (158). This is indeed the case in "Refugee Ship," given that the persona, like wet cornstarch, is free to glide wherever she wishes. But if Candelaria underlines the advantages of such adaptability, in "Refugee Ship" this condition turns out to be far from enviable: when her grandmother removes her glasses, setting the Bible at her side, as if ready to communicate and turning her full attention to the child, "the pudding thickens." The wet cornstarch is suddenly limited in its previous smooth freedom, almost paralyzed and unable to slide away. Trapped, the child is obliged to confront the difficult reality: she can't communicate verbally with her grandmother.

Such disconnection from family, and thus from history, is best illustrated with the key metaphor of “Refugee Ship.” In this poem, the child equates herself to a refugee ship.<sup>3</sup> The lack of confidence this state generates is also central to Cervantes’s most famous poem to date: “Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races.”

Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my  
“excuse-me” tongue, and this  
nagging preoccupation  
with the feeling of not being good enough. (35)

Enjambments throughout the entire collection of poems appear to mime the mental processes of a worrisome and hesitant mind, an endlessly ill at ease and self-conscious persona, obsessed with chronic insecurity, as adaptable and insignificant as “wet cornstarch.” An acting-out effect of linguicide, lack of self-confidence can be coupled with loneliness, also a major corollary of never having been taught the language of one’s family. A heart-wrenching reproduction of such isolation is voiced in the following extract of “Crow”:

Alone I settled stiff in mouth  
with the words women gave me. (19)

Without words, the persona cannot grow; she settles. The intralinear spaces, these gaps in the midst of lines, visually echo her stammering. The fact that her mouth is stiff, as if lacking saliva to talk, suggests to what extent she is undersupplied with a basic human physiological necessity. When these intralinear spaces appear throughout *Emplumada*, they always draw attention to the poet’s lack of words to express the most overwhelming experiences: a rape (*Lots: II* 9), a sexual assault by her father-in-law (*Beneath* 13), when referring to her problematic relation towards language (*Visions of Mexico* 47) or when in rapture with life (*Shells* 60).

<sup>3</sup> While seeking reports on mother tongue loss and finding little material in the academic realm, I finally turned to the Google search engine and the first hit that materialized was a pedagogical study produced by the Namibian Ministry. The introduction stresses the importance of fighting against language attrition as all mother tongues “anchor a child to its culture.” I find it a striking coincidence that “The Refugee Ship” precisely engages itself with such a metaphor, thus laying emphasis on the importance of a first language and the way it fosters a strong sense of belonging and of confidence.

Another formal device linked with linguicide and its reminiscences can be located in “Refugee Ship”: the end-stopped line.

Like wet cornstarch, I slide  
past my grandmother's eyes. Bible  
at her side, she removes her glasses.  
The pudding thickens.

Mama raised me without language.  
I'm orphaned from my Spanish tongue.  
The words are foreign, stumbling  
on my tongue. I see myself  
in the mirror: bronzed skin, black hair.

I feel I am a captive  
aboard the refugee ship.  
The ship that will never dock.  
El barco que nunca attraça. (41)

Five heavily end-stopped lines in this poem request a substantial pause. Significantly, such end-stops are very rare throughout the thirty-nine free-verse poems of *Emplumada*. Only about fifteen other occurrences of comparable lines emerge throughout the book. Such sudden briefness, in a poem made up of long enjambed sentences, draws more sustained attention.

In other poems, heavily end-stopped lines also refer to language loss: “They call me in words of another language”; “Es la culpa de los antepasados!” (44).<sup>4</sup> If other such occurrences are less explicitly related to linguicide, they always involve anger or grief in relation to language and hegemony. In the poem “From Where We Sit: Corpus Christi,” for instance, the two first lines are heavily end-stopped, and although these lines merely recount an activity in which vacationers or day-dreamers revel, they are actually falsely carefree.

We watch seabirds flock the tour boat.  
They feed from the tourist hand.

We who have learned the language  
They speak as they beg

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<sup>4</sup> Translation provided by Cervantes at the end of *Emplumada*. “It's her ancestors' fault!” (67)

Understand what they really say  
As they lower and bite. (33)

In this poem, Cervantes lures the reader into a seemingly religious poem, but strikes in the very last word with the verb “to bite.” By setting up an iconoclastic comparison between a priest dispensing Corpus Christi and a tourist handing out bread to a seagull, she creates an oxymoron that sets forth a stark contrast between her subdued composure and deeply-rooted anger against the bread provider. Coerced away from one’s native language, spirituality and culture, one may become dependent on the dominant culture and religion, she implies here. Despite her apparent powerlessness, life and anger lie in wait.

This should suffice to demonstrate the extent to which the effects of linguicide supply *Emplumada* with specific approaches to themes and structure. I now wish briefly to examine why this collection of poems, far from assembling victimizing verse, succeeds in displaying wise attempts to surmount, both thematically and in the texture itself of the collection of poems, the harsh limitations it portrays. Such resourcefulness struck me first in a poem glorifying the unlikely figure of a drunken man. Despite his grim state, the speaker acknowledges him as a person: the role model for a coming-of-age poet, ironically, is an alcoholic. This addiction appears as a minor problem when contrasted with the utter confusion demonstrated by most men present in the persona’s childhood who disappear, betray or rape her. Yet in the poem “For Edward Long” (15), Edward Long takes care of her in a particular manner.

[He] stayed  
long enough to give me my voice. (15)

Simultaneously adopted as a father figure and a poetry tutor,<sup>5</sup> Lang introduces her to Robert Louis Stevenson, teaches her the importance of poetry, its redeeming force<sup>6</sup> and a way to recover one’s voice ingeniously by unearthing what is at hand, in the neighboring environment, as grim and confining as it may be.

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<sup>5</sup> Cervantes also refers to “her father” as a poet in “Caribou Girl” (21).

<sup>6</sup> This aspect of poetry is most present in “Poema para los Californios Muertos” (42) and in “Visions of Mexico While Writing a Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington” (45-7).

The title of Cervantes's collection of poems, *Emplumada*, operates from the start, an act of restoration. In Spanish, "emplumada" is a word very rarely used on its own. Impossible to track down in various neologism dictionaries, the only reference discovered is located in Martin Alonso's dictionary of Medieval Spanish. The source states that, during the fifteenth century, "emplumada" referred to a specific chastisement of prostitutes: they were smeared with honey and feathers then exposed to the public. A well-known Spanish play attributed to Fernando Rojas and written between 1490 and 1500, *La Celestina*, is cited as an example (Laville 4).<sup>7</sup> Often compared to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* for its plot and its popularity in the Hispanic-speaking world, a Spanish audience would most likely be familiar with this reference. *Celestina* is a bawdy and ugly Madame who looks after her prostitutes and, accused of using black magic to lure men to fall in love with her *protégées*, is exposed to public shame several times. Each time, she recovers her dignity. Her nobility, according to Renée Saurel, lies in how *Celestina* transgresses social and religious taboos in order to live up to her conviction that love is the sole opponent of death (46). If so, this context gives Cervantes's title an interesting twist: *Emplumada* thus refers to a person who is destined to public humiliation, but who in *Emplumada* is "the prostitute" to be subjected to such a treatment? The title may warn the reader that what is uttered in this collection of poems will not please those who negate or overlook the atrocities carried on throughout the American continent. This title also suggests that these poems, just like *Celestina*, take the risk of being "emplumada," in that they may express deep convictions and voice what has been silenced.

In Spanish, the word *emplumada* is also employed in conjunction with the *Serpiente Emplumada*, or Plumed Serpent. *Serpiente Emplumada* is one of the names of polyonymous *Quetzalcoatl*, the Toltec god of rebirth, the symbol of death and resurrection. He is the provider of human sustenance, of fire and maize. A healer, he cures and grants both material and spiritual knowledge. An English-speaking audience may not be immediately aware of all the connotations concentrated in the title of the collection, but to a Chicano/a or Spanish audience, the mythical quality of the title may carry a subtext that colors the reading experience with thematic undertones of resistance and resilience towards a dominant and domineering culture.

<sup>7</sup> I wish to thank Katia Marina, student at the Spanish Department at the University of Geneva, for bringing these references to my attention.

To a non-Hispanic audience, the understanding of the title demands yet more investment. In the epigraph to her work, Cervantes provides a definition of the title, a clue to understanding her poems:

Em · plu · ma · do v.m., feathered;  
in plumage, as in after molting  
plu · ma · da n.f., pen flourish

These definitions, linked to the title, do not really clarify anything, nor do they provide an immediate and comprehensive understanding of it. First, Cervantes combines Spanish words with English definitions. She uses a code-switching practice from the beginning and posits her intention of crossing linguistic and cultural lines. Secondly, playing with the double significance of *pluma* in Spanish – meaning pen and / or feather – she introduces a metaphor that runs throughout *Emplumada*: the bird metaphor repeatedly suggests that writing enables flight and distancing from various torments (Rodriguez y Gibson 79). Cervantes, by providing a complex path to the understanding of her title, seems to suggest that by combining cultures and languages, one transcends them. Rodriguez y Gibson goes as far as stating that loss in Cervantes's work goes beyond trauma. "The poetics of loss transfigures the significance of historical dispossessions, so that loss is the basis for building and imagining new communities of solidarity, new ways of imagining cross-cultural alliances" (146). Loss can become a strength. An example of such an alliance appears forcefully in "Refugee Ship" and its corresponding poem, written on the page opposite to it, "Barco de Refugiados." A long, meandering creative process appears to have taken place before these twin poems were set on opposing pages. "Refugee Ship" seems to be the oldest poem in the collection. Various versions exist, the first one dating from 1975 and a second one from 1982. Both lack punctuation and end with an English refrain, and without the last envoy line in Spanish. Moreover, these versions are presented without a corresponding poem written in Spanish. Thus, its inclusion in *Emplumada* opposite the English poem suggests something more complex: in the very poem where the persona utters her suffering of being "orphaned from [her] Spanish tongue," the poet adds a last line written in Spanish. To complicate further this discordant play between content and form, it is interesting to note that "Barco de Refugiados" is the only poem entirely composed in Spanish in *Emplumada*. One is led to understand that the persona has learned her people's language, has in a sense

attempted to dock the ship, but in the end, despite all her efforts, remains uprooted.

If learning Spanish does not provide peace, it may be argued that Cervantes's particular staging of these twin poems and her code-switching practice can represent a statement which, using LaCapra's terms, reconfigures the trauma and presents it as less "disabling." By requesting her English readership to make an effort to apprehend her specific worldview and language, a performance she launches from the start with the title of her work, she inverts the role between the dominant language and the dominated one. Indeed, the poet's inclusion of Spanish in the last line of the English version demands a minor effort from a non-Hispanic reader. The English version, with its envoy in the last line written in Spanish, opens the poem to possibilities, to another language and culture. A glance back to the Spanish poem is needed in order to understand the last line. One merely needs to observe that the last lines in the Spanish version operate as a refrain and are simply repeated. By cautiously requesting an effort on the part of an English audience, Cervantes asks "to be met halfway," a request specific to most narrative forms of Chicano/a works of fiction (Madsen, 22, 24, 36) and which Gloria Anzaldúa maintains throughout her work as a means to overcome subservience:

Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture – to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. (20)

If LaCapra has brought to light a literary strategy that suggests distancing from trauma by bracketing it, it is the thesis of this paper to make evident that in Cervantes's *Emplumada* the most violent consequences of linguicide are also textually contained: they are concentrated and condensed in solid end-stopped lines. However, while Cervantes confines her deepest pain to a limited textual space, she nonetheless does not place all the consequences of these events in the background, as they are in *To the Lighthouse*. Despite the risk of being "emplumada," she lets them run through her poems, liberating them from the confinement of end-stopped lines, creating enjambments and association of words and ideas rising above common usages, be they of Chicano/a or Euro-American origins. Through all these means, poetry comes into focus as

a language of its own, a way to work through the ordeal and transcend (some) effects of linguicide and social prejudices.

When can one start talking of evidence of healing? LaCapra's cautious approach to trauma, as again in the quotation below, and Cervantes's crafted and poetic treatment of it suggest that the effects of trauma never do completely die out:

One may also insist that working through trauma does not deliver full meaning or speculative synthesis but instead permits a significant measure of critical control that may never entirely – at least in cases of severe trauma – dispense with at least the possibility (and in all probability the reality) of acting out. ("History" 823)

According to LaCapra, no "full meaning or speculative synthesis" can ever really soothe a post-traumatic condition. In other words, redemptive narratives are inventions. Their main functions seem to consist in allowing indifference and forgetfulness to settle in. Only "critical control," the creative bracketing of the traumatic instance for instance, may indicate peace prevails: when healing is embedded in a narrative, assimilated and rooted in form there is more chance that healing is at hand.

In addition to the examples provided herein, it can be noted that shades of serene resilience encircle Cervantes's work: the title of the collection of poems echoes the last poem also entitled "Emplumada." It symbolically depicts the feat of the survivor. Two hummingbirds catch the attention of the persona; they pull her away from her mourning the end of summer. She watches them with fondness as they distance themselves from winter and loss – their attitude sums up a wisdom offered throughout *Emplumada*.

## EMPLUMADA

When summer ended  
the leaves of snapdragons withered  
taking their shrill coloured mouths with them.  
They were still, so quiet. They were violet  
where umber now is. She hated and  
she hated to see  
them go. Flowers

born when the weather was good – this  
she thinks of, watching the branch of peaches  
daring their ways above the fence, and further  
two hummingbirds, hovering, stuck to each other,  
arcing their bodies in grim determination  
to find what is good, what is  
given them to find. These are warriors

distancing themselves from history.  
They find peace  
in the way they contain the wind  
and are gone. (66)

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