

Lorna Dee Cervantes and the Art of Refugeeship

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Abstract: Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes' first collection of poetry, *Emplumada* (1981), includes two paired poems, *El Barco de Refugiados* and "Refugee Ship," the first entirely in Spanish and the second in English, except for the last line. Critics have assumed that one is a translation of the other, with most discussion focused on "Refugee Ship." I argue that there are significant differences between the two and that they are most productively read as components of a kind of disjunctive synthesis that renders the reader a kind of refugee moving between the two languages, unable to settle in either. The title, "Refugee Ship," can be read as "refugeeship," the condition of being a refugee, of crossing borders, linguistic as well as national, surreptitiously, a captive of a voyage without beginning or end.

Keywords: refugee, bilingualism, racism, translation, Chicana

Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île,
Aux captifs, aux vaincus!... à bien d'autres encor!
— Charles Baudelaire, "Le Cygne"

I will begin with an anecdote. Some years ago, a student came to my office and announced that she had decided to write her senior thesis on Lorna Dee Cervantes' poem "Refugee Ship."¹ When I asked why she had chosen that particular poem out of all those contained in the collection *Emplumada*, she answered, in a matter of fact tone, that she liked the idea of "refugeeship." My face must have betrayed my incomprehension and she was kind enough to indulge me by explaining that reading the two words, "refugee ship," aloud made her think of "refugeeship," that is, a noun produced by the addition of a morpheme, in this case the suffix "ship," to "refugee." Refugeeship, she informed me, like "championship" or "ownership," signifies the condition of being something, in this case, a refugee. Finally, the addition of "ship" to a noun can also indicate the skill involved in being something, as in the case of "marksmanship." There is a lesson here about what can be seen from certain perspectives and not others, but in what follows I have limited myself to a few observations on what the notion of "refugeeship" makes intelligible in the poem and beyond.²

Lorna Dee Cervantes is one of the most powerful literary voices to emerge from the Chicano movement of the sixties and seventies. Her poetry, not simply in its content but in its form, represents an exploration

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1 Cervantes 1981, pp. 40-41.

2 I wish to acknowledge Pilar Fernandez, Occidental College, class of 2016.

of the lived experience of the interwoven practices of exclusion and forced assimilation that both shaped the generation of Mexican-Americans who took the name of Chicano, and were in turn shaped by counter-practices of resistance and subversion.³ One of the most important sites in this conflict was language, specifically the right to speak Spanish to fellow Spanish speakers at work and at school.⁴ Anti-Mexican racism led to mass deportations: between 1954 and 1964, more than a million men, women and children, many of whom were US citizens, were deported to Mexico as a result of the US government's persecutory "Operation Wetback." Fearful parents discouraged their children from speaking Spanish in public and, not infrequently, at home, and often gave them "American" names. In 1968, when thousands of students walked out of seven predominantly Mexican-American high schools in East Los Angeles, the right to speak Spanish outside of the classroom figured among their demands.⁵

She writes, not as an observer positioned outside these struggles, but from a position within them, providing a perspective from which this too often unseen conflict becomes visible. In particular, she explores the family's role in reproducing the subaltern status of Mexican-American by treating Spanish as an "inferior" language, unworthy of study, that deserved only to be cast aside in favor of English. Separated from the *Mexicanidad* of her parents and grandparents, but racialized as "Mexican" by the dominant culture, the speaker in "Refugee Ship" has suffered a double loss and a double rejection, adrift in the space of neither/nor. Not content to represent or express this experience, Cervantes has set out to make her readers feel it by means of an experiment in bilingualism and perhaps translingualism. By participating in this experiment, that is, by reading this poem (or poems), we may, if we are lucky, learn something about the practice of refugeeship. The poem, "Refugee Ship," as we will see, is paired with a poem in Spanish entitled "*El Barco de Refugiados*." The latter, often understood as a version of the English language text, represents an attempt to create a bilingual poem in the guise of a translation that tests and reveals the points of contact between languages and cultures, points where they do not simply meet but also enter into conflict.

Following my student's suggestion, I will argue that it is both possible and necessary to read Cervantes' "Refugee Ship" not simply as an expression of the poet's sense of having been exiled from the Spanish language, but also as an exploration of the condition of being a refugee, the different borders in relation which one is defined as a

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3 Dávila 2012, Kraver 1997.

4 Gutfreund 2013

5 Hernández 2008

refugee, and the skills involved in existing in, or surviving, this mode of existence. Even when Cervantes employs the term “refugee” figuratively or metaphorically, she never lets the reader forget the refugee ships, past and present, filled with those to whom no one will give refuge; indeed, to read “*El Barco de Refugiados*” and “Refugee Ship” together is to lose one’s bearings and to feel the fragility of such pillars of our existence as home and mother tongue.

“Refugee Ship” is thus one of those poems that appear to have been waiting for an encounter that might never have happened to disclose meanings that readers had never seen or understood until the moment of the encounter. These meanings, however, were neither hidden nor overlooked: the poem’s words, lines and rhythms have taken on new meanings and new connotations, adding them to those that existed at the moment of its enunciation, meanings and connotations inscribed on them by a new historical conjuncture. It is as if, in particular, the words “refugee” and refugee ship/refugeeship, continue to pursue their ever-proliferating referents to gather them into their domain. This has nothing to do with what is commonly referred to as anachronism; it concerns the process of what Pierre Macherey called “literary reproduction,” that is, the process by which the literary text takes on, or takes on board, additional meanings and associations that become woven into its texture.⁶ Thus, the title “Refugee Ship” will undoubtedly elicit very different responses today than when the poem appeared in Cervantes’ first book, *Emplumada* in 1981. Now, forty years after its publication, it inescapably evokes images of barely seaworthy boats and rafts crowded with refugees from Africa and Asia crossing the Mediterranean only to be turned away by the officials of whatever European nation they have managed to reach: these too are refugee ships never allowed to dock. The images, and the words that carry them, allow us to ask why Cervantes uses the word “refugee” to describe a linguistic orphan who has been deprived of a mother tongue, and compelled to use an adoptive language in its place and whose foreignness is underscored by the experiences described in the poem: seeing her brown skin and black hair in the mirror, but forbidden by her mother to learn Spanish.

We might begin with the history of the word (and concept) of refugee, not simply in its legal sense, but in its actual usage, may not illuminate aspects of the poem that have to a great extent resisted interpretation. The origins of the term “refugee” lie in the Latin root it shares with “fugitive:” the verb *fugio*, meaning to flee, desert or escape. From this verb was derived the Latin term *fugitivus*, denoting the one who runs away or flees. Both the verb and the noun were most frequently used in relation to escaped slaves and army deserters. While the noun, *refugus*, could also be used to signify one who flees, it most commonly refers

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⁶ Macherey 1998, pp. 42-51.

to the action of fleeing back to a previous location (as indicated by the prefix “re”). The noun, *refugium*, rarely used in classical Latin, signified a refuge, that is, a place to which the *fugitivus* or *refugus* might flee to find safety. Finally, another term, absent from “Refugee Ship,” but which the poem seems often to evoke: exile, in the sense of the person who has been exiled, whose relation to “fugitive” and “refugee” is complicated. The exile is one who is banished, who must leave involuntarily, often as punishment. The fugitive, in contrast, is one who has been involuntarily detained and who voluntarily flees detention. “Refugee,” in contrast, designates a far more ambiguous condition that renders any attempt to determine whether the departure of the refugee is voluntary or involuntary very difficult: what is the refugee fleeing from (and why) and where does the refugee hope to find refuge?

Up to this point, I have spoken, as many critics do, of *the* poem, “Refugee Ship.” In *Emplumada*, however, “Refugee ship” does not appear alone, but is paired with and preceded by a poem written entirely in Spanish, entitled “*Barco de Refugiados*,” (“refugee ship”).

BARCO DE REFUGIADOS

Como almidón de maíz
me deslizo, pasando por los ojos de mi abuela,
bíblia a su lado. Se quita los lentes.
El pudín se hace espeso.

Mamá me crió sin lenguaje.
Soy huérfano de mi nombre español.
Las palabras son extrañas,
tartamudeando en mi lengua.
Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo:
piel de bronce, cabello negro.

Siento que soy un cautivo
a bordo de un barco de refugiados.
El barco que nunca atraca.
El barco que nunca atraca.

REFUGEE SHIP

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 name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.

I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.
El barco que nunca atraca.

The two poems are set on facing pages, as if mirroring each other, an effect enhanced by their very similar (but not quite identical) layout: both consist of three stanzas, the first and last of which consist of four lines. The middle stanzas differ slightly: in the Spanish text it is 6 lines, in the English 5; the former consists of 14 lines and a total of 82 words, the latter of 13 lines and 73 words. Given that "Refugee Ship" was first published in 1974, seven years before the appearance of "*Barco de Refugiados*" in *Emplumada*, commentators remain divided over the chronology of the poems' composition. Most, however, assume that the Spanish text is a variation on or, more commonly, a translation of "Refugee Ship," and thus composed at a later time. But Cervantes' arrangement of the poems in *Emplumada*, on facing pages with the Spanish text preceding the English, renders the problem of priority and with it, a series of other problems, undecidable.

The question of translation, however, must in certain ways condition our reading of the two poems and in doing so pose the question of refugeeship at the outset of any reading. The act of translation (which is by no means limited to the scholarly or literary realms) is currently understood as the transmission of the meaning of an original, or source, text written in one language into a target text written in a different language, whose meaning will not be the same as the first, but "equivalent." The Latin verb from which the word translation is itself derived signifies to carry or transport something (even a meaning) from one place or person to another, suggesting that there exists a meaning or sense for which a given language is merely a means of transport or conveyance. Following this conception of translation, the distinction between the original or source language, on the one side, and the

target language, on the other, collapses and the source loses whatever privilege it might have had. All that matters is the meaning that is always separable from a given language. In the case of Cervantes' two poems, the chronological sequence of their appearance or composition would become irrelevant; the Spanish and English would be equivalent to each other because both are equivalent to an ur-text that lies outside of its possible actualizations and serves as the foundation and guarantee of the meaning to which both texts offer equivalents. However, extravagant this theory of translation might seem, its assumptions are those that guide much of what is said about the relation between the Spanish and English texts.

There is another problem with any assertion of the priority (chronological or thematic) of "Refugee Ship" over "*Barco de Refugiados*": in *Emplumada*: the Spanish text precedes the English, suggesting, if anything, the priority of the former over the latter. But we are no more capable of solving the problem by reversing the order of genesis and declaring the priority of the Spanish text based on the chronology imposed on the reader in the experience of reading *Emplumada*, or on the supposition that in the beginning, "*Barco de refugiados*" existed in some inchoate form, realized or unrealized, that grew in the interstices of "Refugee Ship," finally to supplant it.

The very question of which came first, which was the original and which the translation, forces us to confront the fact that that nothing in *Emplumada* indicates that one of the pair is a translation of the other: no note, no identification of a translator, nothing to indicate that the two are anything other than separate poems. If, as Saussure noted, the condition of possibility of translation, and therefore of the mutual intelligibility of languages, is the existence of a "concept" or idea, outside of and prior to language per se, whose externality allows it in principle to be expressed in any particular language, are we sure that Cervantes' two poems convey an equivalent idea or set of ideas? If this were the case, reading the poems would consist of the act of reducing them to the meanings for which they have supplied the equivalents. This takes us beyond the questions of how one achieves this equivalence, whether through fidelity to the source or through an unfaithful fidelity that remains true to the original by deviating from it. Rather, it is a question of the irreducible materiality of the texts, the meanings that arise "accidentally," perhaps from the words the poet is constrained to use, but often from the nonsense of sound and rhythm, the formation of puns or the concatenation of certain sounds. The play of homophony that, as I learned from my student, overdetermines the title "Refugee Ship" and if we are convinced, as I am, that "Refugeeship" is as important to the poem as the title, "Refugee ship," the title of the Spanish text, "*Barco de Refugiados*" cannot be understood as its equivalent. Instead, "Refugee Ship" itself must be regarded as untranslatable by virtue of its properties, both graphemic and phonological, that in their materiality resist translation. This does

not mean that the title "*Barco de refugiados*" does not produce its own singular effects, the functions both denotative and connotative imposed on it by its own history and the chain of associations to which it is inescapably linked. But it is impossible not to see the paradox inherent in the presentation of the two poems in *Emplumada*: that of a speaker who describes the continuing effects of being forbidden to learn Spanish by her mother and who does so in Spanish before describing it in English.

This paradox in turn provokes a series of additional questions concerning the intended audience of *Emplumada* as a whole and this pair of poems in particular. At the end of the book, the reader will find a "Glossary of Spanish Words and Phrases" found in nine of *Emplumada*'s poems. It is significant that none of the Spanish words or phrases listed in the glossary are marked as "foreign" terms in the poems in which they are found, whether through the use of italics or any other graphemic device. Cervantes' suspension of such markings effectively opens the border between the languages; she invites her audience to treat Spanish words just as they would unfamiliar English words, that is, deriving their meaning as far as possible from the context or consulting a dictionary (online or otherwise). Cervantes' Glossary might appear as a negation of this gesture, re-instating linguistic borders by resorting to a notion of equivalent meanings in two languages whose borders are not only distinctly drawn, but carefully guarded, so that there can be no encroachment of one language on the other. As we might expect, however, the Glossary works instead to problematize such notions. If the non-Spanish speaking segment of the book's audience thought they could skip over the Spanish phrases and yet still arrive at an adequate understanding of Cervantes' poems, they will find a glossary on the page facing the final poem, "*Emplumada*," that so closely resembles its layout that the glossary might, from a distance, be mistaken for a poem itself. Readers who persist will find themselves addressed as hopelessly monolingual and ignorant even of Spanish terms like "machismo" (recognized by spellcheck as an English word), "casa" and "abrazo" (Cervantes will define "abrazos" in the plural as "bear hugs"). The readers to whom such unshakeable incomprehension may be imputed are those who fully embrace their privilege not to know Spanish (there is no corresponding right of Spanish speakers in the US not to know English). They are those among whom the mother described in *Barco de Refugiados*/ "Refugee Ship" would have her daughter live as an unwelcome refugee.

But what is perhaps most important about the Glossary is what is missing from it: neither *Barco de Refugiados* nor "Refugee Ship" are among the nine poems whose Spanish words and phrases are defined. Of course, "*Barco de Refugiados*," the only poem in the collection written entirely in Spanish, and accompanied by what has passed for its English equivalent, lies outside the purview of a glossary, but the same cannot

be said for “Refugee Ship,” whose final line, *El barco que nunca atraca*, although untranslated, does not appear in the glossary. Readers with a reading knowledge of Spanish might take it as a rendering of the previous line, “The ship that will never dock.” But is it the case that the concluding lines of the English text are equivalent to those of the Spanish text? In fact, if we compare “the ship that will never dock” to *El barco que nunca atraca*, we will note that the English version is formulated in the future tense; in the Spanish, the verb *atracar*, (to dock) is conjugated in the third person present tense “*atraca*,” and is more properly be rendered “the ship that never docks.” The English phrase stresses what will happen or rather not happen in the future; the Spanish line concerns the present, the experience of being a prisoner on a ship that never docks, that never finds, has never up to this point found, a place of refuge. The speaker has been on the ship for a long time, perhaps a lifetime; readers, in contrast, have just come aboard, or at least feel that they have just come aboard, only to be told that, to cite Pascal, *vous êtes embarqué*.⁷ The journey without destination on a ship that never docks because its passengers are everywhere refused, has already begun.

The differences between the two texts are perfectly apparent when we compare the first stanzas:

Como almidón de maíz
me deslizo, pasando por los ojos de mi abuela,
bíblia a su lado. Se quita los lentes.
El pudín se hace espeso.

A translation that preserves the division of lines and sentences might appear thus:

Like cornstarch
I slide, passing before the eyes of my grandmother,
bible at her side. She removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.

The first stanza of “Refugee Ship,” in contrast, differs in some significant ways from the Spanish text:

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

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⁷ Pascal 1962, fragment 397.

In addition to the insertion of the adjective “wet” before cornstarch, what stands out is the enjambment or run-on lines that interrupt the sentences at “slide” and “Bible.” Perhaps most surprising is the reorganization of the sentences, so that the two sentences that unite to form the first stanza in the Spanish text, become three in English. The speaker slides past her grandmother and her bible in the former, but only past her grandmother in the latter, where our attention is directed away from the speaker and to her grandmother’ as she removes her glasses, “bible at her side.” The verb, *deslizar*, might be read as “slip,” as if she slips by her grandmother’s eyes (and the Bible at her side) furtively, unnoticed, quietly. But her grandmother’s removal of her glasses as if in order not to see, suggests that the speaker is simultaneously slipping away from her grandmother who does not see her and perhaps has never seen her, above all because the speaker cannot communicate in Spanish.

The final line of the first stanza, “*La pudin se hace espeso*” and “The pudding thickens” refers back to the cornstarch with which the poem opens and to which the speaker compares herself. Cornstarch is a thickening (and binding) agent: in what sense does the speaker serve this function as she slides or slips past her grandmother (and is she slipping out or in)? In Spanish, as in as English, “thicken” has another meaning, as in “*la trama se espesa*” or “the plot thickens,” phrases that signal a discovery that the plot (originally of a play) is more complicated than initially thought. The speaker reveals herself to be a thickening agent in this sense: a thickener of plots, as well as puddings, leaving undetermined the question of whether she is slipping away, slipping out, or slipping in. The use of “slide” in place of “*deslizo*” in the English text suppresses many of the questions that arise in the first stanza of “*El Barco de refugiados*,” thus posing in turn a question that can emerge only when the two poems in their different languages are read together in a specific sequence, as if the English both adds and subtracts meanings from the Spanish in seeming to repeat it.

The next, central, stanza marks the beginning of the speaker’s refugeeship, retroactively assigning a meaning to the translation of *deslizo* as “slide” instead of “slip.” Deprived of language—any language—and orphaned from her Spanish name, made a stranger from the language of previous generations, now nothing more than a foreign language whose sounds she cannot master, she is finally a stranger to herself, that is, her own body, her brown skin and black hair:⁸

Mamá me crió sin lenguaje.
Soy huérfano de mi nombre español.
Las palabras son extrañas,
tartamudeando en mi lengua.

.....
8 Aparicio 1986.

Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo:
piel de bronce, cabello negro.

A translation that preserves the lines and sentences:

Mama raised me without language.
orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign,
stuttering on my tongue.
My eyes see the mirror, my reflection:
bronze skin, black hair.

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And, finally, from “Refugee Ship:”

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

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The first line of the stanza should not be allowed to pass as mere hyperbole. “Without language” recalls the fact that no words pass between the speaker and her grandmother. Forcibly exiled from the Spanish language, from its sounds, its music and rhythms, but most importantly from the histories congealed in even the simplest terms, the *palabras cariñosas* and the *palabras sucias*, even as her family name and the color of her skin and hair ensure that she will remain a Mexican in the eyes of those who would denigrate her for speaking Spanish. Refugees not welcome there, except, of course, refugees from Europe who are deemed white.

The first two lines of the stanza have in many ways determined the dominant reading of the poem, including the tendency to privilege biography over history, particularly the history of schools in the Southwestern part of the US, and the campaigns to exclude the use of Spanish at any time or place in educational institutions below the level of college or university. Nor was the supposedly free realm of civil society in the 1950s and 1960s a place of tolerance or even indifference to the use of foreign languages, especially Spanish. Workers in many industries were forbidden to speak Spanish, even among themselves while on the job. Language became a terrain of struggle: the suppression of Spanish in the workplaces of the Southwest by employers represented an attempt to prevent workers from organizing to protest low wages and unbearable working conditions. In the schools, the children of Mexican immigrants were expected to divest themselves of their culture (with its traditions of solidarity and collective responsibility) and language. Their

families, subject to a variety of pressures, often, but by no means always, supported the policy of monolingualism, if only as a way of sparing their children the racism they had faced. This is precisely what Althusser meant when he described the family as an Ideological State Apparatus.

There are few literary works that so effectively capture the feeling of overwhelming destitution and loss among those whose lives became the target of the disciplinary practices exercised at the workplace and the school, and whose effects carried into home and family. Cervantes makes visible and legible the fact that the Americanization campaign in which her mother was an unwitting participant was far less concerned with teaching young students English than with policing their relation to Spanish, and reducing it to the bare minimum. The realization of such objectives had the effect of isolating students from their families, of pathologizing Mexican culture, and of stigmatizing the Spanish language, as well as any intrusion of Spanish pronunciation (including through what in phonology is called “overcompensation” or overcorrection of vowels). The speaker’s mother functions as a condensation of all the forces arrayed to prevent the children of Mexican (and later Central American) parents from identifying with the culture of their forbears, and suggests how these forces came to occupy even the sanctuary of the home.

The speaker describes this experience as being “*Huerfano de mi nombre español*” and “orphaned from my Spanish name.” In current English usage, the construction “orphaned from” can be understood in two senses, one of which is fairly rare. Most commonly, it refers to the cause of the parents’ death, a way of saying “made an orphan by” a car accident, a pandemic and so on. The far less common meaning of “orphaned from” refers to those whose loss has rendered one an orphan, typically one’s parents. While this sense is more common in Spanish than in English, the effect of reading these texts one after the other, and perhaps returning to the Spanish after reading the English, is to feel and be caught up in an oscillation between the two that never allows the reader to settle on (or in) one or the other. This oscillation binds them in their difference, as if each must be read in the light of the other, allowing the intermingling of meanings. We cannot help but hear the Spanish in the English and vice versa until the words begin to sound like synonyms in a single language.

In this way, we may read “orphaned from my Spanish name” as meaning 1) that the speaker has lost her Spanish name, that is, lost it as a Spanish name, pronounced as it is in Spanish and with all the cultural and literary associations it maintains in Spanish. It remains as a relic or keepsake of what no longer exists for her; and 2) that she is orphaned because of her name, because it separates her from the White world around her like an identifying tattoo and triggers the operations of compulsion and constraint designed to secure her assimilation to that world. Her assimilation, however, can never erase the difference associated with her name (and her skin color): she will be assimilated,

if at all, as an inferior version of the white American, whose whiteness functions as the norm against which “others” are measured. The speaker’s description of her attempts to speak Spanish as stuttering or stumbling signals the confrontation between the demand not to speak Spanish and to remain unable to do so, and the opposing demand, perhaps implied by her grandmother’s silence in the opening stanza, to “live up to her name” and know the history of her family and people in and through their language. She finds herself treating Spanish as a foreign language even as she attempts to speak it, just as she is trapped in the foreignness imputed to her by the English-speaking world no matter how great her ignorance of Spanish.

The final lines of the stanza are marked by an increasing divergence between the Spanish and English texts. The Spanish, *Mis ojos ven el espejo, mi reflejo|piel de bronce, cabello negro* [My eyes see the mirror, my reflection/bronze skin, black hair] differs in important ways from the English of “Refugee Ship.” In the latter, “my eyes see the mirror, my reflection” becomes “I see in the mirror/my reflection.” The replacement of “my eyes see” with “I see” eliminates the reference to the eyes of the speaker’s grandmother in the first stanza, the eyes she “slides past.” Perhaps her grandmother’s eyes were the mirror in which the speaker’s eyes see themselves and the dark hair and skin that surrounds them. But that these features are not seen by her but by her eyes suggests a fundamental dehiscence between what the I thinks (and feels) and what the eyes see, as if she cannot entirely believe her eyes. Her skin in the English is not even “bronze” as in the Spanish (*bronce*), but “bronzed,” suggesting that her skin was originally lighter and only became dark through exposure to the sun, or through exposure to those in whose eyes the color of her skin constitutes an unremovable stain.

No wonder then that the speaker tells us in the final stanza, “I feel I am a captive/aboard a refugee ship.” A prisoner, the speaker is detained and imprisoned, forced to remain in the space allotted to those whose identity is imposed on them like a set of restraints designed to prevent the prisoners from escaping. Always already expelled from her native land, she is rejected by all others. Henceforth, she belongs only to the condition of refugeeship, a prisoner on the ship that wanders without port of origin or destination.

The final line of “Refugee Ship” is in Spanish and identical to the final line of *Barco de refugiados*, “*El barco que nunca atraca.*” Unlike the Spanish words and phrases that appear in the nine poems listed in the Glossary, the final phrase is italicized. Repeated like an incantation, punctuated by the hard “c” sound in four of its five words, it is the only Spanish phrase in an otherwise English-language poem, but is omitted from the Glossary. Why is it italicized? Because italics legitimize the admission of Spanish into English, but like the issuance of a tourist visa, only temporarily? Or because the italics direct the readers’ attention

back to the Spanish text, inaugurating the oscillation between languages that joins the two texts in a single experience of reading, as if each is a continuation of the other and not its equivalent? In any case, the act of concluding an English language poem with an untranslated line in Spanish, or at least a line that many readers may not know is a kind of translation of the line above it, is a gesture of defiance, disrupting the intricate mechanisms of subjection that operate in and through language, like an unauthorized crossing of borders.

This is not to say that Cervantes' poem is simply a representation of the fracturing of borders, the borders between languages coextensive with national borders. On the contrary, it tears a hole in the border fences common to languages and nations; Cervantes steers the *barco de refugiados* away from ports of entry and the authorities prepared to deny sanctuary to those most in need of it, and takes it instead to deserted beaches where asylum seekers scatter to safety on moonless nights. But we also think of others: the refugee ships that sink in darkness without a single survivor, those that reach the shores of Europe only to be turned away, abandoned to a fate no one cares to know, and, finally those, whose refugee ship is of a different kind, massed on the southern border of the US and likely to be refused asylum and sent back to places to which they cannot return.

Never has Cervantes' poem(s) been more true, and the art of refugeeship more necessary, than today. The two poems, in Spanish and in English, separate only to converge into a composite: a map, a chant, a chronicle, a place of refuge from which the struggle to turn a world without refuge into a world where no one can be a refugee begins.

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