

Review / Reseña

Kyn Taniya. *Radio: Wireless Poem in Thirteen Messages and Uncollected Poems*. Trans. David Shook. Graphics by Daniel Godínez-Nivón. Cardboard House Press, 2016

Wireless Poems in an Internet Age

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“Hairs raise at the rasp of hertzian waves”; “The Moon rays / tremble like antennas greedy for messages”; “Diaphanous magnetic currents / will take me to rest on the reefs of space”; “And the fish swim in the clean aquarium of the night”. This is the universe of Mexican poet Kyn Taniya, pen name of the diplomat Luis Quintanilla (1900-1980), author of two volumes of poetry published in the 1920s in tangential association with the Estridentista movement, Mexico’s first and undoubtedly most audacious avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century.

Kyn Taniya, son of a diplomat also named Luis Quintanilla, was born and raised in Paris, where he imbibed the influences of Guillaume Apollinaire, José Juan Tablada and Amado Nervo. In 1918, already a young adult, he departed for Mexico, and from there to the United States; leaving a Europe immersed the chaos of World War I, he wrote movingly about the glacial sadness of the world left behind, while at the same time embracing the chaotic and vibrant imagery of the Americas, especially the tropics. These early poems, many of which were written in French and translated by the author himself, were published in *Avión* (1923), Kyn Taniya’s poetic debut in Mexico. He returned to his homeland in 1921, though only to enter the diplomatic

service, following his father's footsteps and continuing his own already nomadic international trajectory.¹

Avión, with a cover by well-known painter and multifaceted cultural promotor Dr. Atl and its visual poems in the style of Apollinaire's calligrams, was characterized by a fresh and unpretentious experimental style.² Coinciding roughly with the first poetry collections of the estridentista movement—Manuel Maples Arce's *Andamios interiores*, published in 1922; Germán List Arzubide's *Esquina*, 1923; as well as the journal *Irradiador*, edited by Maples Arce and Fermín Revueltas in the last months of 1923—the book quickly earned him a place among the emergent Mexico City avant-garde. This was so even though his absences from the country prevented him from being a constant figure in estridentismo or other literary circles.

His *Radio* arrived soon after, published, like *Avión*, by the Mexico City press Cultura. Compact and self-contained as, according to its subtitle, a wireless poem in thirteen messages, “*poema inalámbrico en trece mensajes*.” The subject matter and the form-content nexus, both organized around the novel medium of radio, further linked Kyn Taniya to the estridentistas, whose founding poet, Manuel Maples Arce, had read his own radio poem, “T.S.H.,” on the air during the inauguration of Mexico's first commercial radio station on May 8, 1923.³

The inaugural broadcast was preceded by an issue of *El Universal Ilustrado*—co-owner of the radio station along with Raúl Azcárraga's Casa del Radio—for which Maples Arce's poem had been commissioned, along with other texts both straightforward (such as an interview with Azcárraga, purveyor of consumer radio receivers) and fanciful (“El hombre antena” by estridentista prose stylist Arqueles Vela). The link between estridentismo and radio was emphasized in the editorial

¹ Lourdes Quintanilla Obregón, “Kyn Taniya: vida y obra”, in Gabriela Becerra E., coord., *Estridentismo: memoria y valoración* (Mexico, DF: Secretaría de Educación Pública/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), 241.

² A reproduction of *Avión* can be found in Luis Mario Schneider's *El estridentismo o una literatura de la estrategia* (Mexico, DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997), 331-397.

³ The relationship, or lack thereof, between Kyn Taniya and the estridentistas has been a point of contention among scholars: Quintanilla Obregón, in “Kyn Taniya” (241-259), rejects the connection, arguing that her uncle spent too little time in Mexico to have formed part of any sort of school or “ism”; Germán List Arzubide, while including Kyn Taniya in his chronicle *El movimiento estridentista* (Xalapa: Ediciones del Horizonte, 1926), repudiated the association between movement and the Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago directed by Kyn Taniya in 1924, the same year as the publication of *Radio* (cited by Tania Barberán Soler in her thesis “El Teatro Mexicano del Murciélago: un espectáculo de vanguardia,” Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997). Further discussion of Kyn Taniya's avant-garde poetry and his theater project can be found in Elissa Rashkin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 50-51 and 101-106, respectively.

remarks by Carlos Noriega Hope, who commented that both belonged to the avant-garde, and therefore, to one another as siblings.⁴

Given that their work sprung from early contact with the fledgling medium, when regular national broadcasting had not yet begun, when international content was painstakingly sought by amateur operators with improvised equipment, and when static and interruption were the norm, it is not surprising that Maples Arce and Kyn Taniya expressed bemusement as well as enthusiasm. Maples Arce's "T.S.H." portrays an astronaut of the radio waves navigating in stunning solitude:

La soledad
es un balcón abierto
hacia la noche.
*¿En dónde estará el nido
de esta canción mecánica?*⁵

The poet's characteristic melancholy gives way, however, to a burst of radiophonic enthusiasm, as the dizzying succession of "jazz-bands," "synchronic ports" and "motors" leads him to exclaim: "¡Manicomio [insane asylum] de Hertz, de Marconi, de Edison!" (79).

In contrast to Maples Arce's psychological insistence on the perceptions of a first-person subject, Kyn Taniya's "...IU IIIUUU IU..." mimics the chaotic and confused noise collage experienced by the early radio user. The headphones then necessary to radio listening—the notion of radio as a collective experience shared by listeners in homes and commercial establishments would come later as the technology evolved—both isolate the radionaut from his immediate surroundings, and serve as "electric ears" that connect him to an immense universe of sounds and signals. The onomatopoeic title indicates the audio fragmentation inherent to this situation, while the text situates us, in block text and capital letters, in the midst of this sensory experience:

LAST GASPS OF SLAUGHTERED PIGS IN CHICAGO ILLINOIS
ROAR OF NIAGARA FALLS AT THE CANADIAN BORDER
KREISLER RISLER D'ANNUNZIO FRANCE ETCETERA AND THE
JAZZ BANDS OF VIRGINIA AND TENNESSEE THE ERUPTION OF

⁴ Literally, "el estridentismo es hermano de leche de la radiofonía. ¡Son cosas de vanguardia!": Carlos Noriega Hope, "Notas del director," *El Universal Ilustrado*, April 5, 1923, 11. Ángel Miquel elaborates on the connection between radio and poetry during the 1920s in the chapter "Poemas en los inicios de la radio," from his *Disolvencias. Literatura, cine y radio en México (1900-1950)* (Mexico, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005), 171-195.

⁵ "Solitude / is a balcony / open onto the night. / Where might be the nest / of this mechanical song?" Manuel Maples Arce, *Las semillas del tiempo. Obra poética 1919-1980* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2013), 78.

POPOCATEPETL OVER THE VALLEY OF AMECAMECA [...] (29)

If “...IU IIIUUU IU...” is the most direct of the thirteen poems in its rendering of the chaotic radiophonic event, in other verses radio serves as a metaphor for the sensual, multisensory connection between the human subject and the natural world, whether depicted as outer space, the ocean or other environments. In “Marina”, for instance, “Transatlantic messages / rest on the seaweed / or frolic in the water with the marble fishes // Restless antennas shake off unfortunate atoms / that come and go” (35). In “Midnight Frolic”, the mysterious, seemingly radiophonic mutterings of “terrestrial voices / and of strange voices / faraway” coalesce into an imaginary celestial ball, causing the poet to reflect, with a kind of prosaic irony, “EVENING OUT / I’ll have to wear my tails” (13). In fact, much of the book is characterized by Kyn Taniya’s fluid interplay between earthly, watery and celestial spheres, mediated by overt acts of imagination: in “Landscape” it is the poet himself who “To entertain my beloved I filled the firmament / with constellations”, although the landscape of the title soon escapes his grasp (“The night’s flask fell from my hands”), converting him into an observer, contemplating “eternity” (19).

The Cardboard House edition of *Radio*, translated by Los Angeles-based poet David Shook and illustrated by Daniel Godínez-Nivón, includes two poems not in the original chapbook. The first is “Stadium,” dedicated to José Vasconcelos, who as Secretary of Public Education had promoted the construction of the National Stadium by architect José Villagrán García in 1923. According to a footnote, “‘Stadium,’ one of Kyn Taniya’s later, occasional poems, was written in anticipation of the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam” (51). This may be true, given the poet’s internationalist outlook, however, the Central American and Caribbean Games of October and November 1926 are a more immediate and obvious reference, given that the poem was written in October, when said games were getting underway. These would constitute the first international sports event held in Mexico, showcasing its recently constructed stadium, the very structure invoked in Kyn Taniya’s text.

Moreover, the poem itself refers to Central American and Caribbean, not European or global, athleticism: “80,000 people with a child’s soul / mentally play ball with the elastic bodies / of the rubber athletes, *Made in Central America*” (49); “Cuba, / Guatemala, / and México. Central American Brothers. / These dynamic legs, those tensed thighs, / are columns for the robust temples of the sea” (51). Indeed, Kyn Taniya’s “Stadium” both celebrates athleticism—in keeping with postrevolutionary

intellectuals' widely shared faith in sports as a healthy, democratic and unifying civic ritual—and ties the spectacle to Kyn Taniya's ecstatic, tropicalist aesthetic.⁶

The second uncollected poem, “All of Her,” is dedicated to the Argentine singer and actress Berta Singerman, on the occasion of her visit to Guatemala in 1927, when Kyn Taniya—or rather, Luis Quintanilla—occupied the post of ambassador to that country. Structurally much more linear (and rather less playful) than the poems of *Radio*, “All of Her” fragments its subjects into parts (eyes, soul, mouth, body, hands, arms, face), each described in lyrical non-rhyming couplets, only to reunite “ALL OF HER” as “soul. / Cosmic soul. Musical soul” (53), thus submerging the human in the vast and constantly expanding universe that is, ultimately, Kyn Taniya's preferred territory.

It is interesting to note that Shook, as he explains in his “Translator's Note,” first came into contact with Kyn Taniya via the online sound recording of “...IU IIIUUU IU...” produced by the Laboratory of Intermedia Creations (Laboratorio de Creaciones Intermedia) in Valencia, Spain. This interdisciplinary research group, based in the Sculpture Department of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia's Fine Arts Division, is headed by Miguel Molina Alarcón, whose research has focused on radio and sound art in relation to the historical avant-gardes, and who brings this focus to his and his group's sound art production. Their interpretation of “...IU IIIUUU IU...” forms part of the two-DVD set *Ruidos y susurros de las vanguardias/Noises and Whispers in Avant-Gardes*,⁷ a diverse compilation of works produced primarily in the first decade of the present century, but based on avant-garde pieces and ideas from 1909 through 1945.

Radio, with its inherent engagement with the “noises and whispers” of early wireless transmission, is a natural match for this twenty-first century project. In fact, almost simultaneously with Molina Alarcón's sound experiments, filmmaker and scholar Jesse Lerner made a 16mm film version of “...IU IIIUUU IU...” titled *T.S.H.*

⁶ Regarding the role of sport in the postrevolutionary period, see the exhibition catalogue coordinated by María Monserrat Sánchez Soler, *Formando el cuerpo de una nación. El deporte en el México posrevolucionario (1920-1940)* (México, DF: Consejo Nacional por la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo, 2012), with essays by Dafne Cruz Porchini, Deborah Dorotinsky Alperstein, Carlos Martínez Valle, and—on the Estadio Nacional—Juan Solís.

⁷ See Laboratorio de Creaciones Intermedia, *Ruidos y susurros de las vanguardias (1090-1945)* (Valencia: Dpto. de Escultura, Facultad de Bellas Artes de San Carlos, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, 2008), https://www.upv.es/intermedia/pages/laboratori/publicacions_publicacions/2008_ruidos_susurros_dvd/produccions_ruidos_susurros_doble_dvd_e.html

(2004), using Kyn Taniya's text along with the title of Maples Arce's poem about radio (or "wireless telegraphy") read on the air in 1923. In Lerner's film, the chaotic poem, declaimed by Juan José Gurrola, is accompanied by a collage of images that reflect Kyn Taniya's vision of the vertigo of the modern world as expressed through language and sound waves in permanent creative collision. Both film and sound recording highlight the visual and aural elements of Kyn Taniya's poetry, its ability to function almost as a series of cues, to leap off the printed page into the multidimensional world of the reader's imagination.

Shook writes on hearing "...IU IIIUUU IU...: "The poem struck me as so incredibly contemporary that I could hardly believe it had been written in 1924"; the recording inspired him to seek out Kyn Taniya's text for translation (59). The result is fluid, even if, inevitably, the bilingual reader may at times disagree with Shook's decisions. Rendering the idiom of 1920s Mexico City presents inherent complications, such as when the poet playfully mimics the hawkers announcing public transportation routes in the cry "VENUS AND MARS BY THE MOON / THERE'S ROOM!" ("Kaleidoscope," 15), a reference familiar even today in urban Mexico, but easily missed elsewhere. Nevertheless, Kyn Taniya's fragmentary, playful imagery works well in both languages. As Shook points out, "The poems in *Radio* reflect the fact that we all live between languages, that we all speak our own idiolects, that none of us speaks any language perfectly because there is no perfect language" (60-61).

Although the brevity of his "Translator's Note" and/or the desire to let the poetic work speak for itself perhaps keeps Shook from further reflection, the "contemporaneity" he finds in Kyn Taniya's work may have to do in part with the fact that we too, like the estridentistas, inhabit a world of rapidly expanding media technologies, in which forms of communication and expression recently imagined only in science fiction have abruptly become part of our everyday realities. Kyn Taniya's response to the strange sounds and experiences facilitated and emitted by the then-novel medium of radio resonate, to a certain extent, with the convergences and dissonances of the Internet age. The act of surfing an amorphous, seemingly infinite number of web pages and social networks is, although technically quite distinct, nevertheless experientially similar to that of channeling the fragmented, multilingual broadcasts that, in the early twentieth century, signaled the possible transcendence of national borders and a new era of disembodied, wireless and global communication.

Rather than simply rescuing a historical artefact, Shook and Cardboard House thus offer this new, bilingual edition of *Radio* as a poetic message for our

times. While Kyn Taniya's work has inspired media artists like Molina Alarcón and Lerner, his poetry as such is little known to contemporary readers, whether in Mexico or abroad. The Cardboard House publication of this seminal avant-garde text therefore provides a double service, making *Radio* available to a Spanish-speaking as well as an English-speaking readership.

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