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Review/Reseña

Braulio Muñoz, *The Peruvian Notebooks*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006.

Speaking for Yourself: Narrating the Experience of Immigration

José de Piérola

University of Texas—El Paso

It is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the story of immigration, yet, paradoxically, it is a kind of story that is far from being exhausted. From the 1960s on, waves of sons and daughters of the so-called “ethnic minorities” have been writing novels about their families, their difficult cultural negotiation and their complicated sense of belonging to two different worlds. More recently, novels ranging from Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* to Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* represent this strong current in North American fiction, a current which has a great advantage, and arguably an inherent weakness when faced with this task.

These writers have been either born in the United States or have come early enough to be raised with English as their primary language, a fact that gives them an in into the new culture. On the other hand, because they are receiving their parents' cultural heritage through a heavily negotiated regulatory mesh, the old country sometimes remains far and away. These writers have been speaking for the "other" represented by their parents.

The fact that first generation immigrants are usually not fluent in their adoptive language makes it difficult for them to attempt writing in it, let alone producing literary works. There are notable exceptions to this rule. Joseph Conrad left his old name—Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski—and his native Polish—both country and language—to adopt English for his literary career. In the United States the most notable example is Vladimir Nabokov who wrote half of his books in English. The most recent case is Milan Kundera, who had a long and productive career in his native Czech language before reluctantly moving to French, in which he has written his last three novels. To this, far from exhaustive list, we can easily add Ha Jin, the Chinese writer who writes in English. These writers, nevertheless, faced immigration from a heavily "lettered" social circle. Most Latin American immigrants, on the other hand, seem to come from a less favorable background. Coming from rigid, stratified societies, most of them belong to those levels in which the teaching of a second language is a mere curricular formality. Even for those coming from more privileged backgrounds, whose English is probably a good solid second language, the prospect of switching to English for their literary projects is daunting. This is perhaps why, in both cases, it is their children who write in English, it is their children who will speak for them.

Braulio Muñoz seems to defy such reality. *The Peruvian Notebooks*, as the note at the end of the book states, is his first novel written in English, and it is a story about a first generation immigrant. On a fatal day, Anthony Allday—the budding-writer narrator—remembers and reads about his life in Peru, his immigration to United States and the moments leading to his committing an unplanned murder. Born in Lima to Andean immigrants, Anthony Allday—née Antonio Alday Gutiérrez—grows up in the most impoverished areas of Lima: Tacora, a neighborhood where in the 1970s

stolen goods were sold out in the open; and La Parada, the central market of Lima where most workers earn their living by the sheer strength of their muscles. His father, unable to decide whether his life is ruled by blind fate or sheer luck, passes this uncertainty on to him, along with an admonition to avoid routine to all costs. Unwilling to accept this advice, Anthony swears on his father's deathbed that he will change, he will "become a different man" (25). He travels to Mexico, and crosses the border into the United States, an event he experiences as a rebirth. After hiding for a while, always fearful that "la migra" would come for him, he finally settles in Lima, Delaware. Some years go by, before he manages to get the Green Card which allows him to get a steady job as a watchman at a shopping mall, which seems ideally suited for him. From early on in his life, he has spent a great deal of time reading and writing, to his parents' despair, for they fail to see any value on an activity which does not contribute to the domestic economy. His new job would allow him to spend the "nights working and [the] days writing" (69). Life would seem to have rewarded his efforts, but a major complication ensues.

He begins to have doubts about his sense of self. Most Latin American immigrants feel an immediate connection with the Hispanic presence in the United States. Even some European immigrants, such as his long time friend Alex Sosa, a Portuguese, embrace whatever resembles their culture of origin. But Anthony not only changes his name to an Anglicized version, he also models himself upon Robert Wagner and Clark Gable in the hope that he would blend-in better. This need to "pass" is explained in the novel by dramatizing certain episodes of his childhood. Class oriented, and militantly racist, people in Lima constantly remind him of his family's Andean roots, denying him the recognition that someone born in Miraflores, for instance, would take for granted. His goal seems attained years later when he becomes an American Citizen because he feels that he has become "invisible" (269). This painful construction of a new identity crumbles when he visits Peru as a "tourist." In the present time of the story, he wonders whether he had managed to "convince himself [that] he was an American tourist" (90) back then. Even more, through all his years in the United States, a homophobic strand, planted in his mind in the

ruthless streets of Lima, remains strong. His assessment of his boss' worth, for instance, changes when he accidentally runs into him in a gay bar in Philadelphia.

But if he is trying to become invisible in the United States, in his letters to a few relatives in Peru he pretends to be a visible, successful entrepreneur who starts and manages several business. This other self increases the tension of his already conflicting existence. To assuage his tension he buys an expensive Corvette, even though the new possession does little to erase his fear that "the Antonio Alday Gutiérrez of Tacora would come out from under his skin to claim his body, his mind, his soul" (174). Believing in his letters, a cousin of his, Genaro, decides to migrate to the United States, expecting to work in one of Anthony's "businesses." Unable to come clear, Anthony reluctantly accepts his cousin's arrival. Perhaps planning to postpone explanations for later, he drives his Corvette to the airport. Unlike Anthony, who had crossed the border at night, running for his life, the cousin arrives in a regular American Airlines flight. It is only a matter of minutes before the cousin's naïveté begins rubbing Anthony the wrong way. To make matters worse, the Corvette is missing from the parking lot. They take a commuter train, where Genaro's innocent eyes, and the sense of complete trust, press Anthony even more. Unable to control himself, he walks out of the wagon onto the platform, but his cousin follows him. There, without even thinking about it, Anthony pushes him off the platform, and his cousin falls off a cliff. The novel ends when Anthony reviews the notebooks he has written over the years—when he aspired to be a writer—while he waits for the police to come for him.

This story is told in a complex, layered text. The main action of the novel happens around the year 1995, but it recounts episodes from the mid 1980s, when Anthony immigrated to the United States, episodes from the early 1970s when his parents emigrated from the Andes to Lima, and it even recounts an episode from 1879, the time of the Peruvian-Chilean war over a border dispute. These different timeframes are rendered in more than one voice. The story's present is told in third person, as well as in letters from and to Anthony. The past is narrated by the extracts of the notebooks Anthony has been writing over the years. Finally, the novel also

includes lyrics of Peruvian traditional songs, most of which are considered part of the national identity. This complex structure lends itself to show the contradictory process of identity formation, especially when immigrants negotiate their acceptance in a new country, while dealing with the heritage that at once anchors them and prevents them from complete assimilation. Even though Anthony is led to believe that he can invent “his own life” (108), as when he concocts a background that to the eyes of North Americans would make him seem a middle class Peruvian, he is never certain that his new identity has done much to make him into “a different man” (25), as he intended. Even more, he remains painfully aware that, though he might look like the “quintessential American” (188) to the eyes of some of his naïve relatives in Peru, he would never be able to fool other Peruvians, let alone be considered an American in the United States.

The poignancy of this kind of conflict does not come only from Anthony’s need to negotiate two cultures, a difficult enough proposition, but from the sense of rootlessness he has had his whole life. In fact, in the strict sense of the word, Anthony does not have a native culture he can fall back on. In Lima, he is seen as an Andean immigrant, yet he would be lost in the Andes. In Delaware, he is seen as a Peruvian immigrant, though he would not be able to pinpoint where in Peru his roots lie. Unlike second generation immigrants, who have a good sense of their received dominant culture, which in turn they can compare with the “other” culture brought by their parents, Anthony lives in a cultural limbo from which he would never be able to escape. Similarly, unlike second generation immigrants who, in spite of their difficulties dealing with two cultures, are able to take the best of each, Anthony has nothing to choose from. The novel, by capturing this unresolved tension, seems to suggest that no matter how hard they try, for some immigrants there is no hope of belonging anymore: they have paid the high price of identity for the illusory “better life.”

Of course, having an inside understanding of the ethos of the first generation immigrant is only part of the equation, because a novel, as an artifact made of words, depends on the language in which it is rendered. This is where the novel seems wanting. One has to accept the fact that writing about the Peruvian experience in this context requires a

reconciliation of Peruvian Spanish with American English, which is nothing short of reconciling two different world views. It is not only that some terms are difficult to translate, such as “caballo de paso,” which is variously rendered as “gaited horse,” “Peruvian paso horse,” or, in the novel, “Peruvian pacing horses” (215). There are also some terms which do not have an equivalent because the network of meanings is absent in the target language. “Callejón,” for instance, which could be loosely translated as alley, or ghetto, or slum, none of which would render the sense of a narrow alley in which a number of families live in a one or two room tiny house, usually sharing a common bathroom and a common source of running water. This alley, in spite of its link to poverty, has been romanticized in a number of Peruvian cultural objects, giving it the strange status of a non-exemplary urban myth. In this case, Muñoz leaves the term in Spanish, taking the risk that most non Peruvians will not understand its true meaning. Keenly aware of this, and perhaps giving in to the custom that seems to plague most Hispanic writers in the United States, in other instances Muñoz half resolves the problem by using the term in Spanish, followed by an approximate version in English, as in, “*la gente hace cojudeces*” followed by, “people do the weirdest things” (131), which not only fails to capture the expression, but misleads the reader. In the end, this problem is not resolved satisfactorily.

The novel is built in a very complex structure that, in addition to the layered narrative, uses flashbacks and flashforwards to keep suspense. Nevertheless, there is a sense that, because there is so much going on, some sections seem to be told in a hurry. This is not necessarily a problem, but it reduces the narrated events to mere actions performed by characters that do not come to life. Chapter 8, in the “One O’clock” section, for instance, in a mere two and a half pages the novel goes from Anthony’s round in the shopping mall, to his reminiscence of Hanna, Rosaura, Tom, Genaro and Ana María, all of which had been part of his life at one point or another. But none of these characters grows beyond their outline. It is true that the novel’s main structure follows Anthony’s mind as he does his rounds in the shopping mall, and then as he picks up his cousin, but when we remember someone even briefly, we are not bringing up just a name, or a short

image of that person, but a thick cloud of meanings and feelings associated with that person. The same could be said about whatever events of the past we remember.

These two problems—the issue of language and narrative—depend on one another, and in this novel arise from the fact that choosing to write in English, one chooses a different audience. Narratively speaking, one possible solution would have been to slow down the story giving it enough time to capture Peruvian Spanish by constructing the world that informs it. This requires an effort of self-conscious ethnography in which the narrator speaks of a world familiar to him, but aware that his discourse is a constant process of translation. That is what makes the effort of crossing the language barrier worthwhile; yet, at the same time, it is the biggest challenge, the risk of losing some of one's cultural heritage in the process. In Peru, the quintessential auto-ethnographer was José María Arguedas, who grew up in the Andes, reared by Quechua speaking surrogate maternal figures, yet chose to write in Spanish, which meant choosing to speak for many who had only been spoken of as an “other” by other Peruvian writers.

The Peruvian Notebooks, in spite of its few shortcomings, joins the illustrious company of other novels written by authors who left behind country and language. There is the case of the Peruvian writer Ventura García Calderón, who adopted French for most of his work, but he was born in France to a family of a Peruvian diplomat. Muñoz, on the other hand, adopts English as his literary language after having been raised in Peru. In addition, he is the first Peruvian writer to render in English the immigrant experience. It is a daunting task, it is full of pitfalls, it is bound to tax any writer, yet, it is worth the attempt for it is the only means for Peruvian immigrants to speak for themselves.