

Generation Zero: New Cuban Poetry

Our aim with this selection is to present to English-speaking readers work by Cuba's newest poets. In their country they're known as Generation Zero, which includes authors born after 1975 and publishing in this century. It's certainly a numerous group, as the title of their most complete anthology shows, *La isla en versos: Cien poetas cubanos* [The Island in Verse: One Hundred Cuban Poets] (2011 and 2013). But what stands out most is an overflow of excellence, a creative commotion, an enrichment to world poetry.

This brightness in Cuban verse has come about in the midst of the dismal social situation that has crisscrossed the island since the beginning of the nineties. The fall of European socialism meant Cuba lost 85 percent of its trade, sparking the deepest economic crisis in its history. Daily life became hell: lines, rationing, hunger, panhandling, prostitution, crime. The solution for many Cubans was summed up in two verbs: *resolver* and *inventar* (roughly translated as "getting by any way you can"), all this without necessarily respecting any ethical principle. Hundreds of thousands emigrated to the United States or wherever they could.

Generation Zero was forced to grow up under these kind of circumstances, with no opportunities or future. And its poetry embodies the crisis in countless ways, directly or indirectly. Like in Oscar Cruz's work, it focuses on new social marginality with severity, but also tenderness. It offers us its poetic anti-hero, its difficult relationship with community, its acknowledgement of life and writing as a struggle. This critical view of reality is, as Liuvan Herrera Carpio reveals, sometimes hopeless, and yet always based on an identification with the other.

The themes here are also pensive, with notable intellectual depth. Like in the case of Marcelo Morales Cintero, poetic writing turns principally to thought. Not philosophy, not ethics, not politics, but interaction between reason and feeling. In this interpellation of reality, at all its levels, edges blur, categories like objective and subjective, private and public, stop making sense. What binds the poetic subject to the other, to otherness, is love, transcending family or sex.

Another constant is the ambivalent positioning before both cultural and political tradition. On the one hand, Luis Yussef's lyrical hero is positive and identifies politically, but in cultural terms. His understanding of geography and history goes far beyond national borders, but the universal can show up in a local coffeehouse, become part of bitter daily life. On the other, as in the case of Legna Rodríguez Iglesias, there's a negative discourse of difference, unafraid of being openly political.

A major standout of this poetry is the way it represents the feminine condition. In this regard, Jamila Medina Ríos' work offers a soaring level of poetic elaboration. There are no inhibitions here, moving beyond traditional feminism and timeworn lists of women's body parts, to give voice to a sexuality that challenges the norm. With indisputable grace and personality, Rodríguez Iglesias' poetry takes all this on as well, reluctant to make one single concession, with pleasure and suffering no matter the cost.

Themes intertwine, appear, and later disappear, like in our own minds, our own lives. Ultimately, this poetry expresses a critical consciousness, growing from childhood roots, not forgetting to be self-critical, not limited to the personal. In this way, it challenges every ideology, whether idealist or materialist, rightist or leftist. What come to the fore are a rejection of solipsism and an affirmation of the invention of reality, a dialogue unwilling to sell out to populism or the market, and the need for a participative reader.

This thematic boldness, never seen before in Cuban poetry, is complemented by no less daring work with language. In what seems to be a generational trademark, Sergio García Zamora alternates between prose poems, since they lend themselves well to reflection, and neo-Avant-Garde verse poems, because of the intentional distribution of the text on the page and the abandoning of upper-case letters and punctuation. Morales Cintero, Herrera Carpio, Medina Ríos and Rodríguez Iglesias each do the same. Just like with all self-respecting poetry, theirs is a search for another mode of expression. Indeed, here there is a wide range of styles. While Yussef uses an expanding verse, capable of representing different planes of reality at once, Javier Marimón Miyares opts for one that is synthetic, neo-baroque, where the hyperbaton rules. And while for Morales Cintero the poem stops being a unit of poetic writing, giving up its place to the book, and verse draws carefully, elegantly closer to prose, in Cruz what prevails is a poetry that draws closer to the colloquial and song. In each case, language is refined, cultured, and at the same time popular, and the rhythm that distinguishes it as poetry is preserved.

All in all, these new Cuban poets offer a moving testimony to their generation, trapped between rigid revolutionary principles and the no less rigid politics of the counter-revolution. They do so without renouncing reflection or the dialogical, with a particular way of perceiving the world and an undeniable expressive wisdom. Their poetry is bursting with sensibility and brilliance; it loosens its tongue with grace and courage and reveals an unbreakable commitment to both truth and poetic creativity. This is not only poetry that is well thought out and well written, it is, above all, a writing of its own.