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# Reproductive Freedom: The Voice of Women in Margarita Cota-Cárdenas's "A una Madre de Nuestros Tiempos"

Clara LOMAS

The poem "A una Madre de Nuestros Tiempos" by Margarita Cota-Cárdenas (published in *La Palabra* in 1980) deals with one of the predominant concerns in a feminist analysis of the productive and reproductive function of women in society: reproductive freedom. The literary treatment of this issue by Cota-Cárdenas calls into question cultural and social constraints that deeply affect women's freedom to decide about their own bodies. The particular structure and elaboration of the poem reveal an evolutionary process that becomes a potential source of consciousness raising for both a mother and an entire social group. This study is an attempt to explore the poem's formal quality and to examine its semantic possibilities.

## A UNA MADRE DE NUESTROS TIEMPOS

perdónanos

sé que éramos tus lotos  
beso tus arrugas      no llores ya  
todas aguantaron  
y yo  
yo no pude  
fracasé  
qué tan frágil es el honor  
y yo  
yo no quise  
no acepté  
dejaste tu imagen en mi sedita bordada

dame un beso            y perdóname  
                               deja de lágrimas  
                               madre        raza  
                               y yo  
                               no quería que una débil tarde  
 vieras tus antiguas penas bordadas en mi cara  
                               repetidas  
                               cinceladas  
 mientras yo  
                               yo quise conocer al ID  
                               volar altísimo  
                               definir estas entrañas  
                               que he dejado  
                               y        librarme de leyendas  
                               yaaaaaaaaa  
                               corté los hilos de gasa  
 sécame la sangre  
                               porque yo  
                               sin vientre ahora  
                               yo ya no pude  
                               que mis hijas y sus hijas y sus hijas no  
 dolorosa        danos tu sonrisa de niña  
                               quinceañera  
 di que comprendes  
                               resucita conmigo  
 ya era tiempo  
                               de abortar los mitos  
                               de un sólo sentido

The title of the poem designates the addressee: "una madre." The use of the indefinite article "una" simultaneously denotes a singular addressee, perhaps known, and another, undetermined addressee. This indefinite mother/receptor, however, is placed within a definite/determined historical framework: "de nuestros tiempos." The reference to a specific temporal space indicates the separation established with the past. The poem, then, addresses the present generation. While at the beginning, one could assume the existence of an intended singular addressee, this indefinite mother unfolds,

almost midway through the poem, into an entire social group: "madre raza."

Although the poem does not follow any stanzaic conventions, it is divided into three thematic sections. The first consists of the conscious rupture with the oppressive past. The second focuses on the explanation to the addressee of the reasons for that rupture, and the third is the invitation to change, to the development of a new perspective, to a new consciousness in terms of the role of women in society.

From the first word of the poem, the tone of the poetic voice is established both formally and semantically: "perdónanos." By using the imperative, the speaker assumes a collective voice and directs herself to the addressee in an informal, yet direct and urgent manner. This first command requesting forgiveness—from the known, familiar addressee who inspires confidence—places the reader within the dialectical structure that will govern the rest of the poem: the relationship between the individual/collective poetic voice and the individual/collective addressee. At one level, the speaker appears as a single, unique, and very personal voice, a solitary call articulated by one person who has deviated from the norm: "todas aguantaron / y yo / yo no pude." This solitary deviation is accentuated by the constant reiteration of the singular first person pronoun, "yo," whose use in the Spanish language places the emphasis on that first person as the actor, the sole agent of the action: "y yo / yo no pude...y yo / yo no quise...y yo / no quería...yo / yo quise...yo ya no pude..." However, at another level, the poem itself is framed by the use of the imperative mood in the first person plural; it begins "perdónanos / sé que éramos tus lotos"; toward the end, the closure begins with "danos tu sonrisa de niña." Therefore, while the poetic voice seeks to reveal the genuine sentiments of an individual, simultaneously, it dialectically reveals what could be its antithesis or contradiction—the collective character who assumes that same voice. A mutual, yet contradictory, interrelationship develops between the two voices as they function as an individual within a collective. Although the message emitted may appear to be that of a single woman, it is in fact shared by many women. This collective voice is suggested in the line "sé que éramos tus lotos." The flowers, the natural off-spring, the female children are in fact the many speaking as one. Therefore, the in-

dividual/collective daughter addresses the individual/collective/raza.

What, then, could be the message sought by the individual/collective daughter to be transmitted to the individual/collective mother/raza? A search for change is designated by the central antinomy posed from the beginning of the poem through the notion of past juxtaposed to present. The verbal forms in the past tense enunciate the actions performed by the speaker and suggest a will to reject that situation of the "hijas/lotos": "*sé que éramos tus lotos*" (my italics). In other words, in the past we were like flowers and offspring of beauty whose long life's goal was precisely to reproduce.

History reveals that with the division of labor and, consequently, the creation of patriarchal and monogamous nuclear family, the role of women is defined by exclusion from social production and limitation to services rendered inside the closed and private sphere of the home. At an ideological level, specific social codes are developed which maintain that women find their most fulfilling expression—within this private sphere—in the physical reproduction of the human race: the production of children. Religious, social, and political institutions legitimize and sanctify this "profession" to the extreme of defining a "complete" woman as one who has given birth. Consequently, women who are not mothers—whether due to physical incapacity or by choice—may be ostracized and categorized as somehow incomplete, deficient women. Acceptance by women of this socioeconomic and moral imposition is translated into "harmonic" participation in patriarchal society. History has witnessed, however, that limiting women to unsalaried services within the private sphere has had serious repercussions: among many others, alienation, economic dependency, and domestic slavery.

In our communities, we find that ethical codes inherited from our cultural traditions, some deeply rooted in the Catholic church, have contributed to women's domestic slavery. The poetic voice in this poem transmits a consciousness awakening to this oppressive situation, which is based on the reproductive definition imposed on women. This voice refers to the daughters' reaction as welcoming, tolerating, and resigning of themselves to the socially imposed moral codes: "todas aguantaron." Following immediately, she counteracts this with her own negation, rejection, and conscious resistance ("yo no pude... / yo no quise / no acepté") to the perspective of the well-established and respected sector of society

that sees her dissension as a disappointment, a disgrace, a failure: "fracasé." However, through the interjection which follows, "qué tan frágil es el honor," the speaker projects a contemptuous reply that questions the moral codes of dignity, self-worth, and good reputation set forth by society. It is precisely the rejection of these fixed moral codes on one level and her love, respect, and veneration for the mother/*raza*'s feelings at another that create a dilemma for the speaker. She could find herself also forced to reject her mother/*raza* for constituting a perpetuating element in a cultural tradition that oppresses women. One must remember, however, that at the beginning of the poem, the line "beso tus arrugas" metaphorically alludes to honor and respect for the procreating image of physical and social life, the mother/*raza* whose forgiveness is sought. Also metaphorically conveyed is the imprint left on the speaker by the mother's sacrifice, "dejaste tu imagen en mi sedita bordada." The allegorical allusion to a religious scene could seem to affirm acceptance of guilt and a possible desire for conversion; however, it acquires ironic significance as the poem evolves and it becomes evident that the plea for forgiveness is primarily asking for understanding and secondarily for a renewal of ideas and perspective of the mother/*raza*: "no quería que una débil tarde / vieras tus antiguas penas bordadas en mi cara / repetidas / cinceladas."

The displacement of weakness, frailty, onto the evening insinuates those difficult moments of uncertainty in the mother's old age. The qualification of the mother's suffering as not only old but ancient alludes to the antiquity of the pain transmitted for generations. By extension, the image makes reference to the inherited and inculcated cultural tradition which leaves its mark on the lives of the following generations as these same traditions are consistently practiced without substantial change. Therefore, the speaker proposes change founded on an introspective look at herself, "yo quise conocer el ID." She longs to know her deepest unconscious instincts to discern and separate these from those external elements which are socially imposed. With introspective exploration she proposes to overcome the imposed obstacles, "volar altísimo," and take concrete action, "definir estas entrañas."

The poem's ascending movement reaches its culminating point with the revelation of concrete action. The poetic voice manifests a move toward decisive control over her own body, her own function as woman, at both the personal and social levels. Having acquired

decisive power to define her reproductive needs, the process of liberation from legends—fabricated to define and control women—is begun. The prolonged “ya” emphasizes the cry of saturation. Here the rupture, the break with abstract tradition, materializes with the image of cutting “los hilos de gasa.” This image also suggests the end of sterilization surgery.

The imperative voice again speaks directly to the addressee, this time asking for participation: “*sécame la sangre.*” The tradition that could have been followed by future generations is broken with this conscious action, “*yo ya no pude / que mis hijas y sus hijas y sus hijas no.*” The qualifying adjective that describes this experience initiates the poem’s last section: “*dolorosa.*” Following this explanatory section, the tone changes to requesting of the mother/*raza*, not only approval, but understanding, frank and natural, as if renewing life: “*danos tu sonrisa de niña / di que comprendes.*”

The poetic voice becomes even more emphatic, decisive, and powerful in its invitation to the addressee to be born anew, with new comprehension, new consciousness of women’s right to assume control of themselves, to define their own reproductive function: “*resucita conmigo / ya era tiempo / de abortar los mitos / de un sólo sentido.*” The mother/*raza* is asked to interrupt the process and development of an oppressive tradition—that has not recognized, much less respected, women’s perspective—to destroy it, abort it.

By means of her poetic expression, Cota-Cárdenas penetrates the intimate sentiments of the individual/collective daughter regarding her social function. With the selection of words that indicate singular or plural person and the elaboration made with them—thereby creating an internal dialectical tension—the poem alludes to the dichotomy of the concern of this voice, both individual and social, as it belongs to a daughter and to all women as well. It should be noted that the selection and combination of words—which constitute and elaborate the poetic unity—may or may not be a conscious effort by the writer. The fundamental message of the poem in its totality and, as discussed, in its formal structure and internal thematic tensions also provide the dynamics for poetic expression of one of women’s primary preoccupations: the freedom to procreate or not. The development of the poem throughout the thematic divisions—rupture with the past, explanation, and invitation for change—is particularly important, due to its

delineation of a process of awareness, subtly yet effectively articulated. The call toward the addressee, mother/*raza*, is not one that inspires resentment, hatred, or antagonism. On the contrary, the poetic voice is a call manifesting respect, a will to inform/explain, and finally, it invokes reevaluation of cultural traditions which impose repressive myths on women.

Although women's biological capacity to reproduce is not by itself the only cause of women's exploitation and inferior social position, it has been utilized throughout history as pretext for and justification of their oppression. Mothers, women, ethnic groups, and society in general perpetuate the dominant patriarchal ideology by not offering the opportunity for women to define their own productive and reproductive roles within society. As any subjugated ethnic group struggles for self-determination, women struggle, among many other things, for the freedom not to have their reproductive function controlled by a society that does not assume responsibility for the consequences. "A una Madre de Nuestros Tiempos" questions the oppressive ideology that becomes evident, at times, in a mother's individual attitudes and, at other times, in the social and political actions of the "*raza*" and society in general.