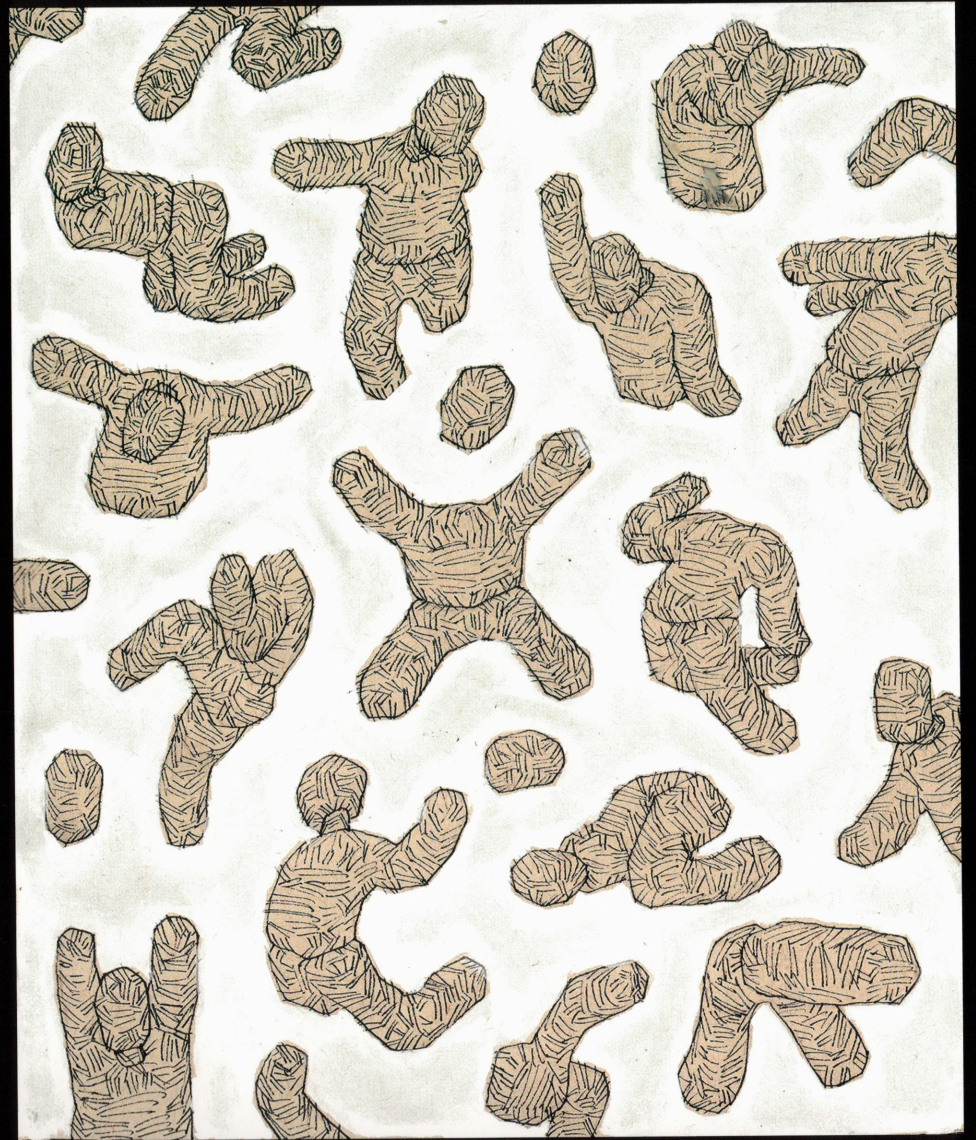


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The Poetic Syncretisms of Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's *Cenzontle*

Castillo, Marcelo Hernandez. *Cenzontle*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2018.

Walt Whitman may be known for "I contain multitudes" but Latinx people live those words in a way that Whitman could have never possibly fathomed. Latinxs epitomize fluidity; we exist on all points along spectrums of race, gender, class, religion, political ideology, and consumer habits. There is no monolithic taxonomy that encapsulates all that we are. While agents of power continually attempt to impose borders on us, we exist as living bridges.

We have developed our bodies into bridges as a survival tool. As imperialism has tried to erase Latinx people from history books and the surface of the Earth, our people have had to devise our own strategies of both asserting a collective identity and preserving cultural histories and legacies. Our response is the art of syncretism: the act of blending different religious and cultural systems together to create an entirely new one. Indigenous tribes of the Americas first used this process to practice their own rites without punishment. They hid these rites inside the conqueror's symbols and systems. Over time we extended the process to language, food, song, art, fashion, and political systems. Syncretism, hybridism, sampling, collage, the mosaic, the mash-up, the sancocho—these are all acts of blending and mixing that form a unifying principle of the Latinx experience. Antonio Benitez-Rojo, in his seminal work on Latino and Caribbean Literary Theory *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Experience*, characterizes syncretism as

... not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences. What happens is that, in the melting pot of societies that the world provides, syncretic processes realize themselves through an economy in whose modality of exchange the signifier of *there*—of the Other—is consumed ("read") according to local codes that are already in existence; that is, codes from *here*.

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's debut *Cenzontle* is a syncretic experiment of consuming the juxtaposition of images and systems from the "there" of El Norte and re-imagining them through the eclectic "here" of the Latinx body. The text experiments with this metaphor of Latinx body as bridge and house of multitudes, a document of what it means to live as hybrid Being.

In *Cenzontle's* "Notes," Hernandez Castillo explains that *cenzontle* is the Spanish word for mockingbird, the origin of the word is in the Nahuatl language, and it refers to one who holds four hundred voices. The *cenzontle* becomes the symbol and the lens through which to read the poems: as a single body with four hundred voices performing four hundred songs. The synopsis on the back cover of the collection identifies Hernandez Castillo as "living in a queer brown undocumented body within a heteronormative marriage." Here the poet announces himself as a syncretic being. Hernandez Castillo himself is living multitudes, many voices. His queer identity is "consumed" through a heteronormative relationship. As an "undocumented" citizen, the "here" of his homeland is read through the lens of the "there" of the U.S. where he now lives, transcending the border that split him. His body is now the bridge between them.

In the titular poem, Hernandez Castillo establishes the central conflict of living as a bridge—as "queer brown undocumented body":

between its bone and its name
between its color and its weight

the night was heavier
than the light it hushed

The poet announces the importance of that idea of living "between," for the Latinx body has to learn to live in between countries, languages, identities. The *cenzontle* is in the act of expressing its many songs that the poet calls both "wound" and "beginning," and in this act of singing with many voices, the bird's beak becomes contorted, "twisted / into a small circle of awe." This contortion is painful, but it also produces something wholly original. The poem concludes: "You called it cutting apart, I called it song." The pain of being twisted and torn apart by the many voices within the single body might be seen only as a destructive force, but the poet sees this splitting as an opportunity to perform beauty. The bird as undocumented queer brown body refuses to deny any part of their splintered selves. Instead, they will work to pull the parts back together.

This contortion is painful, as is the reconstruction that follows, which requires that disparate materials be cut into fragments that can be stitched together. Four of the five "Origin" poems in the collection employ this technique of stitching together fragments to create a unified narrative. They are organized into unnumbered sections, where each section is a fragment. Some of the fragments woven together are written in different voices, as in "Origin of Birds." In others, like "Origin of Theft," the fragments are each a variation that unpacks the ambiguous meanings of the word "theft."

The poem "Chronology of Undocumented Mothers" also uses this cutting and stitching method. Here the plurality of "mothers" is given a new voice through the unification, the reconstruction, of their stories. Historically, splitting also refers to the U.S. annexation of a large portion of Mexico as a result of its policy of Manifest Destiny, which cleaved entire communities and families in half along an arbitrary border.

To contend with this separation the halves are re-stitched, syncretized into a new system or "costume" inside which the body can perform. As the book progresses, *Cenzontle* makes transparent this desire to experiment with role playing. In "Origin of Prayer and Eden," Hernandez Castillo closes with the lines, "We pretended to be deer / pretending to play dead." The poet is all too aware of both the instinctive and social desire to pretend, to put on masks and perform different identities. In "Immigration Interview with Don Francisco" and "Immigration Interview with Jay Leno" the speaker is interviewed by two famous talk show hosts—the talk show host is itself a mask, a role. The poet performs the roles of interviewer and interviewed, expressing his "multitudes" through choice of talk show hosts. Don Francisco is famous throughout Latin America on Spanish-speaking television and Jay Leno is known for his tenure as host of *The Tonight Show* in the English-speaking United States. The poet is in dialogue with, and himself a product of, two continents.

Hernandez Castillo makes clear that the voices in his *cenzontle* are not only racially and ethnically multitudinous, they also express a variety of gender roles. The book depicts a marriage where genders are freely inhabited by both members of this "hetero" marriage, as evidenced by a poem's encompassing title: "Musical in Which You and I Play All the Roles." Later, the poem "First Gesture in Reverse" opens with the vulnerable yet playful statement:

I am lying on the floor
in a pair of blue panties
that I borrowed
without telling.

In the fifth stanza he asserts, "I could be a bride," a sentiment echoed at the start of the very next poem, "Gesture and Pursuit":

I want to be the bride days later
when she is no longer the bride,
combing her hair in the mirror.

The poet is in a "heteronormative marriage" but the book itself makes clear that normativity is under investigation. As the creation of political and geographical borders sever identities and create pain, so does the cleaving of gender identity into a rigid binary. Hernandez Castillo's impulse to inhabit many voices has the aim of ending the suffering caused by a world that tries to impose rigid identity molds onto individuals. As he declares in "Century of Good Metal with Three Prayers": "Let this be the last time / a boy like me cuts himself open, / trying to find the swans / flapping their wings inside him."

"Gesture and Pursuit" is the performance of the role of "bride" by the male occupant of the "hetero" marriage, in which the poet distills:

All I want is to run out of a church,
throw a bouquet,
and hop in a car

like my mother always wanted.

In "Origin of Prayer and Eden," Hernandez Castillo writes: "At first no one knew what a man or woman really was." For the speaker, marriage is an act of syncretism. Coupling is the opportunity to blend, to mix, to perform those many voices. These roles were always intended to be played by whoever wanted to inhabit them, a return to when no one "knew what a man or woman really was." In "Miss Lonelyhearts," the poem that immediately follows "Gesture and Pursuit," the speaker and his partner fully realize this return through their lovemaking as they take turns playing the roles of "man" and "woman," at one point even pretending to be "deer drinking water at the pond." The act becomes an opportunity to wear non-traditional roles and embrace their multivalent selves.

When any of these selves are threatened, as in the poem "Wetback," the response is to defuse the threat with acts of love. The poem opens:

After the first boy called me a wetback
I opened his mouth and fed him a spoonful of honey.

Later in the poem, he strings "a necklace out of the bees that died in my yard" for the boy. Both the insults from the boy and the speaker's act of resistance are a kind of role-playing, a performance.

Perhaps we were on a stage which meant it was a show,
which meant our only definition of a flower was also a flower.

The speaker's multitudes see the possible responses to the racial slur, know that they can "rip open his throat" or "blow him a kiss," yet instead he opts to "Let my bare back remind him of every river he's swam in" and then tells the boy "his Spanish name." He offers pleasure instead of reciprocal violence as solution, another form of putting things back together.

To be brown, queer, and undocumented is to be subject to specific external acts of violence. But sometimes the violence has been performed not by an outsider. Rather it is inflicted by someone much closer to the body, like a family member. In the startling poem "Sugar," we witness the speaker being both fed then beaten by his father. He is first offered the sweetness of a peach, followed by a whipping with a belt the father calls "Daisy." The instrument used to perform violence is given a feminine name within a masculine exchange:

And after it's over, we both know we have become men.
Him for the beating,
and me for taking his beating.

Inflicting pain becomes a rite of passage for the speaker and an affirmation of masculinity for his father. Hernandez Castillo says, "My father's hands will love a man at the first sign of weakness." Masculinity here conflates the transference of suffering with the act of loving. This poem and "Wetback" are separated by only a single poem. "Wetback" is still lingering in the reader's mind (and ear) when they get to "Sugar," leaving the impression that the speaker's instinct to reciprocate the racist boy's slurs with sweetness is born from having been taught to see violence or the transmission of suffering as a man's way

of expressing love. Traditional masculinity struggles with intimacy, sublimating the feeling through conventions of violence. "Sugar" harmonizes with some of the work of Jericho Brown and Danez Smith in its illustration of violence performed as masculine affection.

The book's blending of songs, its experiments in assuming positions, ultimately is an expression of radical empathy. In poems concerning personal violence, the poet exhibits a profound ability to empathize with those who hurt him. It is through deep syncretism of identities, histories, and languages that both complexity and intimacy is gained. "Origin of Birds" marks this intimacy with its dual epigraphs. The first details the number of farm workers poisoned every year by pesticides. The second contrastingly quotes officials from the Center for Disease Control advertising pesticides as beneficial to humans because they save crops. Leave one out and no truth is revealed. But by putting the two in conversation, we are exposed to hypocrisy, to the dangers of presenting a single story. This tension is delineated in the poem through the voices of a doctor and a farm worker, cancer-stricken from working in a pesticide-ridden farm. The doctor, like the epigraph, flatly diminishes the harm the chemicals cause the workers when he tells Ramón it's "only" cancer:

Yes, your hair will fall off,
and the chemo will burn.

Then all will be good, Ramón.

The speaker, for whom Ramón is the first man he ever kissed, is left to witness Ramón's slow and painful dissolution as nurses collect his blood, doctors dig inside his body "as if looking for lost change," and crop dusters continue to spray their poison. In keeping with his instinct, the poet creates a form of healing by reconstructing the physical suffering into a metaphysical image of beauty, depicting Ramón's end as a "flock of birds" being born from his mouth.

Birds flying from the mouth recur in "Dulce" (which means "sweet"), in which the speaker "gather[s] the voices of strangers mouthing my name." At the poem's midpoint, we see the speaker's intention to "eat everything I love / from its edge to its center." Consumption is, as is made clear by Antonio Benitez-Rojo, another means of syncretism. What is consumed is digested in the body and converted into energy. The poem ends with a couplet that articulates this syncretic cycle of splitting and re-merging:

I think about the cock that's never been in my mouth
to shred this kind of quiet and piece it back together again.

In *Cenzontle*, violence is subsumed by love through the syncretic act. The Latinx, immigrant, queer body is healed through the consumption and unification of the strangers that mouth the poet's name. Through consumption, taking into the body, the "Other" as defined by Benitez-Rojo is suffused until it is no longer an "Other." Once suffused, something entirely new and wholly different can be invented. For the poet, this is not mere metaphor, as the book's latter poems concern becoming a father. Prior notions of the violence of "cutting" are transformed from malevolence to one of giving life, of creation:

I cut the cord and
split you from the child.

New life also splits the new mother, half of her "raptured in song," her other half existing as a "biography of grief." The birth of the child causes two splits, the multitudes in the Latinx body continually multiplying and syncretizing until the cenzontle contains the voice of all. This new life inherits the grief of the parents, but it also inherits the multitudes the parents have lived as well as their ability to syncretize them into something previously unimaginable. The dangers the parents faced still exist for the child, but the child will be equipped with hundreds of voices to survive them.

Resurging border conflicts and far right movements across the Americas have fueled a movement of innovative and vital Latinx authors such as Vanessa Angélica Villarreal, Raquel Salas Rivera, and Javier Zamora. With this book's lyricism and visionary syncretisms of gender and ethnic identity, Marcelo Castillo Hernandez's is a breathtaking contribution to this wave of recent Latinx poetry. This poetry is a strange loop of border crossings—geographical, psychological, social, racial, and gender—into and out of violence and ecstasy, a configuring and reconfiguring of Latinx identity. *Cenzontle* is a book of songs within songs about the transnational beings—the unexpected product of U.S. Imperialism—amidst songs about the end of borders and binaries, songs of undocumented mothers and exploited farm workers, about the myriad routes to love, songs of birth and rebirth. It is a meta-chorus that achieves a most radical empathy for the countless voices that live in the mouth of a single bird.