Intertextuality in the poetry of Ulalume González de León

In 1973, Ulalume González de León published her first volume of poetry. She called it Plagio, or in English, *Plagiarism*. In 1980, her second volume appeared: *Plagio II*. Then in 2001: *Plagios*, which combined the two volumes and included her commentary.

In the 2001 edition, she describes “plagiarism”—what she means by it—as “the recognition of a convergence.” She says plagiarism is “the product of a digestion of that which is taken in from others, ingested like any food, in our body, that is to say, in another language, another poetry.” Yet it is poetry that has never been seen before, “transformed by that accumulation of convergent data at whose point of intersection I find myself.” This image of entirely new poetry arising from prior poetry is echoed by José Emilio Pacheco, one of Mexico’s most distinguished poets, in his “Dissertation on Poetic Propriety.” “[A]lthough it may feed on it, hoard it, plunder it,/ the best work of this last half-century/ has nothing in common with Poetry as it was known/ by scholars and sages of another time.”

For González de León, “plagiarism” is the inescapable interjection of other writers and other speakers in one’s own writing and speaking. It is the “plagiarism” of Eliot in “The Waste Land.”

Like “The Waste Land,” the poems in *Plagios* are filled with “fractured quotations, phantom voices,” examples of what French literary theorist and semiotician Julia Kristeva called “intertextuality,” a term she coined at the end of the 1960s. “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another [text].”

Along with Kristeva, Roland Barthes, another French literary theorist and semiotician, had much to say about the interconnectedness of texts:

[T]he text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture. […]

[T]he writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them; if he wants to express himself, at least he should know that the internal “thing” he claims to “translate” is itself only a readymade dictionary whose words can be explained (defined) only by other words, and so on ad infinitum […]

Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, Efraín Barradas, describes at length González de León’s use of “readymades” in his essay “Ulalume González de León or the Poetry of the ‘Readymade.’” The readymade, in which the artist takes something “already existing and with a minimum [of change] transforms it into something else and, in doing so, creates a work of art,” is an ancient technique that came to prominence in 1917 when Marcel Duchamp turned a urinal on its side, signed it, and called it “art.” It is the kind of technique that calls into question basic definitions of art and aesthetics. Professor Barradas finds this use of pre-
existing material not in the least unethical or plagiaristic. “[T]here is no robbery, no deception or plagiarism” in the poetry of González de León.iv

Intertextuality—“readymades” being one example—is the guiding principle in Plagios, an idea that stretches back in time, long before Kristeva and Barthes and Eliot and Duchamp, at least as far back as the Roman playwright Terentius, in the second century BCE, who, in the Prologue to his play “The Eunuch,” excused his use of characters created by an earlier playwright. “If this is a fault, the fault is the ignorance of the Poet; not that he intended to be guilty of theft.” This excuse, however, soon gives way to a justification:

But if it is not permitted us to use the same characters as others, how can it anymore be allowed to represent hurrying servants, to describe virtuous matrons, artful courtisans, the gluttonous parasite, the braggart captain, the infant palmed off, the old man cajoled by the servant, about love, hatred, suspicion? In fine, nothing is said now that has not been said before. Wherefore it is but just that you should know this, and make allowance, if the moderns do what the ancients used to do.v

It is what José Emilio Pacheco called the “unlimited fertility” of intertextuality that allows literatures to build upon prior literatures in order to produce “new” and “unique” works of art. Octavio Paz said something similar to this in his essay, “Translation: Literature and Letters.” “Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation.” According to Pacheco, by calling her poetry plagiarism, the “Ulalumian poetics” announces itself as both “humble and provocative.” Humble because it draws the reader’s attention to the presence or influence of other texts and other authors. Provocative because it invites the reader to reflect on the poet and the nature of creativity. “Everything is creation,” Pacheco said, “because […] knowing how to select is creation.”vi

In her Preface to Plagios, González de León says, “Everything is plagiarism. Everything has already been said.” But she also says, “Everything is creation: I choose to say even what has already been said, which is different now, transformed by that accumulation of convergent data at whose point of intersection I find myself.” In other words, everything in her poetry, as in all new literature, is the same as and different from prior literature. To understand the “plagiarism” that underlies the poetics of Plagios it is essential to understand this aspect of intertextuality.

To further help her readers grasp what she means by plagiarism, González de León explains how, while writing her poem “Cuarto incomunicado” (“Solitary room”), she remembered a poem by Colombian poet Eduardo Carranza. In his poem, “El extranjero” (“The Foreigner”), and in hers, she tells us, “something similar happens.” Here are the first two stanzas of González de León’s poem:

Solitary Room

I can’t remember that room
that I see only from outside from the white
from a winter that ends in their window
in their celebration of others

I can’t remember it
I move closer to the glass

inside

where the colors begin
Against the burning fire I see
their two bodies from the back
their hands joined

and I rap on the glass
so that they might turn their faces toward me

Now, here is the beginning of Carranza’s poem:

The Foreigner

I appear to this memory from the outside
like one who comes from far away
after many years
to his ancient house
and climbs the street walking almost with his heart
and almost furtive in the night
he approaches an illuminated window
and looks from outside at one familiar, so alien,
looks at one he knows well, so foreign,
the two there inside, as though bewildered

The similarities are apparent: the couple inside the house, someone looking in through a window at night. However, in the Carranza poem the perspective remains singular, looking in at one’s past from outside, while in the González de León poem the image is extended, the perspective doubled. In the final stanza of González de León’s poem the “I” that began the poem, the “I” standing outside the window, suddenly becomes the “I” of the woman inside, seated by the fire:

I hear calling at the window
and I turn towards her towards the white street
where someone catches sight of us from the cold
where someone already turns her back on us
—mistaken outsider

With this shift the “I” outside the window and the “I” inside the room are equated: they are the same woman separated by time looking at herself through the window, though only from behind. From the perspective of the future self who begins the poem (which is also the present), the past self looks away, just as, from the perspective of the past self (which is also the present), the future self looks away. And though they do not see one another’s faces, the “I” inside the room finally hears the “I” outside the window rapping on the glass: she hears her future-self trying to
catch her attention. But this future self is a “mistaken outsider” who doesn’t belong, who “already turns her back.” And yet something passes between them, something experienced in the fleeting moment they all but share. It’s an intoxicating image.

González de León says she accepted a “transmission” from Carranza’s poem because “that poem fit into the panorama of my obsessions,” namely, a double-perspective in which someone from outside is looking in, or the past and future are being seen simultaneously, and her obsession with rooms. (Six of the poems in Plagios have the word cuarto (room) in the title, and the action in many of her poems takes place inside a room.)

Another of her poems, she tells us, was “inspired by the famous dialogue between the White Knight and Alice” in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass, and by an essay by Professor of Philosophy Roger W. Holmes. In a manner similar to the way she reimagines Carranza’s poem, González de León extends or “corrects” the conversation between the knight and Alice. Here is the passage from Through the Looking Glass:

“The name of the song is called ‘Haddocks’ Eyes.’”

“Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?” Alice said, trying to feel interested.

“No, you don’t understand,” the Knight said, looking a little vexed. “That’s what the name is called. The name really is ‘The Aged Aged Man.’“

“Then I ought to have said ‘That’s what the song is called?’” Alice corrected herself.

“No, you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The song is called ‘Ways and Means’: but that’s only what it’s called, you know!”

“Well, what is the song, then?” said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

“I was coming to that,” the Knight said. “The song really is ‘A-sitting On A Gate’: and the tune’s my own invention.”

González de León’s poem, “Metalenguajes” (“Metalanguages”), essentially repeats the knight’s side of the conversation, with one important addition:

Metalanguages

The White Knight said:
—The name of the song
   is called “Cod’s Eyes.”

The Knight said:
—But the name of the song
   is “The Old Man.”

The Knight said:
—And the song is called
“Ways and means.”

But the song, which was it?
The Knight said:
—“Seated on a Crossing Gate.”

—No!
(replied Professor Holmes)
The song is…
—and he sang the song

In the last stanza, González de León paraphrases Professor Holmes, who explains in his essay that

there are two things involved, the name of the song and the song itself. Of the name it can be said a) what the name is, and b) what the name is called. And of the song itself it can be said a) what the song is, and b) what the song is called. […] To be consistent, the White Knight, when he had said that the song is….., could only have burst into the song itself.

Professor Holmes admits that the issue is “technical and abstract, but not without excitement.” González de León may have felt this excitement herself when she found a way to reimagine the conversation between the knight and Alice. What’s more, her poem’s explicit intertextuality draws our attention away from the poem, to another text, in which we discover the White Knight’s blatant plagiarism. He tells Alice, “The tune’s my own invention.” But it isn’t. As the scene continues, the knight proceeds to sing his song to Alice:

“But the tune isn’t his own invention,” she said to herself: “it’s ‘I give thee all, I can no more.’”

The White Knight’s song, “Ways and Means,” is a parody of a poem by Wordsworth called “Resolution and Independence,” about an old man (“the oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs”) who makes his living gathering leeches. In this poem, Wordsworth refers to “Chatterton, the marvelous Boy,” an 18th century poet who committed suicide at age seventeen and was a source of inspiration for the Romantic poets. Chatterton is known to have forged the poems of the 15th century monk, Thomas Rowley.

The tune “I give thee all, I can no more,” (not the name of the song but what the song is called) is from “My Heart and Lute,” libretto by Thomas Moore, music by Michael Kelly, for their comic opera, “The Gypsy Prince.” “The work [which premiered in 1801] was not a great success, although the music was more popular.” By having the White Knight claim to have made up a popular tune himself, and by parodying a poem by a well-known poet, Carroll draws attention to the intertextuality at play in Through the Looking Glass.

To sum up: Ulalume González de León, a 20th century Mexican poet (originally from Uruguay), wrote a poem based on a 20th century philosophical essay about a late 19th century children’s
story written by an Englishman, a story that includes a song that takes its melody from an early 19th century comic opera, while its lyrics satirize a poem that references an 18th century poet who forged the work of a 15th century monk. As Professor of Literature at University College Cork, Graham Allen, says in the introduction to his *Intertextuality* (2000), “The act of reading […] plunges us into a network of textual relations. […] Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates […]”

While following the trail of intertextuality may be “not without excitement,” it is ultimately a fool’s errand. González de León makes this point with an epigraph by Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce (who, by the way, authored the “Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectual” and coined the term “onagrocrazia,” or “government by asses.”)

The only ones who, perhaps, have believed or believe seriously that poets do not create so much as imitate, that is to say plagiarize each other, secretly, the successor stealing the work of his predecessor, and trace this chain back through time so far that thief and the thing stolen are lost in the darkness of prehistory, have probably been what are called "source researchers." […] they think that their sagacity and penetration have merit, will open people’s eyes and prove with evidence, undeniable fact, that poets have a habit of selling stolen goods as their own […] The result is [only] the discredit that has fallen on the search for sources and the ridicule of those who go searching for them […] The "source" of poetry is always the spirit of the poet and never things, words or verses born in the spirits of others.

No doubt Roman playwright Terentius would agree.

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vi Alcázar Díaz, Diego. “‘Eternidades de imitación pasablemente diseñadas’: tradición y apropiación en los Plagios de Ulalume González de León a la luz de la crítica genética.” Thesis presented to the Ciudad Universitaria, Ciudad de México, Mayo 2018. [“Eternities of Imitation, Passably Sketched: Tradition and Appropriation in *Plagios* by Ulalume González de León, In Light of Genetic Criticism.” Thesis presented to University of Mexico, México City, May 2018]


