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Translanguaging in Creative Works

Elena Foulis, PhD

Texas A&M University, San Antonio

Vega, E. (Ed.). (2022). *Asina is How We Talk: A Collection of Tejano Poetry Written en la Lengua de la Gente*. Flowersong Press.

From the title to the cover and everything else found in this collection, *Asina is How We Talk: A Collection of Tejano Poetry Written en la Lengua de la Gente* is an invitation to think about how language ideologies are constructed and deconstructed. Eddie Vega has gathered a group of writers, including Priscilla Celina Suarez, Anthony M. Flores, Samantha Ceballos Sosa, and J.R. Estrada, among others, who, through their writing and translanguaging practices, ask us to consider how creative expression offers a space for eliminating the boundaries of language use as it is used by the people of a particular geographic region. Indeed, *Asina* represents Gloria Anzaldúa's *Nepantla* (1987, 2000), that is, a place of linguistic transformation which can be messy, confusing, and chaotic, but also powerful and validating at the same time. Anzaldúa (1999) describes it as a "symbol for the transitional process, both conscious and unconscious, that bridges different kinds of activities by moving between and among different parts of the brain" (p. 252). In reading these works, we become neplanteras/os/es by participating in and witnessing the undoing of prescriptive ideologies of language.

At the same time, this collection reflects what has always occurred organically in our Latina/o/e communities where people often grow up speaking and hearing Spanish and English simultaneously. In *Asina is How We Talk*, Vega brings together local talent to write in the language of the region; he says, "I offer this collection of poetry as a celebration of the pocho, mocho, Spanglish, Tejano, Tex-Mex lengua that the gente actually speaks" (xviii). Indeed, each of the poems in this book is deeply rooted in the context of South Texas, the region with San Antonio at its northernmost point, Laredo and Corpus Christi limiting its western and eastern boundaries respectively, and the Rio Grande Valley providing the southernmost border. Each poem expresses a connection to this place by way of everyday life such as local stores, foodways, landmarks, and most importantly, a complex understanding of Tejana/o/e identity, gender, belonging, and language. For example, in the poem titled "Pocha," Rodriguez writes, "Why does my Spanish offend you?/ My Spanish knows how to dance every cumbia/ and grew up listening to/ Ramon Ayala, La Mafia and Emilio Navaira/ on early Saturday morning as my mother cleaned our casita/ from top to bottom with Fabuloso" (p.59). Vega's own poem, "Y Empieza La Cumbia," evokes the sounds of

music at our local Latino grocery stores; he writes, “and I’m dancing all the way to the cajera/ the viejitas are smiling/ the viejitos just nod their heads/ los chamaquitos are meneando in their shopping carts, and/ my hips are swaying while I’m paying” (p.11). García and Otheguy (2020) explain that translanguaging “incorporates an understanding of how different modes, including our bodies, our gestures, our lives etc., add to the semiotic meaning-making repertoire that is involved in the act of communication” (p.24) which I find quite fitting for this collection since the authors use poetry’s rhythmic verses to evoke sounds, smells, and memories that are embodied in language and cultural practices of this community.

Crucially, it rejects any notion of purity and language hierarchies by using translanguaging in their writing and performance, as many of these poems have been read in public, and what each author writes poses questions that ask the reader to think about why we hold negative feelings about a language that is spoken by many. García and Otheguy explain,

Translanguaging interrogates named languages, pointing to an answer that includes their being constructed by nation-states as a tool for the domination of language minoritized communities. The named language tool excludes these communities from social, political, and economic opportunities by authorizing, legitimating, naturalizing and opening paths only to those who speak what is constructed as the common, autonomous and whole, national language. (p.25)

This also helps us understand Brain Street’s (1995) argument on rigid notions of literacy, in which autonomous models do not “lift those who learn it out of their socially embedded context” (p. 79). Vega and all the contributors of this collection come together to make some of us uncomfortable, some feel seen, and some empowered as we have a tool that helps us have deeper conversations about ourselves and our languages. While the book itself is valuable as a cultural artifact and vehicle for poetic expression, the way in which it is written, without censorship, without linguistic policing (Flores, 2020), and with mucho orgullo, is one way in which the collection and Vega are pushing for language justice.

Asina represents what many of us are doing with our Latina/o/e students in the classroom, whether is the K-12 or college: we want to provide curriculum that is culturally and linguistically relevant and that problematizes the way mainstream culture has commodified—and sometimes censored—our community’s way of speaking. As educators, we want students to feel validated in their use of US Spanish—which is diverse, rich, and an American language— and speak freely using their full linguistic repertoire which includes allowing translanguaging in the classroom. As importantly in *Asina*, neither words in English or Spanish are italicized, which signals the fluidity of uninterrupted language and the often otherized marking of languages that are not English. This is also another indication that Spanish is not a foreign language in the US. As Rosina Lozano (2018) notes:

The long, deep and varied history of Spanish in the United States is not well known. The oversight is understandable since the major influx of Spanish speakers has occurred in the last forty years. The newer immigrants join the descendants of treaty citizens and the children of early migrants, whose history can provide lessons of the long-held vision of belonging. Treaty citizens proclaimed their American citizenship while speaking an American language: Spanish. (p. 17)

For this reason, while pushing for language inclusion, incorporating texts that speak of students’ experiences and those of their families are crucial to creating a classroom that is culturally and linguistically sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017). *Asina* does this by dismantling ideas of privilege and

prestige in Tejano Spanish, or US Spanish, and opening honest discussions about cross-cultural understanding inside and outside the Latina/o/e community.

In the preface of the book, University of Texas, San Antonio Professor Emerita and past Texas Poet Laureate, Carmen Tafolla, tells us that, “*Asina is How we Talk* is an instrument of cultural survival, pride, and understanding, and a celebration of a dynamic translanguaging that brings laughter, growth, and healing. More importantly, it is a reflection of who we are, because *Asina* IS how we talk!” (xv). Indeed, translanguaging is one way educators can advance linguistic justice in the classroom because it allows us and our students to freely use all the linguistic resources we have available to best express who we are, while also learning about influences of other languages and varieties in our own communities.

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