

SOS/ESO ES: A REVIEW OF DIANA GARZA ISLAS'
BLACK BOX NAMED LIKE TO ME

Diana Garza Islas Translated by Cal Paule. *Black Box Named Like to Me*. Ugly Duckling Press, 2024

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Ugly Duckling Press' cover design of Diana Garza Islas' book of poetry, translated by Cal Paule, centers the title of the text in English while italicizing below it the title of the text in Spanish:

Black Box Named Like to Me

Caja negra que se llame como a mí

Already we are confronted with what Roman Jakobson would call an intralingual (within one language) translational problem: strange syntax. "Named like to me" and "se llame como a mí" means both too little and too much. The (dis)order of the syntax disrupts semantics; if to have "Named" something is to have determined and defined it, here we have what Robert Duncan would call an opening of the field. When I say this is an opening of the field, however, I am using a metaphor; a metaphor misnames something, like calling a "heart" a "stone," or like calling a "black box," which is a very closed thing, an "opening of the field."

Black Box Named to Me features as epigraph transcriptions of doomed pilot Amelia Earhart's distress signals while lost. The opening line is "*We are on the line.*" She describes the experience of being lost: *We must be over you [...] We cannot see you. Cloudy and overcast. Want bearings [...] We are circling you. We cannot hear you.*" The bracketed ellipses indicate the curated nature of the epigraph, implying the author's decision to elide (to lose) the source text. However, there is no source text—black boxes didn't exist in Earhart's time, so a person on the other line wrote down the content of Earhart's voice: "Please take a bearing on us and answer by voice...." We have then a quote from a source text that is in fact a transcription (a translation) of a source whose own historical import is characterized by loss. The very attempt to find it results in a demonstration of absence, replacing origin with hearsay.

Next, in lieu of a translator's preface, Cal Paule presents us with a "Box of FAQs" organized in question and answer format. It begins:

Q: What even is this book?

A: This is a full translation of Diana Garza Islas' first book, *Caja Negra que se llame como a mí*. It was published originally by Bonobos in 2015 in Nuevo León, México. It's the first published translation of the book as a whole into English, though some of my translations of individual poems have appeared before in various publications. These are the first poems I've ever translated.

To presume that there would be frequently asked questions even before the publication of a small press book in the littlest-read writing genre there is (not just poetry, but contemporary in-translation poetry) is funny and playful, yes, but it's also performative. It presumes not only a reader, but a conversation: "Please take a bearing on us and answer by voice [...]" In addition, with the admission that this is Cal Paule's first translation project, we see a much more informal and collaborative stance between translator and reader, as well as between translator and writer, insofar as Paule often cites the author's inclusion in the translation process, referring familiarly to her as "Diana." Eventually in the FAQs Paule anticipates the possible antipathy of the reader before such an unorthodox project:

Q: This all sounds like nonsense.

A: This book will teach you how to read it the further in you go. The poems operate in a mode that has to be acquired (like any language!) It's closer to allsense, Diana would say.

Here the distance between translator and poet further narrows, likening the experience of reading poems immersive language-learning; in other words, field research in another country. And yet a language, ostensibly, has fixed meanings for each word; a language is meant to make sense, rather than make allsense. Paule (or Islas) complicates this further: "but I was reminded by Diana that these poems are, in her words, semi-illegible in Spanish. That is an essential part of what they are and how they mean things."

A legible word ought to mean a thing; here, however, a semi-illegible word ought to mean many things. Additionally, the modifying phrase "in her words" is notable from the perspective of the translator, whose very task is to move from "her words" to "in other words." And yet here Paule says Islas' own words are "semi-illegible in Spanish," about a source text written in Spanish that also mixes English, Russian, German, and Hebrew.

In the book itself—a side-by-side, bilingual parallel text—there is indeed a sense of porosity between the pages. Consider the following moment from the poem “The Skeleton Who Adapted to the Route”:

Snails whip the shadow there. Asterics of rain happen there. A plague of cylinders translating the implicated edge, there:

The “edge” implicates what comes after and beyond it; in a singular poem, the edge is often a vertical one brought about by the breaking of the line, whereby enjambment—a radical line break—can imply new meanings beyond the more expected ones of prose. Hence, the succeeding line is implicated by the line preceding it.

In the case of a poem with an adjacent translated text, however, we now have a horizontal edge, from language to language, i.e. the cylindrical movement (though not quite circular) that “translating” effects. Like in a tornado traversing a field, things are stormed, displaced. Notice the “Asterics” of rain, a neologism newly spun from Islas’ “asteriscos.” Both terms in both languages recall the asterisk—a mark that marks omitted matter, such as the “s” in “asteriscos”—and hysterics, a hysterical rain and plague.

Because “hysteric” and “asterisk” morphologically retain their Greek form in both Spanish and English, the task of the translator to replicate Islas’ word play isn’t overly burdensome; these Greek terms act as a kind of linguistic bridge between Spanish and English. What of Islas’ puns, however, that owe their flexibility to the distinct “Spanishness” of the language? We see a beautiful example from the poem “Through the Hive”:

The box trilled cadaevery time. Each and every one a cadaver falling into my hands perfect blue, and I fell. Every drop that fell was a body that fell silent, and was whole, its “boxofhoney” silvery. (She didn’t know how to say “mirror” in my language but I know that in me she saw the red of her race, and the blue.)

“The box” here moves from the titular *Black Box* to the “box of honey,” for example the honeycomb structure that houses many interconnected boxes while also constituting a superstructure box of honey. We see too the translator’s wordplay between “cadaevery” and “cadaver,” which also forges a link between “honeycomb” and “catacomb,” pollination and death. This is how Paule says “mirror” in Islas’ language, the opening original Spanish being “La caja trinaba cadaver. Cada un cadáver.” Islas’ pun here is around “cada ver” (an ungrammatical structure that would connote something like “every seeing”), disfiguring the common phrase “cada vez,” or “everytime.” In fracturing time visually—and in joining the shards of the Spanish into English,

cadaevery—we see a broken mirror that reflects histories between languages. This web of punning, then, to echo Roman Jakobsen again, reveals that intralingual translational problems are also always interlingual ones: each language is a catacomb housing the other language roots that form them. “cada ver” in Spanish is a pun that relies on being mirrored in “cadaver” in my language English.

In other words, in learning how to say “mirror” in my language, I no longer see a monocultural self, but a sort of unlidded black box of multicultural histories and connections that make up “my” culture. The writer and translator Yoko Tawada, in her book of essays *Exophony: Voyages Outside the MotherTongue*, explains how her readings of the poetry of Paul Celan (who is referenced in *Black Box*) taught her just this:

Suffice it to say that the more I read Celan, the more I am convinced that what he refers to as “one language” is not one language at all. This is why I have no special preference for authors who write in multiple languages. Even if you never set foot outside your mother tongue, it is still possible to create multiple languages within it—so that concepts such as “inside” and “outside” become irrelevant altogether.

While Tawada’s definition of exophony is “the general experience of existing outside one’s mother tongue,” I take this “general” very literally: we are generally and universally existing outside of our “own” language. Through the exceptionally translational nature of *Black Box Named Like to Me*, I learn an exemplary lesson about language and poetry: there is no “inside” and “outside.” Hallucinatory, allusive, punny, and moving, Islas’ poetry is a welcome corrective during a time of disturbing political trends of nationalist isolationism, and a joyful example of opening the field. It is also a work of poetry that—and I’m not certain I’ve seen this before—calls out for translation, that tasks the reader to take its bearings and answer it by voice.