

BOOK REVIEW

A Life of Wounds Made Golden

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I'm Still Standing: Treinta años de poesía / Thirty Years of Poetry. By Luz María Umpierre-Herrera. Florida and Fredonia, N.Y.: www.luzmaumpierre.com and SUNY Fredonia, 2011. Pp. 232. \$29.95 (paper).

When a cherished earthen vessel is damaged, often the reparation intends to conceal the fractures as tightly as possible, as if they had never happened. The Japanese tradition of kintsugi, however, fuses the broken pieces with liquid gold, accentuating the cracks, making them shine more beautifully and rendering the vessel more valuable with each fissure. Each golden seam tells a story of use, of abuse, and of healing in jagged gilded scars, which glisten from the places where once they had been shattered.

Luz María Umpierre-Herrera's *I'm Still Standing: Treinta años de poesía / Thirty Years of Poetry* shimmers just so. In this much-awaited collection of over thirty years of work, we enter and connect with the life, love, pain, abuses, and healing of this renowned lesbian Puerto Rican poet, scholar, and human rights activist. Through poetry, essays, letters, and other reflections in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, we are transported chronologically through years of a full and real life lived, journeying intimately into the landscapes of Umpierre-Herrera's greatest heartaches and most intense passions. Most notably, Umpierre-Herrera lays bare the abuses and oppression she has faced at the hands of racism, sexism, homophobia, nativism, ethnocentrism, and especially institutional violence. The abuses do not break her. Instead, her words become a profound response to these oppressions and an act of

defiant healing, one in which she can triumphantly proclaim, like the Elton John song, “I’m Still Standing.” Moreover, she is not only standing; throughout this chronicle of her life and work she imparts a soft mantle of light on each reader, which emerges audaciously from every fracture she has endured.

The book opens with a prologue by Daniel Torres, introducing many of the book’s themes and mapping how Umpierre-Herrera’s work has touched others in Latina/Chicana/Boricua Exile (or Sexile) studies, in LGBT studies, and in the larger world of literature. This is followed by an introduction by Umpierre-Herrera, “On Still Standing,” which provides insight into the challenging and sometimes harrowing life behind the poetry collections to come. The collections ensue chronologically, in both English and Spanish, starting with *Una puertorriqueña en Penna* (1979) that tells of her time at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania (Penna), but also in pain (pena) as she faced discrimination for being a Latina and also a “sexilada,” an exile from Puerto Rico because she is a lesbian. This is followed by the collection *En el País de las Maravillas* (1982), which explores the tribulations of being Puerto Rican Latina, a lesbian, a poet, and fully human. Finally, *Y otras desgracias / And Other Misfortunes* (1985), delves deeper into these struggles, and explores matters of being a woman, unashamedly, and speaking back to patriarchy.

At the heart of the text is Umpierre-Herrera’s most famous collection, *The Margarita Poems* (1987), written in homage to all women, all “Margaritas,” to memorialize love and loss. *The Margarita Poems* contain deeply moving erotic lesbian poems, which communicate explicitly and authentically the heights of lust and love between women. The Latina scholar María DeGuzmán (2012) recently said that, “*The Margarita Poems* adapt the modernist quest motif and structure—exemplified, for instance, in a work such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*—to a queer, Caribbean, decolonial project to free

women and the poet's beloved island of Puerto Rico from the internalized oppressions of a patriarchal empire" (90).

Other collections in the volume showcase the breadth and diversity of Umpierre-Herrera's work. *For Christine: Poems and One Letter* (1995) emerged during one of the "most horrifying experiences" in Umpierre-Herrera's life, when SUNY-Brockport academically bullied her to the point where she found herself homeless and emotionally traumatized. Yet, these poems (and "one letter") are some of the most tender and elevating found in the collection. Words of trauma give birth to healing through solidarity with other women. In *Pour Toi / For Moira* (2005), poems emerge from the other side of trauma into thankfulness for those who supported her and her daughter. The last named collection, *Our Only Island* (2009), speaks of a mature and powerful love between Umpierre-Herrera and fellow Puerto Rican poet Nemir Matos-Cintrón.

There is also a gathering of otros poemas that span many themes of love, loss, and recovery. In particular, "Mr. Rogers," cuts right to the soul as it candidly speaks to a loss of innocence with a deep understanding of what such loss entails. These final poems are followed by Umpierre-Herrera's manifesto, "Whose Taboos? Theirs, Yours, or Ours?," which speaks to the oppressions and stigmas Umpierre-Herrera faced throughout her life. She explores and critiques the systems that produced the oppression in order to dismantle them. Umpierre-Herrera here points out that these taboos do not belong exclusively to "others," but make their homes quite solidly within the halls of academia; she implores us to root them out. The book ends with "Life History Interview of Dr. Luzma Umpierre," conducted by Nemir Matos-Cintrón, which explores Umpierre-Herrera's life not only historically, but spiritually, and imparts to us lessons of resilience, activism, advocacy, and a life lived with struggle, intensity, and integrity.

I'm Still Standing brings us the profound life's work of one of Latina/Chicana/Boricua LGBT scholarship's trailblazers. Umpierre-Herrera has been a fierce advocate for the legitimacy of Chicana/Latina studies and LGBT studies, and has paid dearly for her outspoken championing of its themes, its authors, its literature, and its place in academia. Through her fight and her life-long struggle, the field of Chicana/Latina/Puerto Rican and LGBT studies today has a greater foothold within the ivory tower; however as events in Arizona and elsewhere show, battles need to be continued to maintain our gains. From those just beginning their walk into the perils of academia to seasoned professors, all who have a stake in the transformation of academia toward a more hospitable place for subaltern souls and subaltern ideas can learn from this book.

Work Cited

DeGuzmán, María. 2012. *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latino Aesthetics of Night*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press.