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## María Mercedes Carranza\* (b. 1945, Bogotá)

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María Mercedes Carranza, the most authoritative voice in contemporary Colombian poetry, belongs to the “disenchanted” generation of poets. This generation, which began publishing in the 1970's, revealed writers like Giovanni Quessep, Harold Alvarado, Juan Manuel Roca, Juan G. Cobo-Borda, Mario Rivero and Darío Jaramillo-Agudelo (the latter two have been important influences in her work).

As Carranza alleges, her generation was marked by the “political and cultural impact of the Cuban Revolution, the *Frente Nacional*, the political crisis of the traditional parties and the left, the increasing urbanization of the country, the zenith of the mass media, [...and] the *boom* of the novel, that relegated poetry to a second or third place” (in Rincón 5,6).

She was the only daughter among three siblings, from a Catholic family of peasant origins. Because of her father's, the poet Eduardo Carranza (1913-1985), position as a cultural consular representative, she spent a good part of her youth abroad; she lived in Chile (1946-1948), and later in a post-war fascist Spain (1951-1958), idealized in her memory as “an isolated country outside of the society of consumerism” (Interview).

She grew up under the protective figure of a politically conservative father -- although tolerant -- who initiated her in the secrets of the *Prado Museum*, the Spanish and French classic literature, and at the same time transmitted to her his passion for detective novels. Among the many writers and artists who visited her father, she remembers Gerardo Diego, Dámaso Alonso, Jorge Gaitán Durán, and especially the painter Débora Arango (1907-), who did a full-length portrait of her in a red dress, that she reminisces as the bright image of those days.

Especially influential in her life was the writer Elisa Mujica (1918-), her maternal great-aunt who was living in Spain at that time: “The fable of my childhood is knitted with the legends and stories that she told me; with her I discovered the power of language” (Interview). Later, studying in a school run by nuns, with her brothers at boarding school, and amidst domestic problems between her parents, she found poetry in the pages of Rubén Darío in her father's library, “the place of solitary games with books” (Interview). With that time period in mind, she edited a collection of juvenile literature in 1982 (*Colección ICBF de literatura infantil*).

The return to Colombia was not easy: “When I returned, I still played with dolls and didn't know how babies were born. I left Spain and my childhood; I experienced a terrible cultural nostalgia which I confronted with a resolution to belong to this country” (Interview).

Before finishing high school in Colombia, she decided to become a bilingual secretary which was a fairly common “fate” for intellectual aspirations of women at that time. Her mother, Rosa Coronado, convinced her to continue her studies with the promise of sending her to Spain. After

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graduating and with the financial support of a scholarship, she returned to Spain, and studied Philosophy and Literature in the *Universidad Central de Madrid*. In Spain, she met the poet Juan Luis Panero, her second husband (1977-78) and throughout the year she mixed classes in Latin and History of Art with a bohemian lifestyle which somewhat displaced her studies. Later, between 1965 and 1987 (intermittently) she completed her degree in Philosophy and Literature at the *Universidad de los Andes* (Bogotá).

Although Carranza initiated the canonical feminine presence in Colombian poetry, and her work contains a feminist agenda (Kearns), she rejects this type of recognition. She considers it self-discriminatory to speak of “feminist poetry” and sees Feminism as an “imported” and elitist schema that “hides --at least in our countries-- the actual causes of social inequality of women,” which essentially reside, according to Carranza, in “great social inequalities and profound class differences” (“Feminismo y poesía” / “Feminism and Poetry” 341-45).

Her first book *Vainas* (1972) (a vague term for anything at all, that comes from *vagina*, Corominas) not only covers with a shadow of irony patriotic icons (“De Boyacá en los campos” 36; trans. “From Boyaca in the Country” Crow 73) and manners of the social elite (“Aquí con la señora Arnolfini” / “Here with Mrs. Arnolfini,” 28), but also ridicules the “secondary role assigned to women within a patriarchal society” (Alstrum 521), and the rhetorical commonplace of the *ethereal woman*, as the poet asserts in her “Salmodia sin gracia ni ritmo” (“Psalmody without Grace or Rhythm” 33): “I know I don't dress / with the first lights of dust to go to bed [...], / I only wear my pijama / and a pair of socks on my feet.” She proposes a *female beast* who grows from within, while offering “on the outside the sweetest smile (“Quién lo creyera” / “Who would believe it” 27), and a *blood and flesh woman*, who yawns and loves without “lovesick eyes” but “with the tooth brush [...] / the fried fish in the kitchen and night sweats / [...] among the dirty dishes, behind the everyday / mountain of clothes for ironing, / with the children screaming and the grocery bills, / [...] and the burned out light bulbs” (“Muestra las virtudes del amor verdadero...” / “She Shows the True Love Virtues...” 41).

Conscious that “Every moment there are new ways / to say the same old things” (“Se lo voy a decir” / “I am going to tell you” 39), *Vainas* “seeks to revoke poetry's sanctified language and reinvent it from zero” (Jaramillo-Agudelo 27), using a language deliberately colloquial that fractures the rhetorical grandiloquence of previous poetry (Tono 22; Araujo 1986:19).

Carranza bares herself with an ironic gesture that reaches her own poetry and herself in an autobiographical confession, without cynicism nor bitterness (Alvarado 9, Jiménez 7). Her iconoclastic attitude is not inherited from the vanguardistic pretensions of Nadaism (poetic movement of the 1960's), but rather from the anti-poetry of Nicanor Parra and the playful yet melancholic tone of Julio Cortazar.

A reader of French from a young age, she was influenced by the existentialism of Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir's writings, to which she added the Catalan anarchism, and the sixties, a decade of which she feels herself a daughter (Interview).

Poetry today [...] ought to enter the kitchen, drink Coca-Cola, take a jet, read *Little Lulu*, listen to the Beatles [...] speak to Perez who waits at the bus stop on the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> Street with his newspaper tucked under his arm, help Camilo Torres to shoot [revolutionary priest killed in 1966] (Carranza in *Crow* 71).

In *Tengo miedo* (1983, I am Afraid) the body and the gaze carry fear: “Look at me / fear is inside / Behind these calm eyes, inside this loving body: fear” (“Tengo miedo” 76). Fear also roams the spaces of the metaphorical city of identity, an architectural mirror: “No one looks anyone in the eyes [...] / among smiles and courteous manners / [...] it looks too much like my own life” (“Bogotá 1982” 64).

Irony gives way to anguish over the disaster of the present. Not even the word saves her: “This hand has ordered words into lines / to lead them into the abyss” (“Esta mano que todos ven” / “This Hand that Everyone Sees” 88); “I leased my soul / to hypocrisy: I have trafficked / with words, / [...] I surrendered to the lie” (“Patas arriba con la vida” 70; “Heels Over Head with Life” trans. Crow 77), “I have no faith / in my words / [...] generous whores / they serve god and the devil” (“Nunca es tarde” 78; “It is Never too Late” trans. Nable 45).

The work laments the victory of everyday forces over human beings and their liberty: “I try different professions / from cook, mother and poet / to accountant of stars in the sky / [...] Holly spirit, lover, Statue / of Liberty [...] / I am good for nothing” (“El oficio de vivir” / “The Work of Living” 73). Living becomes performing unhappiness in a charade under the rule of bourgeois values: “First I put on my look / of a respectable person / Straight after I put on my good / manners, filial love, / decency, morality / marital fidelity” [...] I delicately wash / my face of good citizen” (“El oficio de vestirse” / “The Art of Getting Dressed” 71). Ultimately the final outcome is of loss: “I will die mortal, / that is to say having passed / through this world without breaking or stained it / [...] María Mercedes ought to be born / ought to grow, reproduce herself and die / and that is what I am doing” (“Heels Over Head with Life” trans. Crow 77).

Within Colombian poetry of the decade, *Hola soledad* (1987, Hello Solitude) is one of the most renowned books on the theme of love (Jiménez 8; Perico 561-66), topic persisting in *Amor y desamor* (1994, Love and disenchantment). Nonetheless, the thematic axis, more than desire, is the “deterioration of hope, [...] the deterioration of love, the deterioration of one's self” (Carranza in Rincón 5) and the fatality of death: “All the air you drink / Every laugh or Sunday / Everything takes you indifferently toward your death (“Canción de domingo” / “Sunday's Song” 87). “No more sunrises nor routines, / no more light, no more work to do, no more instants. / Only dirt, dirt in the eyes, / in the mouth and ears; / dirt over the flattened breasts; / dirt inside the dry belly; / dirt tightening the back; / along side the ajar legs, dirt; / [...] Dirt and oblivion” (“Oración” / “Prayer” 98).

A claustrophobic and inhospitable symbolic space defines her homeland; Colombia is a house of colonial walls that “started falling down centuries ago” and in which “the living sleep with the dead / [...] and when they sing, they sing their failures” (“La patria” / “My Homeland” 85).

The horror of the widespread Colombian war will arise out of this pessimistic vision in *El canto de las moscas* (1998, The song of the Flies), a book that while doing an inventory of the toponymy of violence, also celebrates the *melopoeia* of the names of 24 Colombian towns: “The wind / laughs in the jaws of the dead / In Ituango, / lies laughter's corpse” (“Ituango” 89).

Carranza maintains that even the poet who --in poetry-- takes refuge from the social delirium, has an intimate relation with the political and economic violence of the present (*Revista Casa Silva* 3: 6-8): “In Colombia whatever geography --whether poetic or not-- is a geography baptized with violence and blood. I chose the names of the towns for their beauty and to speak of life, but I know that beauty and life are memories of death (Interview).

Carranza's poetic exercise of pessimism contrasts with her optimism in the work to which she has dedicated herself since 1984. She is founder-director of *Casa de poesía Silva (CPS)* in Bogotá, an institution devoted to stimulating the study and enjoyment of poetry --especially in the popular sectors-- through free services (library, audio-library), events (recitals, workshops, discussions, festivals), investigations, and publications.

Carranza is criticized simultaneously and contradictorily for promoting the “institutionalization” and populist mass-consumption of poetry, and for leading a “high-Culture” project. She defends the necessity to lobby the State, and the political and economic groups in order to obtain resources for the *CPS*. With respect to doing “poetic demagogy,” she affirms poetry as a social practice of communication and solidarity, above and beyond “specialized” reading of “select”

poetry in academic circles. (*Revista Casa Silva* 6: 7-9; 7: 9; 8: 9-10; 12: 9-11). Lastly, when confronting the critics who feel that she is biased toward “high-Culture,” she says:

What I promote is not for the poets, nor for the professors, it is for the public, a public that in diverse sociocultural strata produces, reads, and has and experiences poetry. What is elitist is not to promote poetry, but to think that poetry (or the aesthetic) is only for the initiated (Interview).

Besides her work in the *CPS*, Carranza considers cultural journalism to be the central activity of her life. She directed the literary pages “Vanguardia” (*El Siglo*, Bogotá) and “Estravagario” (*El Pueblo*, Cali), and for thirteen years was Chief Editor of the magazine *Nueva frontera*. She currently writes for *Semana*.

In 1990 she joined the *Alianza Nacional M-19*, facilitating the process of integration into the democratic system of the guerrilla group *M-19*, converted into a political party after the peace treaties with the government. She was one of 4 women among the 74 members elected for the *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* that in 1991 proclaimed a new Constitution. In the *Asamblea*, she urged the participation of the FARC, the major guerrilla group in Colombia that did not have confidence in the peace process after the assassination of more than 1,500 members of the *Unión Patriótica* (a left-wing political party):

The *Asamblea* tried to offer a way out of the war; but in Colombia there exists neither the political will nor the economic conditions for peace. While we spoke of reconciliation in the *Asamblea*, President Cesar Gaviria bombarded “Casa verde,” the center of operations for the FARC (Interview).

She voted against the constitutional ban on abortion, defended women's and children's rights, religious freedom and the secular State (officially Catholic in the prior constitution), cultural pluralism and the freedom of information, and insisted in the democratization of mass-media ownership. Risking her life, Carranza voted publicly, along with four others, to maintain the option of the extradition of Colombians as a legal tool against the Mafia of drug-traffickers, alleging respect for international treaties, impunity in the face of terrorism, and loyalty to the cause of her friend Luis Carlos Galán (1943-1989), assassinated by Mafia hitmen while a presidential candidate.

After the *Asamblea*, she abandoned politics and returned to the helm of the *CPS*:

Here I will be, working in what I believe in while my faith lasts, reading Darío and Neruda as if I were encountering them for the first time in my father's library, and living poetry, stubbornly, as a social experience of beauty within language (Carranza, Interview).

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