



**Through the Rearview Mirror. An Ethnographical
Novel of Mexican Taxis/Por el espejo retrovisor.
Una novela etnográfica de taxis mexicanos**

Kathy Taylor

Graphic Type de México

Mexico City, 1999, 248 pp.

Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges' words, "cada encuentro una cita" ("every encounter is a date"), seem to etch travelling paths into larger patterns of unknown meaning. Such crisscrossing of destinies is acknowledged in Kathy Taylor's *Through the Rearview Mirror. An Ethnographical Novel of Mexican Taxis/Por el espejo retrovisor. Una novela etnográfica de taxis mexicanos* by translating notes from an ethnographic project into the realm of fiction. In doing so, she not only maps uncharted paths in fiction-as-ethnography-as-fiction but also creates a unique space for unheard voices to participate in a complex intercultural and bilingual mirroring of otherness in motion.

In this novel Kathy Taylor uses ethnographic field notes collected during myriad taxi rides in Mexico (mostly within a small town that appears under the pseudonym of Tope-tlán) and translates them into narrative devices such as the literal insertion of a lined notebook page scribbled with field notes and newspaper clippings. She also structures the entire novel using mostly single-page vignettes that give an identi-

ty to each anecdote and episode, thereby creating a fragmented whole that reminds the reader of the hair-thin borderline between storytelling and experience, fact and fiction, between who observes and who is observed.

The narrating voice shifts its narrative focus continually, emulating the movement of the taxis weaving routes through the town, moving from one taxi-driver's perspective to another, from them to other taxi riders and to the central character, the *señora güera* (none other than the ethnographer-writer's alter-ego). Narrated dialogues between a taxi-driver and a taxi-rider mirror both taxi occupants as they observe each other: "He sees her watching him again as they talk. Surely she sees him seeing her too. Neither says anything." (p. 22) The crisscrossing paths bring several separate destinies together so that part of a larger warp is made visible. The surprise ending becomes merely one more of destiny's unforeseen paths, where otherness becomes itself and other simultaneously and cruises the city's streets in a never-ending story/journey.

The taxi drivers portrayed in this book are itinerant ethnographers, perhaps even underemployed and underrated cultural analysts, observers of current political and social realities in Mexico, of varying visions of Mexico and of the U.S. They are protagonists in daily realities of poverty, illness, *asaltos* or hold-ups, death; into the habit of undaunted optimism and unswerving faith in the presence of Zapata as both myth and reality. Above all, they are storytelling agents that bring collectivity and orality to a fictional framework.

Kathy Taylor's book not only highlights their unique social role but also translates them into a very different kind of informant by enabling their storytelling gifts to become more than mere ethnographic anecdotes, to become intrinsic parts of a creative whole, inserting them as allies in the process of creating narrative fiction and in problematizing the complex politics of otherness.

What is perhaps most outstanding about *Through the Rearview Mirror/Por el espejo retrovisor* is its linguistic and cultural interplay. Kathy Taylor's initial notes in Spanish for the ethnographic project grew into a novel written entirely in Spanish, in which she is completely fluent even though it is not her native tongue. She then translated it into English to share it with fellow English-language speakers. Yet, due to the fiction-ethnography interplay, the process became even more fascinating when, during the revision of the text in English, the author-turned-translator began to re-write it, altering the original Spanish version accordingly, in a mir-

roring effect that encouraged further fictional creativity, within a rare linguistic and cultural dialogue, after which the final version in Spanish was revised by her (with the cooperation of Irlanda Villegas from the UNAM). Thus, two versions of the novel were created, each contemplating the ideal reader of each culture and language. In this sense the mirror of the title *Through the Rearview Mirror/Por el espejo retrovisor* became more than a metaphor. It was a creative impetus since, as Kathy Taylor has said, each text "revealed new things about both cultures as I tried to think about the different perspectives that each language would offer to each audience."

In this mirroring dialogue, writer, ethnographer and translator were one and the same, yet they had a different say in the novel. In this sense, these three carried on a dialogue not only amongst themselves but with the real-life informants, the taxi-driver characters and the fictional protagonist, *la señora güera*, in an interesting and unique interplay of the politics of presences. As if each obtained the right to a role within a democratic game facilitated by fiction.

One of the immediate challenges of a bilingual venture such as this would be the translational task of remaining faithful to the cultural as well as the linguistic tone of the original Spanish text in the English version. Kathy Taylor does this by inserting certain "clue" words in Spanish that create a specific illusion reminding the reader that the conversation, for instance, is actually taking place in Spanish. This apparently simple device is of vital importance to the effect of the narrative as a whole and is achieved only through acute observation of linguistic and cultural profiles.

The fact that both Spanish and English versions of this novel share the exact bilingual cover—underscoring duality/unity by having a dark-skinned Zapata (on the left) and the *señora güera* (on the right) merge into a single head-portrait—although each version is printed separately indicates the need to target different readerships and cultures by means of a "bridge-cover". This also reminds the reader that mediation between cultures/languages is best mapped where several kinds of borders cross, in spaces created as unique interstices for the creation of new exchanges and new meanings.

(Versions of this book in English and in Spanish are available from graphictype@alfa-mex.com or kathyt@earlham.edu)

Claire Joysmith
Researcher at CISAN