

Collins Klobah, Loretta (2018). *Ricantations*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd, 138 pp.

Michela A. Calderaro

(Università degli Studi di Trieste, Italia)

Loretta Collins Klobah, whose new poetry collection, *Ricantations*, was named a “summer recommendation” by the British Poetry Book Society, is recognised as one of the main poetical voices within the Puerto Rican literary scene, and one of the most vocal supporter of women’s plights both in Puerto Rico and in all other Caribbean islands.

She teaches Caribbean literature, creative writing, and medical humanities courses at the University of Puerto Rico. She has published both poetry and academic articles in such journals as *Small Axe*, *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, *Image and Narrative*, *Jamaica Journal*, *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, *South Asian Popular Culture*, and *Literature and Medicine*. Most noteworthy among the many awards she has received are the Pam Wallace Award for an Aspiring Woman Writer, the Award of The Academy of American Poets, and the Pushcart Prize. She has also won grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a Fulbright Award, an International Council for Canadian Studies Fellowship, and a Rockefeller Grant. She has been an invited poet at the Bim Literary Festival in Barbados, Calabash International Literary Festival in Jamaica, NCG Bocas Literary Festival in Trinidad & Tobago, and the St. Martin Book Fair. She was also nominated as one of the poetry judges for the 2018 OCM Bocas Award in Caribbean Literature.

It is always interesting, before opening a book, be it poetry or prose, to take a close look at the front cover: it tells you more about what is inside than the blurbs on the back cover.

The cover art of *The Twelve-Foot Neon Woman*, Collins Klobah’s debut collection for which she won the 2012 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, is a reproduction of a mural by a Puerto Rican graffiti artist named Ske Pagan and the TNX crew. A poem in the collection, entitled “La Madonna Urbana” (who is that “twelve-foot woman painted onto the wall” who gives the collection its title on page 12) is actually about another mural by Ske. The poem offers us a glimpse of humanity protected by “Our Lady of Barrio Obrero, la señora profana, la madonna boricua, | la cabrona, la Gata”. We witness the lives of real, actual people whom the poet has encountered: we meet Jorge, “in fishing galoshes and sweat-soused shirt”;

Alejandra; and Juanito, who has AIDS and “limps barefooted on sun-melted asphalt”. And while the barrio gets slowly and quietly ready to sleep, Juanito sings together with *Our Lady of Providence* a song that opens the door to hope, notwithstanding the harsh lives of the barrio’s inhabitants.

Hope, indeed, is one of the emotions you’re likely to experience reading Collins Klobah’s visionary new collection of poetry. Hope and music are elements that run through all of Collins Klobah’s poems, and in *Ricantations* she makes the reader dance to the sound of boleros, salsa, calypso (“Man Haffi Try”, or “Night Watch”, to name just a couple of poems).

Music and hope are also present on the front cover of *Ricantations*, with a reproduction of artist Samuel Lind’s oil painting *Ángel Plenero*. This painting, which in Collins Klobah’s own words is one of resurrection, is closely related to what the poet experienced and saw during Hurricane Maria and the devastation that ensued in its wake on the island, all described in the collection’s title poem. However, the traumatic experience did not weaken the resolve of most determined citizens, the poet included, to stay on the island.

The painting may also be viewed as a sort of introduction to the entire collection, with details of it found scattered throughout all poems. In an interview conducted by artist Jacqueline Bishop and published on *The Sunday Observer* (June 3, 2018), Collins Klobah’s herself describes how the painting helped the book to take shape:

Every element in the painting relates to the poems in *Ricantations*, from the symbolism of death and resurrection, to the winged angel dressed in two-toned shoes and fedora, the breaking of the chains on the *Plena* drum, the mysterious plant life, and the mythic sky and stars. “Plenero” means “a musician of *Plena*”, one of our traditional singing, dancing and drumming forms in Puerto Rico, which involves the playing of a hand-held drum that looks like a tambourine without the metal discs.

Some of Samuel Lind’s works, his bronze statue and paintings of *Osain*, are the inspiration for Collins Klobah’s poem “*Osain*”. *Osain* is one of the *Orishas*, who are the primary gods and goddesses of the Yoruba religion; he is the god, or spirit, of the forest, the guardian and keeper of plants and nature. Lind’s painting depicts him running through a mangrove swamp, and turning into a mangrove tree.

In Collins Klobah’s poetry nature has always played an important role. This collection brings to the fore her fascination with the way nature intertwines with both female and male figures, and shows how nature can actually sooth and change the lives of people who grow up amid violence and death.

There is indeed a very high level of violence in Puerto Rico, but often, in Collins Klobah’s collection, this violence can be transformed into something good.

In the poem “He talks to a Butterfly” the protagonist is Joe, an actual person, an ex-convict, who works as a caretaker of butterflies at ‘Aula Verde’, a butterfly farm. The Puerto Rico administration had set up a program aimed at rehabilitating convicts through work at the butterfly farm, so they could then rejoin society. In a delicate and elegant voice, Collins Klobath tells us about Joe’s tender harvesting of eggs in “the copulario | here monarchs and orange fritillaries | achieve butterfly positions”. His love and dedication to butterflies is cathartic and transforms his life.

Loretta Collins Klobah’s poetic texts intersect with existing, mainly historical, texts, leading to completely new and surprising formal effects. Myths and monsters of the past, grotesque beings, human and supernatural, historical figures belonging not only to Puerto Rico but also to other Caribbean islands, are thus fused into daily life. The stories of these creatures become canvasses where, through a process of substitution and superimposition, a new vibrant reality is brought to life.

Collins Klobah weaves a web that connects all the Caribbean islands and then reaches outside them, towards other shores and other lands. She uses geography, culture, language, time and space as tools, as if she were in front of a loom, interlacing diverse strands to build an intricate pattern.

Making use of Bakhtin’s chronotope, a theory regarding how space and time intersect each other, Collins Klobah manipulates time and space, fusing different realities and leading to the creation of manifold portals. Often the portals open to a new space, where the space and the time of the dead merge with those of the living – as in “Come, Shadow” for instance, where the poet can clearly perceive the presence of her dead mother, or in “Night of Charcoal Sky and Sea” where time lived and time dreamed blur and become indistinguishable.

Through these portals Collins Klobah brings together mythical elements of the past into our present – as, for example, the “gargoyle” which flies over us, today. The gargoyle embodies different times and different spaces, observing ghosts alongside the living, and making us feel how hundreds of years of suffering, deprivation, excruciating work in the cane fields affect life today.

Just at the moment
when the guard’s
head drops sideways,
he hears the beating
windstorm of heavy,
feathered wings flogging
him to the ground,
then lifting off into the dark sky,
wings taller than a man,
smelling of seaweed and rot.

[...]

Perching on a roof of a company village -
 [...] the gargoyle glimpses ghost girls playing
 a ghost son [...]
 as he carries a warm lunch in a fiambreira to his father
 in the cane fields

Spanish and English, but also dialects, embark us on a whirlwind voyage. Loretta Collins Klobah grew up in a plurilingual and multicultural family, and thus the issues of identity and belonging, geography, language and culture play an important role in her work.

She was born in Merced, California; her mother was of Spanish and Scottish heritage; her father Cherokee and Irish; other close relatives came from Mexico. Though Spanish is the main language spoken in Puerto Rico, English is the language used in schools, so one is bound to continuously switch between languages, both at home and outside it. Language is also greatly affected by the waves of migration of islanders to and from the 'mainland' - the United States, of which Puerto Rico (Spanish for «Rich Port») is an unincorporated territory.

Puerto Rico, with its mountains, its pueblos, its inhabitants and their resilience, and especially its history, is set at the centre of Collins Klobah's poetic web. But then her poems carry us also to London, to Mexico, to Trinidad, all while switching from one language to another, from one historical or personal event to another.

Ricantations is also a moving autobiographical portrait of Collins Klobah's life. In "Come, Shadow", for example, she describes visiting her hospitalized schizophrenic mother, and how she still feels her presence:

After two years on the other side,
 she gave up on visiting my dreams -
 then a decade of non-intervention,
 quiet ashes in a buried tin box.

Today she is detectable
 in my peripheral vision,
 everywhere in my head
 - annunciation.

Other poems describe real people whom she has met, or events she has taken part in. Every poem gives us a glimpse of life in the Caribbean, or helps us see how events, or injustices, related to the islands have a bearing on life outside the Caribbean and should be addressed by all of us.