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M. G. Sanchez (2019). *Crossed Lines.* The Dabuti Collective.
M. G. Sanchez (2019). *Border Control and Other Autobiographical Pieces*. The Dabuti Collective.

In 2019, two new books by foremost Gibraltarian writer M. G. Sanchez were published: *Crossed Lines* and *Border Control and Other Biographical Pieces*, which expand on his interests from previous deliveries. The two read beautifully as complementary because, though treading different genres –fiction and life writing respectively–, they explore the common trope of the border, an inescapable topic in Sanchez's writing, as well as the friction(s) and hybridization(s) that go along with the existence of borders, and which are a direct consequence of the very border's (im)permeability. If this appears as a convoluted sentence, the only excuse is that it would aim to respond to the complexity and nuance of Sanchez's treatment of his subject matter, never one-sided nor simplifying, even when his take on the issues in discussion necessarily originates in his subject-position as a Gibraltarian. This condition, Gibraltarianness, is what his whole oeuvre is devoted to throwing light on and dissecting, in the absence –as he explains in "Deficit", one of the stories in *Border Control*– of a minimal body of Gibraltarian literature which could properly buttress and feed a *Llanito* sense of identity. Sanchez's writing self-avowedly sets out to fill in this gap (Abas 2018).

Yet his writing also tackles issues beyond Gibraltar, as is the case with *Crossed Lines*, which contains three stories set in different parts of the world. In the first one, "Brexitland", a young working-class couple lead a rather misera-ble life which is barely made more colourful by the arrival of their much-desired baby. Their petty existences are in fact felt to be doomed from the beginning, and the claustrophobia to which they are condemned will end up taking a deadly toll. The second story, "Sleeper", has a border-crossing Spaniard who works in Gibraltar as a protagonist, and seems to suggest that we may (or may not) have freedom to cross physical and political borders, but what if we are not capable of surmounting the ones that we carry inside? In the last story, "Passepartout", the focus on constraining borders takes on a more global dimension. Here the main character is a man diagnosed with terminal cancer, who may be seen to try and deflate his frightening predicament through boarding on planes and flying away from the epicentre of his distress. The moral of the previous story reverberates in this one, namely, the depressing idea that borders are often carried along and nurtured within ourselves.

On its part, *Border Control and Other Stories* compiles a good dozen of autobiographical pieces, where Sanchez once again evinces his skills as consummate storyteller. There is a fluidity to this self-exploratory writing which makes it highly enjoyable, and in my opinion its genuine subject matter will certainly appeal to readers in the Iberian peninsula (Gibraltar being paradoxically unknown to the mass of Spaniards despite its geographical closeness). This proficiency is not surprising, as in all Sanchez has penned a sizeable corpus of short stories, essays and novels. To these we must add his singular *Bombay Diary*, published only a year earlier in 2018. This *Diary* gives a detailed ac-count of the writer's three-year stay in the Indian megalopolis, and is bedecked with relevant historical data in typical *Sanchezian* manner –usually partaking of the observational, the imaginative, and the academic. This is also the case with many of the essays in *Border Control*, where the reader learns about the history of Gibraltar in rich detail, and also about its cultural complexities regarding its colonial status. As Sanchez claims, paraphrasing psycho-geographer Iain Sinclair, "public spaces have their own secret, unrecorded history" (*Border Control* 19), just as he has stated elsewhere: "I want people to know … about the smell of Gibraltar's dusty cobbled streets, about the sense of history that oozes out of its venerably ancient stones" (Sanchez 2015). Such a thing occurs, for instance, in "Enactment", the second piece, where the narrative voice tells us of a walk the author took around the Rock, sometime in 2016, and of his simultaneous mental meanderings. In this peaceable jaunt, the flâneur unveils and brings back to life the secret history of several specific places, such as the so-called *Alameda*, Gibraltar's botanical gardens, of which he writes: "these six hectares of terraced land squeezed between Rosia Road and the Rock's western face can be regarded as a repository of disembodied memories, a sort of museum of forgotten experiences" (*Border Control* 19). He then goes on to explain the different uses to which the place has been put by the people at different times: "fumbled late-night sexual encounters, acts of drunken hooliganism, tearful park bench break-ups, gay and lesbian rites of passage" (*Ibid.*), which have been occurring in the place for more than 200 hundred years. The historical review, too, is exhaus-tive: "When the red-light district shut down in 1922 […] And several decades later, when the civilian evacuation of 1941 had emptied the Rock of its womenfolk […] Even as recently as the late Seventies and early Eighties" (*Ibid.*). Through such mixed exercise in creative and evocative self-expression, Sanchez manages to in-scribe many of the forgotten histories of Gibraltar, thereby filling a conspicuous void in the historiography of the place.

What mainly stands out in *Border Control* (as well as in "Sleeper", the only story in *Crossed Lines* which as was said is set in the Rock) is language itself. It is impossible to miss out on the frequent and dexterous use of code-switching between English and Llanito, the local vernacular –which a careless reader could perhaps mistake for a local variety of Spanish, thus forgiving the web of Mediterranean and European influences and historical depth which inflect this unique language (Cavilla 1978; Vazquez 2018). In his attempt at providing a fair representation of Gibraltarianness, Sanchez's writings offer, as one might expect, faithful reproductions of the ordinary use(s) of language in Gibraltar: "What I am interested, above all, as a Gibraltarian writer," he has said in an interview, "is to capture the reality of everyday life on the Rock, all the countless little peculiarities associated with living in a small, hemmed-in place where practically everybody knows each other" (Seoane 252). To us monolinguals, this linguistic versatility is fascinating. Something, however, worries me: whereas Sanchez's intended audience is certainly Gibraltarian –insomuch as he is keen on constructing a literary archive of and for Gibraltarian identities–, he is also intent, as he has made clear on several occasions, on dispelling certain demeaning myths and attitudes about the place and its people which abound in both Spain and the UK. Might not be the case that his frequent forays into Llanito alienate the monolin-gual Anglophone reader? Not really. The balance between linguistic realism and (English) readability is cautiously measured in most of the stories. There are, however, occasional risqué moments: for instance in the passage when, in "Journey through Castile", Sanchez gives voice to Mama Bertha, his Llanito-speaking grandmother, expressing her demystifying opinions about contemporary art. The delicious discussion between the narrator and Mamma Bertha dealing with certain controversial aspects of Picasso's life and paintings is –exceptionally– held entirely in Llanito (*Border Control* 138-139). One fears, in effect, that not all readers may grasp its carefully graded irony. But Sanchez is loath of shunning problematic subject matter. This can be observed, not only in this blunt criticism of a Spanish national icon like Picasso, but also in the critical treatment of the deplorable affair of *la Manada*, or in the pointed reflections about the Valle de los Caídos *touristic site* as it stood at the time of this trip in Castile, or when tackling the worrying matter of children bullied by their classmates (or, worse, by teachers themselves).

"Journey through Castile" had been a long-standing project of Sanchez's, himself a great admirer of classic art and architecture. However, as he explains in the longest piece in the collection, he kept postponing it, haunted by the memory of an episode he suffered in the Madrid of the early 1990s, when an ordinary-looking Spanish waiter was serving coffee to him and a friend, and, on learning that they were from the Rock, blurted out that they were thieves and "*piratas ingleses con mucha cara dura* " (*Border Control* 141). Fearing similar incidents, Sanchez refrained from visiting Castile until 2018 when he was invited to speak at the University of Salamanca. *Border Control* persistently addresses the question of "the other" as cultural stereotype, and the prejudice which thrives on both sides of the Spanish-Gibraltar border, by way of denouncing its short-sightedness. This is definitely one of the virtues of the collection and of the whole of Sanchez's oeuvre: it proposes a fundamental revision of the construction and nurturing of damaging images of the next-door neighbour, images it carefully deconstructs.

To conclude, let me return to the border, the great protagonist of Sanchez's writing (Manzanas 2017). The opening piece, "Border Control, 2003", is concerned with the Spanish border, like "Youth", "Loop- the-loop" and "*Traje de Flamenca*". Contiguously, "What I always felt in my bones" and "Going Back" are rather about European borders, both being critiques of Brexit (which gives the title to one of the stories included in *Crossed Lines*). These two stories in *Border Control* provide first-hand and heartfelt explanations of why, against all logical expectations, the 2016 referendum resulted in a Yes vote. Borders are complex; in Sanchez's work, they are a hindrance to human freedom. But as Gloria Anzaldúa (herself cited by Sanchez) defends, they also are a site of creativity and resilience. Though Anzaldúa's border is set in the Americas, Sanchez suggests that her thinking "could very well apply to the elderly *matutera*, *varizha*, tissue-sellers and other luckless chancers associated with our own [Gibraltar-Spain] frontier, a human grotesquerie […] continually reminding us of the unnaturalness of all dividing lines" (*Border Control* 26). In "Youth", which focuses on the author's own childhood memories during the closed-frontier years, the city's drainage system frequently overflows, spilling putrid water and sewage onto the streets. As the narrator explains, "you needed to pull up your trousers several inches about your ankles. You'd then walk the steps very slowly and on tiptoe, placing each step in front of you with exaggerated care" (*Border Control* 30). Even if the children managed to zig-zag their way up the street away from the dirty stagnant water, they could never get rid of the smell, "that clung to your hair and skin even after you had stripped and showered, like a malign presence or a haze of radioactive fall-out…" (*Ibid.*). Such is, in conclusion, the fate of borders: they unduly constrain human agency, and thus, by virtue of their artificial nature, they are bound to be debased and to overflow one way or another. M. G. Sanchez's writing reminds us that, in whatever form, border-crossing is a healthy, life-affirming exercise.

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