

**CHICANA CREATIVITY AND CRITICISM:
NEW FRONTIERS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Edited by María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes
Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1988.

Introduction

MARIA HERRERA-SOBEK

The 1980s decade witnessed an explosion in the literary output of Chicana authors. The initial success of vanguard writers such as Alma Villanueva, Bernice Zamora, Lucha Corpi and Lorna Dee Cervantes in the late 1970s and early 1980s encouraged Chicano-oriented publishing houses to "risk" investing in Mexican American women writers.¹ The success of these initial ventures has been greatly instrumental in helping minority women get their works in print and in the market place where they can be made accessible to the reading public as well as to academic critics. The most active Chicano presses encouraging women writers in recent years are the Bilingual Review Press/Editorial Bilingue and Arte Publico Press (which has been the most aggressively involved).² The 1980s was a productive decade for Mexican American women writers.

The 1990s decade has proven to be an equally exciting period for Chicana writers. A new publishing era was initiated with Random House's publication of Sandra Cisneros' second work of fiction, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. The success of the publication and the wide mainstream recognition it received opened up publication doors for other Chicana writers such as Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God* (1993, W. W. Norton), Denise Chavez's *Face of an Angel* (1994, Farrar Straus Giroux), and Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995, Dutton).

The essays and poetry of both Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa have become necessary and important frameworks in any serious discussion of feminisms. The new poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes continues to shake our very foundations of

what language can accomplish, as does the recent fiction of Demetria Martinez and Terri de la Penal University presses are opening doors to other writers like Mary Helen Ponce and Lucha Corpi, and feminist presses like Third Woman Press, Kitchen Table, Aunt Lute continue making our work available. The outstanding work of these Chicanas (and those omitted only for lack of space) is forcing a space in American letters that has never existed before. This second edition of *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature* will continue to expand the parameters of Chicana literature as an integral part of our American literary landscape.³

Both the creative works as well as the critical essays are characterized by their innovations in form and content. New images of Mexican American women surface in Roberta Fernandez' short story "Andrea." Equally innovative is Fernandez' combination of the literary history of a genre in the active world displayed. The south Texas author incorporates a historical overview of Mexican American theater within her narrative. Denise Chavez expands the frontiers of Chicano literature by introducing a new genre: the Novena Narratirasy Of rendas Nueromexicanas. This work is a combination of theater, sculpture, folk belief and folk art. In addition, Chavez skillfully renders images of Mexican American women from various walks of life: the bag lady, the factory worker, the housewife, the store clerk, the sexually abused retarded child, the tough pachuca.

The life of the factory worker is also explored by Helen Maria Viramontes in her short story "Miss Clairol." I foresee the factory worker as a protagonist in Chicano/a literature becoming more and more prominent, since a great number of Mexican American women belong to this sector of American workers.⁴ The Chicana protagonist working in factories may be as important a character in future Chicano literary works as the migrant worker has been in theater and the novel.⁵

Sheila Ortiz Taylor, on the other hand, provides us with bittersweet memories of family life as seen through the eyes of a precocious young woman. Chavez' contribution in poetry explores the often forbidden terrain of female sexuality and eroticism, while Lucha Corpi ventures into the world of magic realism. Evangelina Vigil departs from her brassy, sassy poetic persona to offer us a more introspective, reflective poet.

Chicano/a literary critics offer new perspectives and new challenges in the field of literary criticism. Diana ReboLledo argues for a return to the Chicano text and for discovering our own theoretical constructs. Rebolledo's article is a call for independence from white European and American literary theoreticians who are not acquainted with the Chicano experience. This lack of historical specificity and historical context make their theoretical postulates suspect when applied to Chicano creative works. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, reiterates Rebolledo's position and perceives knowledge and immersion in the Chicana experience as vital for an authentic Chicana Feminist approach.

Norma Alarcon focuses on patriarchal society's engendering of Chicanas as "women" and their inferior position with regard to the symbolic contract. Alarcon views this asymmetrical relationship in the symbolic contract as an impelling force that drives Chicanas to explore their subjectivity. This selfreflexivity stimulates the creative process and yields literary works of art.

Julian Olivares offers a specific case study in his analysis of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* regarding the contradictions and problems in applying European literary theories (in this case Gaston Bachelard's theories expounded in his book *The Poetics of Space*) to a Chicana literary work.' My article "The Politics of Rape: Sexual Transgression in Chicana Fiction" contrasts the vectors of functionality versus aesthetics in Chicana literary constructs. It posits that Mexican American women's concern for political and social oppression are primary vectors structuring many of their works. This does not detract from the beauty of the work but in fact invigorates and transforms it into a powerful work of art.⁸ The elitist conceptualization denigrating confessional, autobiographical and subjective literary works should be seriously questioned in post-modernist poetics and particularly in ethnic minority literatures

The unifying thread linking both creative and critical works in this collection are the daring inroads into "new frontiers" which the authors make in their writings. The poets, short story authors and critics are all taking risks; they are expanding the boundaries of Chicana literature and literary criticism, offering new vistas and new possibilities. Their courage to tread new waters and not remain stagnated augurs well for the future of Chicano literature. This, in turn, opens up new dimensions for

mainstream American literature, since it is through the constant infusion of new blood, new ideas, new visions and new perspectives that a national literature is able to continue vigorously flourishing. The recent explosions in Afro-American, Asian American, and American feminist literatures have invigorated and revived the American literary scene and challenged the institutionalized canon.~? Chicana writers, likewise, are joining in and expanding the frontiers of America cas' belle lettres.

0

POETRY

Lorna Dee Cervantes' "Bird Ave" introduces the reader to the tough ~world of the Chicana adolescent living on the edge of the world in a barrio street. The title, with its play on words (bird = ave) and multiple connotations, reiterates Cervantes' particular predilection for these winged creatures (cf. *Emplumada*, 1983) in her poetry. Bird, of course, in England's street jargon means "girl" or what Americans call "chick." The "birds" on Bird Ave are tough, indeed. Cervantes invokes the late 1960s atmosphere through her clever incorporation of lines from rock-and-roll songs symbolic of the era, such as the hit from the English rock group the Rolling Stones "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and the Diana Ross and the Supremes childlike, highvoiced refrain "Baby, Baby, ooo Baby." This intertextuality subtly provides a reference to a specific historical period.

The representation of tough, teen-age Chicanas walking the streets on hot summer days, challenging the world with their street talk, street walk and street cunning, strikes another blow to the image of the passive, timid Chicana.l' This is another vision of Mexican American women far removed from "Nice-little-girls-who-go-to-church-on-Sundays-in-their-starched-white-dresses-to-worship-the-Virgin-Mary."

On the other hand, "Bird Ave" conjures up another stereotype—the streetwise pachuca. The poetic voice narrates the world of the alienated, gangobsessed young woman who, in order to survive, teams up with others in similar circumstances and, instead of being "screwed," do the "screwing" themselves. The visual, shocking,

attention-getting costume of the pachuca— "teased tough hair", "teased tight skirts"—proclaims membership in the school of hard knocks. The barrio streets are not a young lady's sorority house and initiation into this exclusive club requires good dosages of sweat, blood and violence:

She had it then
all total control
banging my head
on the blacktop for effect.

Cervantes cleverly juxtaposes and inverts, subverts, Establishment institutions through their deformed association with the dispossessed. Membership in exclusive private clubs requires an initiation: the protagonist of "Bird Ave" is initiated by having her head banged on the street's hard pavement. The metaphor for military, "brass," is incongruently juxtaposed with the three young girls in the poem: "beauty, brains and brass." This metonymic association reveals the paramilitary nature of the group at war with society. The streetwise Chicanas live in a jungle and they are the "model Rambos."

INTRODUCTION 5

.....
0

Likewise the Catholics' revered religious symbol of God, the Trinity, is parodied in its blasphemous association with the tough pachucas. "We were the trinity," the poetic voice brags. Finally the police are ridiculed by the threesome's appropriation of the police's motto "To protect and to serve," translating it into "We're here to serve." The reader recognizes full well that the three street-wise adolescents are really not here to render essential services but on the contrary to do harm or serve as drug dealers. Through this process of slogan transformation, the police are transposed (by association) into just another tough street club, albeit

sponsored by the Establishment. Cateyes' insistence on ethics ("you gotta understand / about ethics"), the darling word of a hypocritical Establishment who in the eyes of the barrio youth is perceived as not having ethics at all, is repossessed by the ghetto gang members. Ethics to barrio gangs are essential to their survival. They must have ethics, a special kind of ethics, a barrio honor code, which permits the gang members to trust only each other.

Cat-eyes, Mousie and Flaca Pea are rejects of society. They seek, therefore, to reintegrate themselves into their own space, reinventing themselves from the barrio jetsam that an uncaring society refuses to acknowledge and accept. Flowering in the midst of a sterile world, the young tough-as-nails girls refuse to capitulate, to fade, disintegrate into nothingness. They assert their right to be, to exist and, not wishing to display any vulnerability, they hide their wounds in macho body language and a rough exterior. The streets are mean and so are Cat Eyes, Mousie and Flaca Pea who have divested themselves of their humanity and welded their identity into ubiquitous urban animal survivors: cats and mice. The lessons learned off the streets have taught them well; nothing can equal the barrio's no-nonsense survival skills.

It was tough
to know it all
and we haven't
learned anything
since

it was tough to know it all and we haven't learned anything since

0

The connection between ghetto streets as an educational institution is rendered through the initiation-graduation rite of having your head banged the concrete:

grins and made
lemon crap
out of my cheeks
before letting me up
all righteous rage
sin class ni pomp
and circumstance

grins and made lemon crap
0

The carefully cultivated impregnable exterior of the poetic persona and her friends hides the encoded social protest and the indictment against a society that is a knowing accomplice in the molding of such characters as Cat-eyes, Mousie and Flaca Pea.

Equally astute in depicting the world of the dispossessed is the poem "Astro-no-mia" which by its very title denotes the unprivileged position of the poetic voice that is expressed in the plural communal "we"—the Chicanas. "Astro-no-mia" encompasses the wrenching realization that for Chicanas this Earth is not theirs ("Astro-no-mia"="Planet-not-mine"). The word, of course, derives from astronomia=astronomy, the science of astronomy. The title, therefore, is invested with several connotations: the planet earth and the poverty-stricken Chicanas who, living in the midst of plenty, do not own any part of it. It also connotes the academic discipline of the physical sciences—chemistry, physics, mathematics, etc.—which are represented by the sinecdoque "astronomy." Chicanas/os have historically been prevented from "owning," from acquiring knowledge in the sciences through a substandard educational system.~3 A sisterly, feminist connection is made via the association of the Chicanas who, kept in inferior schools, feel: "The closest we ever got to Science / was the stars" and the Greek Goddesses

Diana, Juno, Pleides las siete:

hermanas, daughter, captives
of Zeus, and the children, the children
changed into trees, bears, scared into stars.

These Greek goddesses parallel present day Chicanas, since they too were victims of patriarchal law represented by the all powerful archetypal patriarch, the Greek God Zeus.~4 Thus the only avenue by which Chicanas could reach the stars was through psychological states of mind: dreaming, the imagination, reveries, desire. However, reality, represented by a mother's voice, rudely interrupts the dreaming and "shoots" them down from a lofty imagination:

Our mothers would call, the fathers
of fate, heavy like mercury, would trash
our stomachs into our wombs. Cold
We'd rollercoaster back down to the earth

Patriarchal law, the rule of man, is hard to escape. Orion, man, aims his shaft "shooting his shaft into my lit house from the bow," and the poetic voiced is forced to obediently reply to the command "y ya voy"="I go now" or "I am coming." Cervantes cleverly continues to display her splendid verbal dexterity in the last line "y yo? Hay bow. Y ya voy" ("And me? I bow. And I go.").

The strong fist series of poems "Bananas" (I-V) strikes at our political consciousness and wakes us up to the reality of poverty, political repression, racism and other important social issues. Through the title "Bananas" the author cleverly links such diametrically different populations, both ethnically and geographically speaking, as Estonians and Chicano/Latin Americans.

The strong fist series of Poems "Bananas" (I-V) strikes at our political to the reality of poverty, political repression, racism and other important social issues. Through the title "Bananas" the author cleverly links such diametrically different populations, both ethnically and geographically speaking as Estonians and Chicano/Latin Americans. as Estonians and Chicano/Latin Americans.

Amerir~nc

0

While "Bananas I" centers its themes on the scarcity of food (and by extension, the drabness of life and the yearning for some exotic ray of light, for brighten their lives), "Banana II" zeroes in on the political and economic oppression and exploitation of the Latin Americans who do have an "exotic" environment and "exotic" life styles. The United Fruit Company train takes bananas out of the South and Central American countries but leaves in its wake death and abject poverty. The Colombian massacres are invoked as are the epidemics, the starvation of the Indians and peasants in the land of exotic and plentiful produce. The mestizo poor serve only as fertilizers for the high yielding fields.

In "Banana III" the linkage becomes closer between addressee and poetic voice. The poem is structured through the use of the epistolary mode—a letter to I (Indrek of "Bananas I"). Here racism is highlighted. The ethnicity of the poetic voice is underscored and the "strangers in their own land" feeling overpowers the narrator as she is asked "Where are you from?"

Concerns related to ecological issues are expressed. The use of pesticides, a primary issue with Mexican American farmworkers, is explicitly discussed and underscored.

The raping of the environment dominates "Bananas IV." Here the issue is not bananas but the mining of uranium, a primary element in nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, just as the harvesting of bananas brought poverty, death and hardships to the Indian and mestizocampesinos of South and Central America, the mining of Uranium in Big Mountain (Colorado?) rains destruction and suffering on the Native Americans in the western part of the United States. The local vegetation is destroyed as are the sheep, and Native Americans are left without their major economic means of survival.

"Bananas V" returns to the stark reality of the previously Russian occupied northern country, Estonia, and linkage again is weaved through the oppression of peoples. The "exiles in their own homeland" are not Chicanos in the United States or Native Americans as had been intimated in the other poems

but are Estonians. Unemployment sears the soul—no-work-no-food is the mantra by which they live and die. Non-stop hunger is their lifestyle.

Toward the closure of the poem, the poetic voice returns to ecological issues. Nuclear power, nuclear weapons, nuclear testing bring forth issues of radiation and the by-products that harm the ecological systems of the world. In particular harm is wrought upon humans, be it cancerous tumors in adults or birth defects in infants. The poetic voice finds the answer in poetry. Poetry feeds the soul and ultimately is the one sustenance humans cannot do without.

Taking a different tack from the "Bananas" poems, Cervantes approaches the subject of giving birth from a personal, autobiographical mode in her poem "First Beating." Some Chicana poets have used the metaphor of birthing, as in "birthing" themselves or "birthing" a poem, effectively in their writings. Alma Villanueva and Cervantes herself have utilized this trope in the past. Previously, in her poetry collection *Emplumada* (1983), Cervantes had written a poem related to the "birthing" of self as a metaphor for the process of maturation and growing stronger. In "First Beating," the poem included in this collection, she returns to the birthing metaphor but this time it is a paean to literally giving birth to a baby. The poetic voice views the birthing of her baby as a miracle. The strength and power of the infant amazes the poet, who marvels at the miracle of birth and development.

The poetic persona is particularly astonished at the strength and energy of the new life. This new life had to struggle through all sorts of barriers in order to make it through. The poet admires the new life that she perceives as having had to come up from an old life, a bitter, lost life (mainly the mother's). The new life brings a sense of hope and strength to the old life (the mother) and makes an identification and linkage between the new and the old life. This identification brings hope and optimism for a better future. Motherhood, then, is perceived as a creative process and equated with writing poetry, with being born again.

Lucha Corpi's "Romance Negro" ("Dark Romance") was her personal response to the article "The Politics of Rape: Sexual Transgression in Chicana

Fiction." The study was read at the conference and elicited a strong emotional response.~5 Corpi, for instance, had not intended to read this particular poem from her previously published collection Palabras de Mediodía/Noon Words but, because the thematic material covered in the poem coincided with the "Rape" article, she felt compelled to include it during the poetry recital session and in the anthology as well.

"Romance Negro" narrates the sexual violation of a young woman who in despair hangs herself from an orange tree, where the orange tree and the non-present flower, the azahar or orange blossom, symbolize the woman's frustrated future wedded life.³⁶ The poem is a tour de force in its juxtaposition of sensuality and eroticism with the negative vectors of violence and brute masculine force which destroy a budding, beautiful life. The images and metaphors, creating an atmosphere found in the romances of Garcia Lorca, invoke the exotic sensualness of a tropical climate: vainilla (vanilla), caña (sugarcane), canela (cinnamon), cacao (chocolate), etc. Corpi elaborates a strong linkage between woman and nature by applying the above imagery to the young woman, Guadalupe, who is luxuriously bathing in the afternoon sun in the river just before the violation occurs. The sensualness and relaxed atmosphere contrast sharply with the male principle which suddenly and unexpectedly intrudes. The peaceful connection between woman and nature is brutally severed through the violent force ravishing the woman:

Y en un instante arranco la flor
Estrujo la leche hasta cambiarla en sangre
(And on the instant cut the flower
Wrung blood from the milk)

A patriarchal order is established and reaffirmed in the father's acceptance of a "fine mare" in exchange for his daughter's violation. The young woman's response to her powerlessness in this patriarchal system is to commit suicide by hanging herself from her father's orange tree.

A sense of futility and inevitability pervades the poem. It is a pessimistic statement about the impossibility of breaking the chains of oppression enslaving women. However, Corpi posits a challenge to the reader to become involved in effecting a change in the current state of affairs where rape is committed with impunity by males and with the tacit approval of other males. The author structures the challenge through the protagonist's anal demise, for it is impossible to leave the reader untouched when reading the lines:

Y Guadalupe . . . Guadalupe colgo
su vida del naranjo del huerto
y se quedo muy quieta alli
con los ojos al rio abiertos
(And Guadalupe . . . Guadalupe hung her life
from the orange tree in the orchard,
and stayed there quietly,
her eyes open to the river.)

Guadalupe's hauntingly opened eyes point to the scene of the crime, to the dastardly deed left unpunished. The young woman's tragic death is a more powerful call to arms than strident rhetoric could ever be: It is very difficult, once having read the poem, to ever forget Guadalupe's accusing dead eyes.

In a recent interview with Mireya Perez-Erdeli, Lucha Corpi confides her extreme psychological and spiritual need to write poetry. After a two-year hiatus from her creative writing, she declared:

El silencio poetico de dos anos cast me mate y despues volvio otra voz muy diferente a la de Palabras (la primera coleccion). Es una voz mas sombria. En Palabras hay mucha luz y hay mucho color y hay muchos contrastes. Es poesia de sentidos³ es sensual. En Ciudad en la niebla, que es el siguiente que escribi, son los elementos del invierno, la poesia es sombria. Es aura. Es una voz distante. Es una voz que esta activamente participando en lo que ve, y lo que

siente y lo que esta a su alrededor.t'

Indeed, Lucha Corpi's seven new poems included here are evidence of an intellectual abstractness much more pronounced than in her earlier work. Their imagery can be classified as bordering on, if not directly partaking of, the magic realism mode so prevalent in Latin American writers.

Lucha Corpi, a Mexicana/Chicana from Jaltipan, Veracruz, received a solid education in Mexico and thus is perfectly at home in the Spanish language. Corpi, of course, is bilingual and does write some of her creative work in English. One of Corpi's major contributions to Chicana poetry is to insist (by her actions) that Spanish is part of our literary cultural heritage and we should never forget it. This is indeed a strong political stance, since in our English-dominant country it is difficult, if not impossible, to publish in other languages. As a poet wishing to communicate, therefore, she is taking a risk in challenging the English-speaking world with her Spanish-written poetry.

Seen in the above light, Lucha's poetry makes a strong political statement. However Lucha may not even be conscious of the political stance she is assuming by merely writing in Spanish. Her intellectual honesty impels her to write from the heart and, if Spanish is the communicative code that surfaces, so be it. Her internal need to write supersedes all other external factors. Fortunately for the reader, this particular stance has produced some of the most outstanding, beautifully constructed poetry written in Spanish this side of the border. Lucha's grasp and dexterity of the Cervantine tongue equals, if not supersedes, some of the best poets in Latin America.

The collection published in this study is introspective, subjective and impregnated with internal tension. It is the expression of an anguished soul who suffers the pangs of a highly developed intellectual mind in search of answers to an existential angst and, not apprehending them, reverts to a bittersweet melancholy. At the center of Lucha's poetry is the eternal conflict between man versus man and man versus woman. Corpi thematizes the futility of seeking and finding harmony with the Other. With steely implacability the poetic voice

dissects relationships only to discover pain and disillusion. Lucha's poems end in despair ("Invernario") or stoic resignation ("Recuerdo intimo"). Her liberal, progressive concern for the human condition is evident in "Indocumentada angustia" and "Sonata a dos voces." The last two poems in the collection "Cancidn de invierno" and "Llueve" reflect on the theme of death and its inescapability. The motif of the constantly falling rain is the thread that unites the seven poems.

Corpi's first poem "Invernario" projects a paradoxical universe of abstract images with sensual, down-to-earth elements. The first stanza commences with a set of disembodied eyes reflecting the turbulent discharge of violent natural phenomena—a rain storm approaching. In the mirror-like surface of these cold, surrealistic, penetrating eyes, the cobbled-stone streets as well as the sensual greenery of the wheat herds still humid from the night rain are faithfully reflected. Other elements found in a small rural Mexican town— white-washed houses, an old peasant with violin in hand, etc.—are encompassed in the all-seeing eyes.

The second stanza changes from the third person narrator to the first person, and we find that the poetic persona too is included in the all-powerful reflecting gaze. However, upon perceiving her reflection, the poetic voice is surprised to see that her reflected self is not realistic but has been fragmented into a thousand pieces "coma quien mire en el mar / su imagen fragmentada / por la corriente ind6mita." The poetic voice realizes that seeing herself in the gaze of the Other has been lethal, for she has been transformed from her initial humanity into the natural inanimate world of

en coral
y sombra
y pez
en roca
y mineral fosforescente.

The metaphor "coral" conjures a vision of red, that is, blood—suffering. Coral is an inert element belonging to the natural world. The poetic persona first metamorphosed from human to coral is further decomposed to sombra (shadow)—a mere illusion of what she used to be as a human being. Although the third element transforms the poetic persona back to the animate world, ash, this can be perceived as another metaphor for nothingness since the illusiveness of the ash swimming in water renders their corporeality difficult to observe. The next line, nevertheless, retransforms the persona from a live entity back into the mineral world of the rock. The Anal line completely annihilates even this corporeality by converting her merely into a bright evanescent light: "mineral fosforescente."

The dehumanizing experience leaves the poetic voice and her desire for human contact imprisoned in a world of suffering and silence "entre el demiángulo del ojo / y el origen del canter." The severity of this suffering and unsatisfied desire is rendered through the shocking and unsettling image of "coma un suicide impenitente / me acecha mi de sea / por sus brazos . " The bittersweet desire of self-annihilation is perceived through the metaphor of the "suicide impenitence."

If "Invernario" evinces an alienated self whose only escape from this torturous existence is to self-destruct, we encounter a more harmonious self in "Recuerdo íntimo." In this poem the poetic voice narrates in the first person singular an anecdote from the past. In a bittersweet, melancholic tone stimulated into the recall mode by the rainy weather, the poetic "I" reminisces about a similar rainy day in the past. The narrator describes how the three of them—the cat Finnigan, the baby and the poetic persona—immersed themselves in the warm comforting water of the bath tub—an urban Noah's Ark—and waited out the storm, thus escaping annihilation. Unbearable memories creep into the poetic consciousness. The poet, however, refuses to yield and takes comfort in the purring of the cat and the smile of her two-year-old child: "Es todo lo que necesito recordar."

"Fuga" depicts a poetic persona who narrates the process of escaping from

an imprisoned state to a more liberated one. The narrating voice describes her lack of freedom, both physical and verbal, through the metaphors "muro"=heavy, thick walls, and "silencio"=silence, voicelessness. Flight is perceived as initiating in her aural sense, the ear (oido) since the flutterings of wings—again a metaphor for freedom—and the murmuring of falling rain—a metaphor for "outside"—beckon the protagonist to flee. The transformation of the poetic persona from prisoner to free spirit is phoenix-like, for the flight to freedom is structured through the metaphor of fire:

me decidi por el fuego
y en su promesa de agostos oportunos
mi corazon ardio
una noche de invierno.l8

The imprisoned poetic voice fantasizing a future alive with warmth and promise severs the cold shackles that imprison her and flees.

The second stanza introduces an interlocutor "you" to whom the poetic voice directs her ire. The reader now realizes it was a lover who through his caresses imprisoned the protagonist. Stanzas z-7 incorporate powerful action verbs in the htst person preterit to structure the violent action the poetic person had to undertake in order to free herself: "Cruce," "lance," "cauterice," "borre," "clausure." These verbs depict actions of leaving and discarding. Included is the verb cauterize' which is a medical term and has resonances of pain, lacerations and wounds. The finality of the actions are structured through the word cla~sure'(closed): "y clausure las puertas de la historia / pare no recorder mas tu nombre ni mi nombre." The stanza conveys the superhuman effort to erase and forever forget the past, the lover's name and even her "self" that was part of that lover.

As the narrator escapes—adders—she finds an unexpected freedom and discovers her poetic voice. The motif of gaining knowledge through suffering is encoded in the lines, "Afuera / en el invierno de los dioses / con mano

temblorosa destape el silencio." The narrator perceives poets as Gods who in their "winter"—winter being a metonym for extreme suffering (as for example winter of our discontent)—create poetry. Here then in the temporal space of the Winter of the Gods the poet discovers her creativity: she dares to "uncover" with "tremulous" hand the "silence" reigning tyrannically over her before her flight. Witchlike, the poetic voice discovers her powers and the seeds of her poetic Ore burst out over her body, her temples (mind), her "pechos" (heart=emotions, feelings) and fingers (instruments for structuring the written word).~9 Explosively, poetry bursts forth through the images of "sangre" (blood=life), "trigo"=fertility, "luz de junio" (summer light). The protagonist continues to describe the poetic universe newly found. This vibrant, vital universe is populated with beautifully constructed images garnered from the cosmos (the night, the stars, the evening light), human experience ("dolor/y canto"), biological miracles ("espiga," "pez dorado"), and marine life from whence we all came ("escama," "espuma," "sat").

Closure is achieved through the image of a prehistoric marine animal, the whale, who, impregnated with knowledge due to her longevity, announces — even though with melancholic voice—the beauty of a future harmonious poetic life: "anunciando la amplitud ecuanime / de un equinoccio boreal."

In "Indocumentada angustia" Lucha Corpi denounces the destructiveness and rapacious nature of urban industrialized society and the plight of the undocumented worker exploited by that society. The "rascacielos" (skyscraper) is a metonym for industrialized western civilization. Industrialized society in turn is described as insatiable harpies destroying the cosmos: eating stars, the moon, poisoning the wind. Technological society is a destroyer of dreams, of the imagination, of fantasy. The wind imprisoned in this man-made jail (the skyscrapers) becomes enraged and strikes out at the flowers destroying them, thereby introducing even more violence in the cosmos. The wind's destructive force can only be soothed by the falling rain.

As the falling rain soothes the angry wind, the fog emerges pregnant with life (migratory birds), and through its misty sponginess cushions the pain, the

sufferings of the partly hidden (in the fog's mist) undocumented worker. The sad plight of the Mexican migratory worker is rendered in the poem's closure:

acallando la indocumentada angustia
del ilegal en su propia tierra,
hundiendo sus dedos en la luna y en la lejanía sin puertos
ni faros.

INTRODUCTION IS

0

The Mexican immigrant, who once owned this land, now can only dream of achieving a better life ("hundiendo sus dedos en la tuna," the poetic phrase having a double valence in meaning: through hard work and through his dreams of a better life). There is really no hope for ending the sufferings of the migrant worker. Dispossessed, the migrant is a perpetual pilgrim in search of his own land, set adrift without beacons or ports. Although Corpi has stated in an interview that

no escribo poesia politica y por esa razon siempre estoy al margen y ademas escribo poesia en español y por esa razon siempre estoy al margen de la literatura chicana. Estoy en las villas. Es decir si tu le dices a alguien que vas a tener una conferencia y vas a invitar a escritores chicanos, te aseguro que en el 90% de los casos no piensan en mi para invitarme. Piensan en Lorna Dee Cervantes, Alma Villanueva, Bernice Zamora, en otras escritoras. Porque son escritoras que llevan como centro de su trabajo el barrio. Yo no me crié en un barrio—es otra vez falsificar la experiencia, la existencia. Para mi eso seria oportunista, tratar de pasar y de escribir así para poder ser parte de ese mundo. Yo no nací, no crecí en el barrio y si empiezo a falsificar mi experiencia, empiezo a falsificar todo.²⁰

"Indocumentada angustia" demonstrates Corpi's sensitivity toward the

;offerings of mexicanos in the United States. It should be pointed out that the poem, although belonging to the social protest genre, is infused with beauty and poetic sensibility and underscores that politics and poetics are not mutually exclusive but can be profitable partners in beautifully conveying a specific message.

Webster's dictionary describes the sonata as a musical composition "in three or four movements contrasted in rhythm and mood but related in tonality and having unity of sentiment and style." Lucha Corpi in her poem 'Sonata a dos voces' utilizes the structure of the sonata to render a poetic composition in two "movements": a "Largo Frenetico" and an "Adagio." the frantic rush of urban life. Time is dissolved and annitthe mad rush to survive the urban jungle.

Se congregan parvadas de semanas
domingos llenos de numeros
jueves quimericos
en los que el tiempo
se traiciona a si mismo
y regresa a la hora cero.

The irony of this mad rush to annihilate time is delineated through the pedestrian tasks the poetic voice is forced to undertake: meetings, messages, groceries, dirty clothes, etc.

The poetic persona continues enumerating the infinite number of everyday tasks demanded in our daily lives. However, she begins with such pedestrian activities as stitching a shirt and slowly enters the poetic world through the metaphor "deshilar ausencias." Here the domestic task of sewing deshilar, undoing stitches, is applied to undoing the memory of an absent loved one. The image of the absent loved one is reiterated in the line "y el amigo partio sin decir palabra." The poetic voice becomes progressively more melancholic and closes the first "movement" with a nostalgic bittersweet tone: "cuando hubo que planter jacintos / en las tumbas de nuestros muertos."

The "Largo Frenetico" describes the conditions that have left the poetic persona

voiceless, inarticulate, without the ability to write poetry: "y la palabra queda entrelabios/como un debil aroma a jazmines muertos." A linkage is made here between the flowers planted at the tomb of the dead and the dead voice exhaling only the aroma of "jazmines muertos." The poetic persona, however, realizes that life continues, and the image of a young girl, perhaps the poet herself in her father's house, dreams of a future life traveling around the world. The continuation of life, in spite of the violence surrounding it, is rendered in the image of the "limonero" which "ha dado flor y fruto / entre mil bales de lluvia / y la violencia del viento." This stanza foreshadows the closure of the poem and the message of social protest encoded in it. The final stanza delivers the political message that

en El Salvador los niños mueren de prisa
y en Africa la sangre se seca lenta
y no hay palabra que pueda detener
el largo beso de sombras de la muerte

The only salvation left for humanity, the only solution to the senseless killings in our troubled globe is to love each other.

For the narrator poetic creativity, the poetic voice, is silenced by both the inanities of life (washing dirty clothes, answering memos, attending endless meetings) and the bloody violence raining on all parts of the planet. Both are deadly to the poet's desire to create, to sing songs of life.

"Cancion de Invierno" is an elegiac poem dedicated to Magdalena Mora, a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Mora was extremely active in social issues concerning Chicanos. Her premature death was a blow to the Chicano activist community. Corpi in "Cancion de Invierno" thematizes the transitoriness of life: here today, gone tomorrow. The Hispanic model for this poem is the elegy written by Jorge Maurique, El Marques de Santillana (1440-1479), in "Coplas por la muerte de su padre." Analogous to the Marques de Santillana's poem, Corpi elucidates on the "fugacidad de la vida":

En un abrir

y cerrar de ojos
lleno
de magia
relojes
y sueños viejos
llega el invierno:

Life's ultimate destiny is death. The constant transformations of energy yield the never-ending cycle of life-death-life-death. The thermodynamics of the universe stimulate continuous chemical reactions and transformations. The poet intuitively grasps this basic law of physics:

Nada hay fijo ni perenne
ni la lluvia
ni la semilla
ni tu
ni yo
ni nuestro dolor
en este mundo que sangra

The state of continuous flux in the universe, the unfathomable nature of these mysterious never-ending transformations produces unbounded anxiety and angst in the poetic voice. And the only weapon the poet has at her disposal to combat complete annihilation is the poem itself: "venciendo la furia del olvido verso a verso."

Corpi's last poem "Llueve" returns to the motif of the continuously falling winter rains utilized to structure the infinite melancholy and sadness the poetic voice is experiencing. The uninterrupted falling rain is analogous to the falling tears the poetic voice seems to be shedding. The sentient world outside is affected by the incessant rain. A nexus between the poet's past and the insect world is structured in the fourth stanza:

Las hormigas
desterradas de sus nidos
cargan sus muertos
hasta que ellas mismas
caen bajo el peso
en una tina de baño
o en la alacena llena de miel y de pan

The poet and the ants have been exiled from their homes, from paradise. The flood annihilates many of these ants and their compatriots unselfishly carry the dead ants with them only to perish under the weight of the dead burden.

The poet wishes for a spark of life to interrupt the gray, mist of the falling rain. But the electrical spark fails to materialize and only the rain continues in its endless downpour. The poetic persona intuits that the time is not yet ripe for a transformation:

mas solo llueve
Lluvia flea
Lluvia manse
Lluvia infiniea
No es tiempo, no es tiempo

.....

Evangelina Vigil's six poems evince a new introspection and preoccupation with both time and the creative process. Her first poem in this series "the parting" is an elegy; embedded in the poem, however, are two central concerns: the inability to decipher the meaning of life through nature's primal language—"we listened to the cricket's urgent song / a message we tried to decipher / it eluded us"—and the circularity of time. The poem situates the action at wintertime. Summer's bountiful days of fertile sunshine turn to autumn and the harvesting of the fruits of summer. The inception of winter

introduces the final falling of the last green leaf, and death and desolation predominate in a winter landscape bereft of green plants and flowers, bereft of life.

The motif of the cricket (which in American popular lore is a lucky omen) will be a constant element reiterated in her other poems. The cricket is presented here as the bearer of nature's special message. The poetic persona, unable to decode this "urgent song." Nevertheless, the messenger is able to plant the seed and induce a state of somnolence, of sleep. And it is in this dream state that the poetic persona and the other mourners become more receptive to nature's specific message; as the mourners sink into stupor, they are immediately awakened by the fierce wind that insistently encircles the house and demands to be led back to life: "rattling windows / shaking the screens / like spirits, wanting in." Here the connection between the dearly departed, nature and those in mourning is cleverly structured through the linkage between the insistent personified wind rattling and shaking the windows and screens, and the "spirits" who refuse to disappear. They want to join the living inside the house.

The man-made artifacts, the windows, impede the spirits' entrance but nevertheless allow the mourners to decipher, to some extent, nature's encoded message. The branches of the young trees struggling persistently to survive the winter wind outside the grievers' window indicate that springtime will eventually follow. This realization of the circularity of time is expressed in the last two lines of the stanza: "time's simultaneous arrival / and departure."

Having grasped nature's message of time's "eternal return," the mourners' can finally accept the beloved's death and can let go of him/her ("despedir"="soltar").²² The ritual parting is enacted in the Spanish language with a heartfelt despedida ("despedida"="acompanar por cortesia al que se va a marchar.") The Spanish formula of the despedida—"adios, querido amigo"—is augmented with the acknowledgement that this separation is not forever, for we shall all eventually follow those same footsteps into infinity—"nos vemos en el infinite." the Doet intones.

The second poem in this series, "in its absence," reiterates the theme of the "eternal return" and time's circularity. Here the two themes of time's circular nature and the creative process are conflated, since the central concern of the poetic voice is

structured in the disquieting question of "If nothing new exists under the sun what is left for me the poet to create?"

The despair of lacking inspiration to create new "songs" is reiterated in "the giving." "No longer / no longer can I—the poetic voice insists—think the poem is gone, words elude the poet. The vacuum created in the poetic mind is perceived to be related to the demands of every day living.²³ The poet finds this overwhelming, time-consuming, deadening. Those who from the mass of humanity are forced to conform. The price for fitting in, for conforming, is the loss of poetic inspiration. Therefore, the frustrated narrator is left with the bitter realization that "it's those who think like most / who excel."

Again in "spillage" the theme of poetic ennui, of the inability to write, is structured through the artifacts utilized in writing. The pen is perceived as static, cold, dead: "pen lies cold." Other writing utensils frustrate the poetic persona: "ink bottle sits" inactive; unenergized, the bottle of ink is personified and depicted as "sitting" unproductively. The next line, however, is even more despairing for the ink that is made to flow through the writers creative hand has spilled stupidly on the waiting blank page. The "indigo blotches" connote painful, purple "moretones" (from morado—purple) on the body. The poet suffers from writer's block and lack of inspiration. Time, however, is relentless "and tomorrow arrives / before daybreak/ and yesterday's words / can never be retrieved." Time stops for no one and each day of unproductiveness in the artistic realm can never be recuperated. The poetic persona is aware of the terrible loss: "a sigh of realization / is worth an eternity." Paradoxically, it is precisely this writer's block which led to the construction of the poem.

The absence of the creative voice in "spillage" contrasts sharply with the bountiful creativity and communicative skill of the natural kingdom in the poem, "equinox." In this poem we encounter once again the "cicadas" chattering in the month of August. The second stanza directs the reader to another animal domain full of activity and sensual pleasure: the trout in the river jumping and splashing, communicating their sense of being and beauty in their own natural code—body language.

A hint of the circularity of time is injected in the third stanza where the spectra of

death and decay is introduced through the metaphor of parched summer grass. The reader recognizes that with "parched summer grass" autumn and winter are just around the corner. Nevertheless this negative desolate image is contrasted with the "tall pecan trees" that gracefully celebrate their being alive and their own creativity through a perfectly choreographed dance. The stately trees do not fear the advancing shadows (of death through winter) but beckon them, gracefully knowing that they (the pecan trees) too will return next spring with bountiful fruit.

The fourth stanza journeys to outer space to the confines of the powerful sun in whose furnace-like center is the source of all creative energy. Thus cicadas, trout and pecan trees are all joined together through the symbol of the archetypal creator, the sun. The fifth stanza introduces the human element in the form of a child—an embryonic adult. The child symbolizes the continuation of creative activity for it gently stirs "in the center of afternoon dreams."²⁴ The last stanza returns to the cicadas and their lazy chatter; the circle is finally complete.

The preoccupation with the "eternal return" surfaces anew in "hacia un invierno?." Nature and time form the central axis structuring Vigil's poetic universe. The winter season is once more utilized as a metaphor for the end of a cycle, for death. The theme of poetic creativity conjoins nature and circular time to weave the triad informing Vigil's six poems.

In "hacia un invierno" the first stanza introduces the creative process of poetry as a painful ordeal that drains the poet emotionally and physically. Poetic creativity is perceived as emanating from internal wounds (both physical and emotional). The words are equated with blood which drips from internal lacerations. A metamorphosis ensues as the words "drip" becoming letters which hurt and wound, letters which cause emotional pain both in the writer and the reader: "ojos llorosos leyendolas / agua salada borrandolas." The powerful cleansing function of water from the falling teardrops do not alleviate the emotional turmoil of the grieving soul who continues to suffer.

The poetic voice once again seeks to find the answer in nature; in the singing of the "chicharras," cicadas. The poet intuits that nature knows the meaning of life and, furthermore, that structured in the natural world is the encoded message which humans

fail to decipher. Yet the singing chicharras, analogous to the poet, insist on singing the truth albeit to no avail.

The cosmic forces of nature, too, encode a message. The day bright and resplendent in the morning transmits its message like the chicharras; eventually, however, it too hides its face in the arms of the night, the chicharra eventually ceases to communicate its "urgent song" and becomes silent. And it is only the "grille," cricket, whose solitary song accompanies the souls that contemplate the full moon hoping to kind the answer beyond its silvery face.

Night-time and the starry sky bring hope to the poetic voice who in the darkness of the night nurtures a new illusion, a new hope. The poetic persona realizes the circularity of the process and wonders what it is that makes "hope spring eternal in the souls of humankind?"

.....

Several of Denise Chavez' poems in this collection are structured around the tension elicited by erotic passion and the easing of this tension through the cooling, soothing effect of water, often depicted as falling rain. In the poem "I Am Your Mary Magdalene," the poetic persona addresses an interlocutor who does not share the aroused, sexual desire the narrator is experiencing. The poetic "I" experiences feelings of guilt at her unbound, uncontrolled eroticism and compares herself to the archetypal repentant prostitute, the biblical Mary Magdalene. According to the New Testament Mary Magdalene is the harlot who wishes to join Jesus' group. She bathes Jesus' feet with precious oils and when the Apostles try to reproach her for her wastefulness and for her past wicked life, Jesus exonerates her and forgives her sins.²⁵ The poetic voice, by self-naming herself Mary Magdalene and expressing a desire to wash her beloved's feet, is paralleling the biblical prostitute and her tale of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation. The narrating "I" confesses her transgressions":

Often I have had to apologize
to men
for passions
wouldn't know

it would be this way

Female sexuality in our patriarchal culture has been denied, kept a dark secret up until recent times. It is only with the advent of the feminist movement that both men and women have acknowledged the extent and intensity of female sexuality. Chavez in her poem explores the problematics of female passion: men are often frightened by it; they do not like sexually aggressive women and are repulsed at women's openness of their sexual desires. Just as women have been socialized into hiding their intelligence, they have been equally socialized into repressing their sexual feelings.²⁶ A sexually active woman outside of marriage was stoned to death in biblical times.²⁷ During the Victorian period, even married women were supposed to dislike sex and saw the conjugal act merely as another wifely duty to be performed at her husband's request.²⁸ In our own century in the 1950s the dictum was: "Nice girls don't."

The poetic persona in "I Am Your Mary Magdalene" is punished for her sexuality and ardent passion: "Okay, banishment—/ that high tower." In a repentant voice the protagonist seeks forgiveness in the closing stanza: "I am your Mary Magdalene / come let me wash your feet."

The tension between lover and poetic persona is discerned in other poems such as "Tears," "Door," "Chekhov Green Love," and "Two Butterflies." A sense of frustrated passion, unsatisfied or unrequited love permeate these poems. Often the falling rain in Chavez' poetry brings a release from the extreme tension the poetic persona is experiencing. The falling rain is analogous to the act of making love, particularly at the point of orgasm. After the falling rain, the poetic persona experiences calm and relaxation.

.....

Naomi Quiñonez's fierce critique of patriarchal culture is constructed through a series of poems that depict the alienated woman: the woman alienated from her body, from herself. Her works point to the construction of female identity from the perspective of the male gaze. The woman, who is not an

"authentic" woman, but one defined and molded into a caricature by male dominated Madison Avenue's commercial advertisements. This definition is inscribed in the poem "Ultima II True Blue Eye Shadows of the Past." The poem focuses with hard, unflinching images on the emptiness of a woman's ritual each night as she unmasks, "unmakes" herself. The noun "teatro" (theater) is invoked to describe the falseness, the inauthenticity of her life. The props for making the "feminine" are enumerated in a scathing description of the nightly undressing ritual women undergo: "high heels stranded in the Bali girdle," "terror" at having forgotten one's lipstick at a bar.

The pain of being a woman, a woman jilted, scorned, left by a man is starkly depicted. The attempt to make this pain disappear through alcoholic bouts, the remembrance of unwanted pregnancies aborted but not erased from memory are chronicled in these uncompromising lyrics. The narrator rightly expresses the belief, "Somewhere there is a woman / dying to get out / past a burgundy rinsed head, / dying to leave the black leather / mini skirt at the scene / of someone else's crime." The lyrics hit below the belt and hold up a mirror to the face of a walking-wounded woman who, because of the dictates of a patriarchal culture, is still in the grasp of the woman-asBarbie-Doll, or woman-as-playmate of the month, syndrome.

The poem "Ultima II True Blue Eye Shadows of the Past" presents a woman whose "authentic" self is "Dying to spread legs wide and leap / past Hanes Opaque pantyhose / and a hundred stumbling men." Somewhere inside this farce, this poor imitation of a woman, lies a poet "who loves passion / more than Ultima II True blue / eye shadows of the past." The narrator's voice seeks liberation for this woman who is imprisoned in the clutches of Madison Avenue's version of womanhood.

In her poem "The Photograph," Quinonez continues the theme of unauthentic womanhood by presenting the travails of another protagonist, Adriana, who is likewise trapped in the patriarchal signs of femininity; Adriana of the blustering petticoats, the orange lips, the French-twist, the tiny waist, the spiked heels, and so forth. The reader is again presented with the patriarchally

constructed image of the feminine. The fact that Adriana— representative of womanhood—is alienated from herself is clearly stated in the poem: "Adriana of the / absent self/ the misplaced alma / the searching wound." The protagonist is portrayed as part of the scenario used to fulfill male egos; as yet another object surrounding the male, who likewise being alienated himself, searches through material objects in order to kind himself. The male here is also viewed as a "constructed man." The poetic voice intones: "Diego, the uncertain myth/of constructed men/the navigated ego / of place and placement."

The poem "The Photograph" is placed within the context of the 1950s (1958), a decade that witnessed the construction of womanhood in the image of the Marilyn Monroes, the Sophia Lorens, Jayne Manshelds, and other love goddesses who were unreal, unauthentic representations of womanhood. The construction of the feminine in a certain mold eventually led, through the efforts of feminists, to the scathing critique of this misrepresentation. The French feminist Simone de Bouvoir in her book *The Second Sex*, and later in the 1960s, the American feminist Betty Friedman in her manifesto *The Feminine Mystique* critiqued the false social construction of women.

The reality of women's lives and the fall from goddess to victim of spousal abuse and rape is chronicled in Quindnez's next poem "Spousal Rape." The poem is structured around the metaphor of a meal—a meal consumed by the male animal (here represented by a lion) and where the main "dish" is the female. The female bears the brunt of male violence and uncontrolled sexual desire. Spousal rape, ignored for many years by the courts and society, nevertheless leaves its indelible mark on the body of the woman, a signature of male violence that is never erased. The poetic voice gives closure to the poem with precisely this knowledge: "How many meals they managed / no one is certain / only the teeth marks on her throat / will ever say."

In her poetry Quindnez focuses not only on the victimized female but also presents an image of the archetypical strong female in "Ay que Maria Felix (or Maria was no Virgin)." In this poem the protagonist is a speaking subject. With a firm and strong sense of self, the poetic voice begins "I am Maria Felix."

Maria Felix, as almost every Mexican and some Mexican Americans know is the Mexican movie star who represented the quintessential strong woman—the hembra—or counterpart to the macho. Maria Felix defines and represents herself—arrogant, with an attitude, not a victim but instead the victimizer herself since she is always breaking men's hearts. She is a "Mexican to the max / molcajete Mama / calling the shots / shooting from the hips." However this, too, is a teatro, as the poetic voice implies; she is an invention of patriarchal cinematic imagination for members of a male audience who like their women strong. "Que teatro / swishing feminine / to the backlash of salvation."

The poetic voice inquires as to the veracity or authenticity of this silver screen invention: "Is she me, or a channel 34 mirage?" Again, the construction of womanhood by patriarchal society is only an "illusion of sexuality." Nevertheless, the image of the strong woman, of one who can spit in a man's eye and leave is alluring to women. Although the poetic voice acknowledges that this representation of women is merely a cruel illusion, she nevertheless finds comfort in the image of a woman who is not a victim: "Ave Maria, / Y que viva la Mujer!" Long live woman!—woman with a capital M is contrasted with Ave Maria—the Virgin Mary—she who has been touted as a model of women's submission to a patriarchal order.

Quiñónez seeks to empower women through the poetic voice structured in the poem "La Diosa In Every Woman." This empowerment is sought via the rekindling of our relationship with precolumbian Aztec mother goddesses. The poem is structured through the metaphor of the altar—an altar conceptualized in the female form of an offering of prayer for enlightenment, growth, and personal power and not in the patriarchal conceptualization of the altar as a place to kill, shed blood—a site where sacrificial rites are made to a bloodthirsty male deity. In order to fully comprehend the poem, one has to be knowledgeable of the Aztec pantheon of female goddesses—Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue, Malinalxochitli and Tonantzin.

Coyolxauhqui is the Goddess of the Moon who, with her four hundred brothers and sisters, the stars, sought to prevent the birth of Huitzilopochtli, God

of War, by killing Coatlicue their mother. Coatlicue, on the other hand is the Goddess of Life and Death, representing the duality of life that encompasses both ends of the spectrum. Tonantzin is the nurturing mother earth. She is a protectress and loving mother who looks after her children. Quiñónez's poem then is an altar, a woman's altar where women can kind—a voice taken away by patriarchal society. The poetic voice rejects the pedestal where previously women had been enshrined and imprisoned into passivity and inarticulate silence: stone idols don't speak. The shattered woman on the street can identify with Coyolxauhqui, the dismembered Aztec goddess and as such we, her female descendants, can reconfigure her, can make her whole again. With new knowledge women can seek unity and wholeness with themselves and with each other.

Likewise the women from Guatemala (or other Latin American countries) can identify with Coatlicue—the giver of life and death—for women indeed bring life to this world. Since Coatlicue is that entity in which opposites reside, in which conflict and resolution are encompassed within her nature (i.e. snakes—symbolic of regeneration, of life—and the skulls decorating her attire representing death), she is an excellent model for representing the duality of life. Gloria Anzaldúa, the Chicana feminist theoretician and poet, has found her to be a source of inspiration, of creativity.

Through the figure of Malinalxochitli one can find the power or strength to fight the battles encountered in our daily lives. The poetic voice suggests those downtrodden women oppressed by their daily exploitation in the workplace, for example, the seamstresses, can gain comfort, strength, and confidence through identification with the goddess Malinalxochitli. Tonantzin, on the other hand, is perceived as the source of fertility, of giving birth, but a birth not only of babies but of a new consciousness. The poetic voice finds inspiration for both men and women in these ancient goddesses. They represent a new beginning and not an end, for Quiñónez's altar is an altar of empowerment and not one of deadly sacrifice.

Quiñónez's poems chronicle women's daily struggle to give meaning to

life. They reflect a search for authenticity, an authenticity that has been lost in the mire of patriarchal society with its emphasis on power over others and on destruction through its fascination with war.

.....

The much-touted 1980s christened and enshrined as the decade of the Hispanic proved illusory at best and a cruel hoax on an exploding ethnic population who thought they were at last emerging from the shadows of invisibility. The optimistic hope of acquiring equity in the economic, political, educational, and social spheres of American society were dashed with the opening of the 1990s decade. This decade is proving to be an era of anti-immigrant backlash with the introduction of Proposition 187 in California in 1994. Proposition 187 seeks to deny an education to undocumented children, non-emergency medical services to undocumented workers, and in general to restrict social services to undocumented workers (who are in fact taxpayers). A new proposition dubbed the Civil Rights Initiative seeks to abolish affirmative action programs in the state of California and is being presented to the voters at the next state election. At the national level Newt Gingrich and his Contract with America followers are seeking to introduce similar bills. A period of increasing mean-spiritedness toward the poor, the "foreign" looking, the Other, and all of those not fitting the conservative ideal of middle- and upper-class America has been unfolding in this decade.

The poets, always attuned to the spirit of the ages, have begun to express through their lyrics a sense of outrage and protest. Gloria Eneida Alvarez's short poems in her collection *La Excusa/The Excuse* explore themes of alienation, of love lost and found, of spiritual despair and philosophical searching. However, her later poems are grounded in the reality of social inequalities and injustices.

Alvarez's poems in *La Excusa/The Excuse* collection written at the inception of the 1990s evidence a preoccupation with language and with the metaphysical as is shown in "Acordeon" [Accordion]:

Estoy atrapada

en un mundo de luz
Paginas ilimitadas se abren a mi
La palabra escapa
despues regresa, salta

I am caught in a world of light Boundless pages open up to me The word
escapes then bounces back
Atras cortinas vagas de pensamiento. Behind vague curtains of thought

The mystery of language continues to pervade the poet's imagination in "Sin complicaciones" ["Without Complications"]. Here she ponders the paradox of language, which when uttered (in anger, hate, or scorn) can produce "rivers of silence," rivers of silence.

The unfulfilled promise of language is critiqued in "Vuelvo y no recuerdo" ["I Return and I Don't Remember"]. The poem explores the optimistic seduction of words that promise to open channels of communication only to yield intolerable silences. Silence searches for "the word" to communicate with others. The Lacanian Symbolic Order, which seeks to make present that which is absent, is evident in these poems. The Symbolic Order does not yield that desired connection with the Other, and a sense of loneliness, alienation, of lack pervades the poem. The poet only knows "silence with its need to speak." The world of the Symbolic Order is unacceptable and leads the poetic voice to the imaginary world of dreams. The need to speak, to have a voice, to be able to articulate becomes psychologically unbearable and is somatically transposed to the body, which will experience pain. The knots in the tongue and the vocal cords will evidence themselves as knots in the body. The present is never verbally experienced but only "felt" through extra-linguistic modes such as "visions, dreams, admonitions, games, rites, lost words twisted by the distance and the noise." The poem explores the need to assert oneself and fiercely fights the fear of disappearing into nothingness. Diana Rebolledo in her seminal book *Women Singing in the Snou': A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (1995)

elucidates:

For many years Chicanas have been unable to write or to publish their writing if they did write. They were also working within a system in which language denied them. Thus to be able to write meant they had to "seize the language" (Ostriker) and become the subjects of their own narrations, and not the objects. This implies an extraordinary measure of empowerment for those women who were supposed to stay at home, be good wives and mothers, and be caregivers: active within the domestic sphere but not the public one. To find language, then voice, then consciousness of self and to be able to insert themselves as subjects has been very difficult, particularly for minority women writers. (Rebolledo, 1995 :X).

Alvarez's preoccupation with woman-as-speaking-subject continues to manifest itself in "Hueso de la noche" ["Bone of Night"]. And the image of being tongue-tied emerges again in "Deaf" in the startling line "Your tongue is tied to the bedpost." The male, too, can be without the Word, inarticulate, as expressed in the poem "De viaje" ["On a Trip"] and in "The Day It Began" ["E1 die que inicio"] where she exhorts her male interlocutor to

Accept its commiument
To speak to act
Take the Word
Take your Word
Take it for your own sake.

Alvarez uses more metaphysical terms in her poem "Spark/Chispa." Here the poet explores the meaning of life. She poses a series of beautifully crafted rhetorical questions to an invisible interlocutor regarding the meaning of reality. She does this by juxtaposing spiritual, poetic images against an incredibly beautiful natural landscape. Toward the closure of the poem she contrasts the physical reality of words, i.e. the materiality upon which they are based—the tongue, the lips, the palate, the air, with their spirituality.

The existential and metaphysical preoccupations of the early nineties yield to social concerns by 1993. Here Alvarez's poems evidence a preoccupation with events

taking place in Latin America and the slaughter of innocents taking place there through senseless class and racial wars. Her poem "Fallen Comrade, There Is No Mourning You" is a commemorative paean to a Maya-Quiche woman. The poetic voice does not mourn the death of a valiant soldier-woman but intuits that a victory in death for the sacrifice will make "every daybreak fertile, / dressing the morning star with hope." The poet calls for solidarity on the part of Chicanos with the courageous Maya-Quiche Indians against their oppressors.

The desperation and hopelessness of urban life is explored in her poems "Still Dreams" and "Contras/es/Contrasts." The poet zeroes in on the blight of the urban landscape abandoned by the middle-class Euroamerican majority. The poor, the homeless, the addicts, the wings, the dispossessed, the children, the throw-away people contrast sharply with zones of urban development right in the middle of skid row. The poet brays at the injustice of it all.

Alvarez continues her cry against social injustice in her poem "Vende futuro" ["Sells the Future"] where her protest centers on the hardships of immigrant workers. In "Totem/La siempre firme" Alvarez returns to expound on the vicissitudes experienced by women whose lives are filled with pain, racism, sexism, and poverty. The title plays on the stereotype of the superwoman who is all things to all people. Beyond the stereotype, according to Alvarez, is a woman who suffers, who feels pain, who is humiliated beyond belief. The central image of the body beset by life's hard knocks conveys to perfection the pain suffered by Latina women in a world that exploits them unmercifully and takes them for granted.

.....

Alma E. Cervantes's poetry is raw, untamed, speaking from the heart of the barrio. Therein lies its force and red-hot sparks that fly from an "untamed" tongue, as Gloria Anzaldua would put it, speaking volumes in which jab-like lines describe Chicana life on the other side of the tracks. The poems expound upon the violent "Piquetitos of Love," the jaded, worn-out dreams of jilted Chicanas and of love come and gone ("Had I Ironed Your Shirt"). The lot of the downtrodden Chicana is articulated in "Harta" while another group of downtrodden sisters is delineated in "A Toast." The hard-luck stories of wines (alcoholic women) barely surviving on the edge can be con