

## On Lorna Dee Cervantes

Lorna Dee Cervantes was born in 1954 in California. She grew up in San Jose, speaking English exclusively. This was strictly enforced by her parents, who allowed only English to be spoken at home by her and her brother. This was to avoid the racism and genocide that was occurring in her community at that time. Lorna Dee Cervantes is currently a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She considers herself "a Chicana writer, a feminist writer, a political writer" (Cervantes). Although her literary works are held in high esteem, she often lacks self-confidence concerning her writing. Her two collections of poetry, *Emplumada* and *From the Cable of Genocide*, are the only published works exclusively written by Cervantes. She explains that this is due to the fact that she has "never been a writer who sends out a lot of manuscripts and a lot of poems. . .because of the terror of rejection" (Cervantes).

Cervantes' poetry, as she disclosed in an interview, is "autobiographical as a strategy" (Cervantes). This has caused tension within her family. She has an uncle who for years has refused to speak to her due to this. Cervantes uses vivid language in her poetry to create power. As a poet, she believes that writing in the language of childhood, and in the language that one dreams in, is crucial to conveying thoughts. Her power of writing and status as a poet have recently become widely known, as she received the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation Writers Award in 1995 for her outstanding Chicana literature.

In addition to having written two major works of poetry, Cervantes edits novels and composes literary anthologies. One of the works to which she has lent her editing talents is *Mango*, a cross-cultural literary magazine. She also edits a poetry journal entitled *Red Dirt*. Her talent and wide range of literary work have resulted from many years of writing and discovering her voice. She writes to express her thoughts and emotions in an attempt to convey Chicana experience. Cervantes is composing a new book of children's poetry, which will include work from a seventy-eight page manuscript that she wrote at age fifteen. This latest work will be entitled *Bird Ave*.

Cervantes' personal experience as a woman of color and a Chicana writer has influenced the tone and style of her poetry. Her poetry is blunt, but its messages capture the souls of the readers and give them a glimpse of a turbulent life, much like her own, in hopes of helping them to grasp an understanding. In her first work, *Emplumada*, a collection of poems, she deals with the social environment, the class status of women, the poet's relationship with the words of nature, and the act of writing. In "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between the Races," Cervantes reveals a little of her feminist side, but more importantly, she focuses on the racism she senses outside of a community where she feels safe and how it can be hard to comprehend racism in a country that many races share together. This is clear in the poem when she writes:

I am not a revolutionary. I don't even like political poems. Do you think I can believe in a war between races?

I can deny it. I can forget about it  
when I'm safe  
living in my own continent of harmony  
and home, but I am not  
there.

Emplumada, Lorna Dee Cervantes' first celebrated collection of poetry, is the work of a poet on her way to becoming a major voice in American literature. From the Cables of Genocide will confirm her as one of the most talented and compelling poets writing today (Jessica Hagedorn, Arte Publico). The language and imagery that Cervantes uses to express a feminist and humanistic vision of her world has been well accepted not only within Chicano(a) literature, but among other American literatures. For her brilliant works that convey impacting messages about experiences that range from love to pain, she has won numerous awards. She is the recipient of two fellowship grants for poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities Fellowship. Emplumada won the American Book Award in 1981, and From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger won the Paterson Prize for Poetry and the Latino Literature Award.

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