

Jamie Wood Martinez: On Lorna Dee Cervantes

Lorna Dee Cervantes is among the first Latina poets to be recognized outside the Chicano community. Her work inspired many people during the Chicano movement.

Lorna Dee Cervantes was born on August 6, 1954, in the Mission District of San Francisco, California. Cervantes is of mixed Mexican and Native American ancestry. Her mother's Mexican ancestors intermarried with the Chumash Native Americans of the Santa Barbara area. Her father's heritage derives from the Tarascan Indians of Michoacán, Mexico. When she was five years old, her parents divorced, and Lorna, her mother, and her brother, Steve, moved in with her grandmother in San Jose, California. Lorna often accompanied her mother to the houses she cleaned. In these homes, she discovered the works of Shakespeare, Byron, Keats, and Shelley. Lorna began writing poetry when she was eight years old. She became fascinated with the lyrical potential of language, which was fed by her brother's musical talent. She contributed her writings to her school paper at Lincoln High School in San Jose.

In 1974, she accompanied her brother, who played with the Teatro de la Gente (Theater of the People) of San Jose, to Mexico City for the Quinto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos. Wanting to add to their repertoire, the group asked Cervantes to read her work as part of their performance. She chose to read "Barco de refugiados/Refugee Ship." Impressed by the poet's ability to exquisitely capture the Chicano dilemma of belonging completely to neither Mexican nor American culture, *El Herald*, a Mexico City newspaper, printed the poem. Soon after, her poetry appeared in *Revista Chicano Riqueña* and subsequently in many journals and reviews.

After her poetry reading, Cervantes devoted herself to writing, editing for *Mango*, a literary review, and helping other writers. She learned the printing trade and bought an offset printing press. She soon published chapbooks for Chicano writers with the assistance of *Centro Cultural de la Gente* (People's Cultural Center) of San Jose and *Mango Publications*. By 1978, she was beginning to gain national recognition. She received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and spent much of the following year at the Fine Arts Workshop in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she completed the manuscript for *Emplumada* (1981).

Emplumada is an amalgamation of the participle *emplumada* (feathered plumage, after or during molting) and the noun *plumada* (a pen flourish). The title and much of the verses throughout refer to Quetzalcoatl, the Mexican god of love, art, and creativity in his semblance as the plumed serpent, who symbolizes the full potential of human experience. *Emplumada* received national recognition. Nicolás Kanellos wrote that the collection "presents a young woman coming of age, discovering the gap that exists in life between one's hopes and desires and what life eventually offers in reality. The predominant themes include culture, conflict, the oppression of women and minorities, and alienation from one's roots."

In 1982, Cervantes's mother was brutally murdered in San Jose. The devastating loss took its toll on the poet. She allowed herself a period of grief and introspection before delving back into her creative life. She received her B.A. at San Jose State University in 1984 and studied at the University of California?Santa Cruz. Her education continued through the Ph.D.

program in the history of consciousness at the University of California?Santa Cruz. She did not graduate from the program. She released *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* in 1991. This collection includes stream of consciousness texts, surreal yet candid imagery, and a conviction that cannot be ignored.

Cervantes edited *Red Dirt* magazine and founded and directed *Floricanto Colorado*, which showcases Chicano and Chicana literature in Denver and surrounding schools. She joined the faculty at the University of Colorado?Boulder, where as a professor of English she teaches creative writing (poetry), poetics, cultural criticism, and aesthetics. Her writings continue to be discussed as excellent interpretations of a life and perspective that synthesizes the divergent parts of being human. Her work has appeared in nearly 200 anthologies, including the second volume of the *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, *Touching the Fire: Fifteen Poets of Today's Latino Renaissance*, *After Aztlán: Latino Poets of the Nineties*, and *Daughters of the Fifth Sun: A Collection of Latina Fiction and Poetry*.

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. She has been awarded the American Book Award, Paterson Prize for Poetry, Latino Literature Award, and Lila Wallace?Readers Digest Award for her work. She continues to speak and inspire fellow writers and has been invited to speak at the Library of Congress, National Museum of Women in the Arts, and numerous universities and institutions across the United States, Mexico, Spain, and Colombia. Her latest book, *Drive: The First Quartet*, was released in 2005.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Jamie Wood Martinez [2]

Review Process:

Single Review

Target:

Lorna Dee Cervantes

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/jamie-wood-martinez-lorna-dee-cervantes>

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