

New Chicano Literature

Lorraine López

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Not all new Chicano authors emerge from the recent tide of immigrants. Another pool of culturally specific identity that differs significantly from the general pattern of Mexican American writers, who trace their roots to people who immigrated between the Mexican Revolution and the 1960s, are those who can claim centuries-long residence in the territory now with-

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in U.S. boundaries. There are relatively few of these writers because, simply, the northernmost provinces of nineteenth-century Mexico lost to the U.S. in the 1846 war had very few inhabitants. The great majority of that population was concentrated in New Mexico, an area that has never lacked writers. Before Texas, California, or New England had settlements, New Mexico had produced literature and witnessed dramatic performances. Among the established New Mexican Chicano authors figure Rudy Anaya and Jimmy

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Santiago Baca, master craftsmen in the novel and poetry respectively. Now a new name joins them: Lorraine López —more or less.

More or less because, born in Los Angeles (1956), López is a first generation migrant to California. Her parents moved to the coast from Belen, New Mexico, where the main part of her family has resided for some four centuries, tracing its arrival to the original founding of the colony. Yet, true to U.S. custom —once the children leave the family enclave, the generations continue dispersing — she too has moved again, coming to settle down in legendary Nashville, Tennessee, where she is now a professor of fiction writing and Latina/o literature at Vanderbilt University. On the way she studied at California State University, Northridge, dropped out to marry and raise two children, returned to finish a degree in education, taught secondary school, divorced, migrated back East all the way to the other coast to study at the University of Georgia where she completed a doctorate in creative writing (2000). Without exaggeration we can say that López has acquired a diverse, well-rounded education in many senses of the word.

With this background, no wonder López' debut volume of fiction impresses one as the product of a mature author. *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories* (2002)¹ doesn't read like a first book. Even when stories feature adolescent protagonists, there are none of the cutesy, naïve games that often betray writers in their first works —or linger intolerably in the writing of experienced ones. In part the impression that this is an author who has honed her skills in drafts that the public will never see is explained when one learns that López is also a second generation of another sort: one of the new writers privileged to study her craft with a Latina mentor of established reputation, in her case Judith Ortiz Coffer. In other words, López repre-

sents those new Latino writers who enter an educational system transformed by the struggles of earlier activists who created positions for Latino faculty so that subsequent generations of students could feel themselves more understood, more supported in their rite of academic and creative passage. Access to Latino mentors is no insignificant factor in the development of the new Chicano writers, a fact López herself readily credits for her success.

Lorraine López' fiction breathes fresh air into Chicano fiction when the balloon of the Chicana writers boom seemed to have sprung a leak. Following on a string of less than stellar novels by some of the leading established names, López' *Soy la Avon Lady* renews our expectations for good writing. One difference lies in López' eschewing of the pretentious efforts to crank out voluminous, commercial block busters, books that have proved tedious, prolix. López writes well-structured, judiciously measured short stories. She adds nothing extraneous. Notably absent are those superficial Latino markers that have come to plague recent publications: sprinkles of Spanish, often followed by English translation, that seem more like exotic spice added to a salad to make it ethnic than essential elements of the character's or the narrator's speech pattern. And instead of characters whose lives revolve perpetually around obsessive questions of ethnic identity, López' characters are too busy trying to manage immediate challenges to personal survival to worry about where they came from and why they are maladjusted. Alienation is more a pervading characteristic of contemporary Usonian life than a psycho-historical problem of ethnicity.² Ethnicity appears in the stories almost as a product of coincidence: it is part of who they are, not all they are; it adds something to their personal context, but doesn't explain their dilemma —or at least the narrator does not allow the story to bog down in meditation on the subject. Her characters may seem quirky, mildly or extremely disturbed by everyday irritations, often under excessive circumstantial pressure and pushed to the crisis point by one too many unfortunate turns of events, but they never strike us as the products

of academic or commercial manipulation by editors targeting a certain readership. Nothing in López' work appears calculated to market herself within the new niche of Latino literature.

Most impressive in her work is that in this first volume López achieves that difficult task of making what is essentially a tightly controlled artistic construct, the short story, seem spontaneous, natural, free flowing. Starting a López story is like jumping into the deep end of the pool. No wading in slowly here. The first paragraph—if not the first line—plunges one into the middle of an action that seems to have developed long before. Readers will sense a full, complex world implicit in the dialogue, in details of the narrative, in apparently random allusions, yet the author offers few digressions to explain or fill in the blanks. Her stories flow ever forward, sweeping one into plots that will almost always end as abruptly as they began. Not that López just drops a story; quite the opposite: she displays keen awareness of when to close off a narrative for maximum effect. It is as if in full movement of a melody, the musician would stop playing to allow the audience, singing a cappella, to taking the song beyond the end of the performance itself. López has mastered ellipsis, resisting the temptation to tell too much, to fill space just because she could. Somewhere along the way she learned a lesson some of her predecessors would be well served to heed: leave readers wanting more, not wishing for less (coincidentally, her mentor Ortiz Coffer is also a master self-editor).

López locates many of her stories in New Mexico, but again refreshingly different in location. Far from myth-laden environments (Anaya's *llanos* or his and Baca's northern urban streets), López places her characters in the hardly ever explored Truth or Consequences. Were the name not that of a real city just off Interstate 25 in lower mid-New Mexico, 150 miles south of Anaya's and Baca's Albuquerque, 75 miles north of Denise Chavez' Las Cruces, and even a hundred miles from her own ancestral Belen, readers might think it a López invention to lend her tales allegorical context. Her stories feature people suffering the consequences of some crisis of truth. At times the mean-

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ing of their existence hangs over the characters like a life sentence with no hope of parole dealt them by some perverse, faceless judge; at others it hovers just beyond reach, illusive for both character and readers alike, a mystery that becomes no less enigmatic in the telling, only more obsessive. López utilizes both the traditional forms of short story structures: linear narrative that builds to resolution and the epiphany-style in which a plot opens in momentary revelation of significance. However, in either instance she draws on different techniques—irony, ellipsis, ambiguity, understatement and humor among them—to suspend full delivery on readers' expectation of meaning. Thus her best stories continue to resonate after reading. One could imagine some of them becoming novels in the future—already some of them trace a web of family relationships—although they might better be left as gems of the underestimated, under-appreciated genre of short story.

For *Voices of Mexico* López has prepared an even more finely tuned version of a story from *Soy la Avon Lady*. It provides a fine introduction to her writing, featuring many of the traits described above. At the same time, she is already preparing to surpass this introduction with a novel and another collection of short fiction to which readers of the new Chicano literature can look forward. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Lorraine López, *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories* (Williamantic, Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 2002).

² "Usonian" is a word coined by architect Frank Lloyd Wright to replace "American" when one refers to something from the United States. "American" pertains to all the countries of the Americas, so it should not be used to designate only the U.S.