
REVIEWS

Ellen McCracken. *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999. 233p.

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Ellen McCracken's *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* is a close analysis of 24 U.S. Latina authors whose literary productions were published in either the 1980s or 1990s. In her introduction, McCracken explains how Latinas, through their writing, are able to address the controversial meaning behind the social buzzwords "diversity" and "multiculturalism." Both social activists and academicians have pointed out how instead of being a stragem to promote inclusion, the meaning of diversity and multiculturalism has been mishandled to the point where the culture, history, and politics of under-represented groups remain blind spots in mainstream society. With a focus on gender, Chicana, Cuban American, Dominican American, and Puerto Rican women narrativists deploy discourses on identity politics, memory and autobiography, sexual transgression, and religious revisionism within a historical framework that provides a social representation about individuals of Latin American descent. The function of these discursive strategies is to subvert dominant discourses that threaten to erase, misinterpret, romanticize, pluralize, tropicalize, and/or locate Latinas/os as the Other. With gender concerns woven into the multilayered new Latina writing, this literary construction gives a heterogenic quality to the representational writing space which McCracken terms a "feminine space of Postmodern ethnicity."

The book is divided into six chapters. The first, entitled "Postmodern Ethnicity as Commodity: Containment and Resistance in New Latina Narrative," is a study of four Latina canonical writers: Julia Álvarez, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Cristina García. In this very intriguing chapter, McCracken charts the manner in which publishing houses introduce these Latinas into the mainstream literary scene. Her provocative study of book jackets and book reviews illustrates the mainstream publishers' attempt to commodify the four authors. She also elucidates how, through the thematic and structural content of their work, Cisneros, García, and Álvarez explore the intricacies of Latino subjectivity. McCracken raises concerns about Castillo's novel, *So Far from God*. She finds that the parody of his-

tory, politics, religion, and characters within the novel could possibly mislead readers who are unfamiliar with Latino culture and history to arrive at erroneous interpretations regarding the representation of Nuevomexicanos or Latin Americans. While McCracken is thorough in her critique of *So Far from God*, she commits a minor error when she states that “La Loca performs an abortion on her sister and protests Farah jeans” (38). Actually, La Loca helps her sister Caridad with three abortions. And, since this portion of Castillo’s novel is posited in the early 1990s, it is the Levi Strauss, rather than the Farah slacks company, that La Loca is boycotting. This is a slight distraction to an otherwise very informative chapter.

In chapters two and three, McCracken writes about how Latina writers reinflect language by writing the body, establishing a palimpsest with pre-existing patriarchal texts, highlighting the resilience of women, and experimenting with the reconstruction of the Other. Basing her readings on Ernesto LaClau’s theoretical model on populist rupture, McCracken analyzes creative productions by authors such as Micky Fernández, Aurora Levins Morales, Rosario Morales, Helena María Viramontes, Nicholasa Mohr, Lucha Corpi, Roberta Fernández, and Demetria Martínez. She concludes that these narrativists’ approaches to re-signifying language create social antagonism through revising dominant discourses which usually limit and confine the subjectivity of Latinas. Furthermore, McCracken offers a fine interpretation on the function of autobiography and history in Latina writing. She notes that Latina writers combine real life events with fiction in order to break away from narrative individualism. McCracken suggests that by imploding history, Latina authors propose to their reading public a new perspective “on the everyday lives and history on Latinos in the Americas” (94).

Chapter four, “Remapping Religious Space: Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Religious Culture,” is one of the most interesting sections of McCracken’s book. In this chapter she discusses the manner in which standard Catholicism is reshaped by syncretism and the re-interpretation of important religious symbols and praxis in Latina writing. As well as being beautifully written, the chapter is illustrated by 24 pictures of saints, milagros, ex-votos, retablos, and prayer cards. These examples of important religious items compliment effectively McCracken’s readings of how religious practices are incorporated into Latina narrative. For this reviewer, as an outsider looking in, the author’s explanation of the characteristics of Santería and how it differs from Voodoo is especially valuable for understanding Álvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Judith Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun*.

Chapter five concerns McCracken’s readings of corporeal and sexual transgression. While her discussions serve to elucidate the prohibited in Latina narrative,

her assessment of how Mary Helen Ponce writes the body invites questioning. In her novel *The Wedding*, Ponce assigns one of the characters pig-like characteristics such as “thighs like hams” — “Her squinty eyes gleamed wickedly above a small snout” (McCracken 168); hence the character’s name: Porky. McCracken, through a Bakhtinian critical lens, concludes that this character’s “grotesque” presence adds to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the novel. On a superficial level Bakhtin’s theory on animality might function to identify corporeal signifiers that subvert the classic body. However, when this theoretical perspective is used to read the corporeal space of a young Chicana, it is highly problematic. We must remember that, within United States history and society, Latina women and have been animalized and characterized as instinctual, as have African American women. Another reading of Ponce’s character would involve pointing out that this “unruly body” evokes dominant discourses regarding the body politic. In addition, Ponce also writes the character as continually overeating. McCracken decodes this as the author emphasizing the “serious issue of the eating disorder” (168). Actually, it appears as if Ponce is attempting to emphasize the “piggishness” of the young girl rather than trying to make a connection with an eating disorder. The same judgment probably would not hold if the character were thin; then her gluttonous eating habits would be admired because she would not have to worry about her figure. McCracken appears to have the same reading for fleshy women because she arrives at the same conclusion for Lourdes Puente, a character with a bounteous body in García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*. McCracken believes that García renders Lourdes’ body to represent an eating disorder as well as a representation of “hyper-Americanism, foregrounding the culture and economics of excess that sustain both” (25). Other than this oversight, this portion of the book contains some insightful and thought-provoking comments on autoeroticism and lesbian transgression.

The final chapter contains a discussion on the integration of gender in new Latina writing. McCracken determines that some Latina writers will knit in gender to establish a link with ethnicity and social justice. She pinpoints how other Latina authors favor developing gender issues over other components which contribute to identity formation. McCracken delivers a strong interpretation of Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* in which she evaluates how the author connects gender with race, ethnicity, and social justice. Worth mentioning as well is McCracken’s close reading of Cherríe Moraga’s *Giving up the Ghost*, wherein the critic evaluates Moraga’s powerful criticism and depiction of patriarchal violence.

Well-written and engaging, *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* presents a valuable perspective on Latina narrative. Individu-

als interested in U.S. Latina culture and literature will find this book a valuable source of information. ✨