
Maria Herrera-Sobek and Helena Maria Viramontes, eds. *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature*. 2nd edition. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. 290p.

LIANA M. SILVA
BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY

Herrera-Sobek and Viramontes' book, *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literature*, collected literature and criticism from the second conference on Mexican-American women writers that the University of California at Irvine hosted on April 22, 1987. *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* is now in its second edition, and rightfully so. The book appears not only to feed the need for Chicana literature in the reading public, but also to fill a gap in literary criticism on Chicana literature. The editors wish to familiarize readers with Chicana writers, broadening their scope from better-known writers like Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa. This collection proves to be an excellent addition to Latino/a literature and criticism; it successfully highlights themes and concerns of Chicana writers, all the while opening the doors to further exploration of Chicana literature and literary criticism.

One of the purposes of *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* is to bring to light lesser-known Chicana writers; it introduces the reader to various poets as well as fiction writers who presented at the conference. The collection consists of a section of poems, a section of prose (fiction and theater), and a section of critical essays on Chicana literature. Within poetry the reader can find poems by writers such as Lorna Dee Cervantes, Lucha Corpi, and Denise Chavez, among others. The poems, although authored by different Chicanas, come together through the reappearance of themes and motifs. Some of the themes present are those of patriarchal structures, rape, female sexuality, the writing process, and the injustices perpetrated against Mexican immigrants. In terms of motifs, the city, the winter, and the Virgin Mary recur in the poems, establishing a sense of continuity through the authors.

The themes and motifs, as well as the concerns of these Chicana poets, are also present in the prose chapter. The editors have included four pieces by Denise Chavez, Helena Maria Viramontes, Roberta Fernandez, and Sheila Ortiz Taylor. An example of how the prose complements the fiction is Denise Chavez's play "Novena Narrativas y Ofrendas Nuevomexicanas," which introduces the reader to nine female characters who all approach an altar and present a unique offering to the Virgin Mary: their life stories. Naomi Quiñonez, in her poem "La Diosa in Every Woman," also uses the image of the altar as a meeting place for the conflicts and struggles of women. In this way, both authors have redefined the concept of the altar; although it is commonly thought of as a place of sacrifice and death to

receive blessings from the gods, here women come together, leave their suffering behind, and revel in the emotional connection with other women. The last section of the collection presents the reader with five articles of Chicana literary criticism, and some make reference to either texts or authors included in the book. Here well-known Chicana/o critics make their appearance, with articles by Julian Olivares (the only male writer in the collection), Tey Diana Rebolledo, and Norma Alarcón, as well as Maria Herrera-Sobek.

The collection is certainly experimental in its form. From its compilation of criticism and fiction to its use of poetry in English and Spanish, the book takes risks and succeeds at its experiments. Although some readers who are not familiar with Spanish may feel left out of the complete literary experience this book offers, this should not stop them for most of the book is in English. Gloria Enedina Alvarez's poetry in Spanish, accompanied by its loose English translations, is one of the highlights of the poetry section. It is true that you get the full meaning of Alvarez's poems when you read the Spanish version along with the English version and see the places where the poem twists and turns subtly around the language of choice. However, the availability of the English versions is practical as well for non-Spanish speakers. Because there are no English translations for the few other Spanish poems, including the English translations of the Spanish poems in future editions would be helpful for English speakers who are interested in Chicana poetry, no matter what their nationality. On the other hand, it must be underscored that the deliberate use of Spanish instead of English in these texts is commendable, since it breaks with the stereotype that Mexican-American literature is available only in English.

The subtitle of the collection, *New Frontiers in American Literature*, draws attention to the ever-shifting idea of an "American" literature, and the role that new genres such as Chicana literature play in the definition of said literature. Herrera-Sobek asserts in the Introduction, "The outstanding work of these Chicanas... is forcing a space in American letters that has never existed before" (1-2). Later on she states, "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" (3). The texts do not engage in a discussion of what "national" literature means; neither does Herrera-Sobek discuss what makes them part of that collection of works she calls "national," aside from a brief mention in her Introduction. Rather, this collection seems to speak for the uniqueness of Chicana literature, as if to say that it stands alone. After much thought, this reviewer concludes that the book is meant to draw attention to these new writers on the national literary scene—after all, if the writers are hyphenated Americans, their writing can and should be included as part of a national literature solely on the basis of their nationality.

No wonder then that the highlights of the collection are the piece by Tey Diana Rebolledo titled “The Politics of Poetics: Or, What Am I, a Critic, Doing in This Text Anyhow?” and the essay by Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “Chicana Literature From a Chicana Feminist Perspective.” These are two pieces that try to define what it means to be a Chicana writer, a writer standing at the intersection of gender and race. In addition to calling literary critics to resist fitting these texts into pre-established theoretical frameworks, these two essays reach out to writers and critics. They attempt to draw a connection between Chicana writers and critics, as they are both a part of this developing genre. Instead of putting critics in opposition to Chicana writers, these two essays put them side by side in their task of bringing public attention to this genre. Particularly enjoyable are Rebolledo’s list of struggles that she as a Chicana critic faces; they are relatable as well as complex. Haven’t we all as academics thought about our roles as critics and readers (as well as what comes first)? Rebolledo approaches this dilemma, and her ideas illustrate the particular struggles that she as a critic and as Chicana—as well as a Chicana critic—faces. The answers she provides are unique but they also suggest guidelines critics in general should use when approaching literature.

All in all, the editors have accomplished their purpose of introducing readers to Chicana writers as well as the themes and concerns of Chicana writing and literary criticism. This burgeoning literary genre deserves more attention and more critical thought. This book proves invaluable in its approach to this genre and to its needs and desires. What readers will take away from this book is that the idea of “national literature” (as in U.S. literature) is in flux, and rightfully. These writers have introduced new texts into American literature, redefining what “American” literature means, as well as the idea of “American.” *Enhorabuena!* Welcome! ✱