BOOK REVIEWS

Voces híbridas. La literatura de chicanas y latinas en los Estados Unidos by Stacey Alba D. Skar (Chile: RiL Editores, 2001), 223 pp.

Stacey Alba D. Skar's book "Voces híbridas"continues and broadens critical work on a significant group of Chicana and Latina women writers in the United States. The book explores the hybridism of texts and the bilingualism which do not respond to official canonical models of North American or Latin American literatures and invites new readings on the representation of subjects that inhabit borderline spaces and the formation of new feminine identities.

In the introduction, Skar indicates the concepts articulated in her approach and counterbalances these concepts with those previously developed by other scholars. The introduction also clarifies the inconsistencies within certain theoretical concepts that are often (mis)used, illustrating the contradictions inherent in the hybrid consciousness of writers. Skar emphasizes the need to avoid an idealization and homogenization of the margin and, to this end, she contributes a series of chapters which clarify borderline spaces and redefine the subjects of "transculturación" and the "hybrid" or "interstitial third space."

The work is divided into two sections with four chapters each, and a useful selected bibliography. The first part, "Chicana Voices," focuses on the literary work of Mexican American women writers. An initial chapter explores the myths of Aztlán and Nepantla, critical to Chicano literature, describing the reevaluation of these myths by writers. The second chapter analyzes the hybridism of the borderline communities through the poetry and essays of Gloria Anzaldúa. Borderline communities are defined, not only by the geographic territory which they occupy, but also by their shared experiences. The following chapter is centered on the poetry of Odilia Galván Rodriguez and Alma Villanueva. Skar presents the importance of feminine cosmology of pre-Columbian civilizations and of maternity, shaping feminist conscience within this poetry. In the concluding chapter of "Chicana Voices", the author discusses literary redefinitions in Chicana writing about three archetypical figures (the Llorona, the Malinche and the Virgin of Guadalupe) and their importance in undermining the traditional models imposed by patriarchal society while promoting diversity and pluralizing channels to reinvent feminine identity.

The chapters of "Latina Voices," the second section, are eclectic, offering a critical glance at the literary production of contemporary women writers from such diverse origins as the Caribbean to the Southern Cone of Latin America. However, they share the representation of other hybrid voices of Latina women in the United States. The opening chapter begins with the analysis of diverse perspectives on the Newyorrican identity in poetry by Sandra Maria Esteves, Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales, as well as in the narrative of Ana Lydia Vega. The two following chapters study the metaphoric structure used by two Caribbean authors in their attempt to present the problems of national identity. The first of them, Rosario Ferré, uses the metaphor of the house to emphasize the necessity to articulate an alternative model to portray the multiple faces of Puerto Rican identity. On the other hand, Cristina García resorts to the trope of the family to represent the relations between Cubans and Cuban-Americans. This chapter emphasizes the complicated dialectic between these opposing groups. In her conclusion, Skar approaches "Voices of Exile: from the Dominican Republic to the Southern Cone". She includes the work of Alicia Partnoy, Nora Strejilevich, Isabel Allende, and Julia Alvarez. In this section she puts special emphasis on the two stages of the narrative of exile: one associated with the reconstruction of historical memory and the processing of a testimonial voice, and another tied to the literary creation of a hybrid voice referring to Hispanic communities in the United States. I would suggest that there is still work left to be done in a study that divides the production of women writers of such diverse backgrounds, in which other representative hybrid voices of varied geographic spaces are included.

"Voces híbridas" is a text that combines reflections and analysis and offers a broad perspective on the present reality of the production of literature by Latina women in the United States. It is recommended reading for all those interested in this field and understanding this cultural situation.

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Women's Tales from the New Mexico WPA: La Diabla a Pie, Tey Diana Rebolledo and Maria Teresa Marquez (eds.) (Houston: Arte Publico Press, The University of Houston, 2000), 454 pp., $17.95.

The stories collected in this book emerged from the Federal Writers' Project sponsored by the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt; the Project was part of the larger back-to-work program (WPA) initiated during the later 1930's and early 1940's. New Mexico was one of the states that chose to participate in the Project. The cultural and historical information gleaned from the stories collected by individual investigators hired from the relief rolls was to become the basis for individual state guides. As pointed out by the editors, the guides were disappointing, much of the material never found its way into print, and the stories remained for years in archival collections in New Mexico. Although some of the material has been used in publications, the editors have rescued the stories from oblivion and made them available both to scholars documenting women's lives in New Mexico and to those readers interested in the folklore and traditions of the people of the state as seen through the eyes of the women living there.

The introductory essay provides unusual insight into the difficulties of the project in its execution, including some questions regarding the lack of information concerning methodology in collection of the stories and concern over the loss of original Spanish versions of the stories. In fact, the editors make clear that the stories have had a troubled past. For example, although the stories would have been related in Spanish, they were eventually recorded in English with some Spanish phrases and words included oftentimes misspelled, but sometimes corrected. Therefore, the editors are careful to inform the reader that, while they have engaged in only minor corrections in the texts, the stories as presented are sometimes less than an accurate representation of the teller's original voice. With those limitations in mind, what the reader finds is a rich and inviting panoply of women in New Mexico. The stories not only inform as to the everyday lives of the women with respect to healing, customs, and roles, they also provide insight into the relations between the Hispanic and Indian people, and some information regarding the women's views of Anglos (primarily presented as money hungry).

Women's Tales from the New Mexico WPA: La Diabla a Pie is a delightful walk through the old days of New Mexico, and an interesting glimpse into former New Mexican culture, as recounted in the tales of the women interviewed. Some, such as *The Year It Rained Tortillas*, treat the reader to a kind of humor that works particularly well in folktales. Others, such as *The Curandera, Partera*, and *Remedios* give us glimpses into the practical skills developed and applied to

maintain health, bring babies into the world, and heal sickness before pharmacies and doctors trained in medicine as we know it were commonly available in this part of the country.

Since the tales are recorded as accurately as was possible, they successfully convey a voice of authenticity, as though the reader were sitting in the shade next to a hot dusty street listening to the women talking. Some tales are highly engaging, while others more matter-of-fact or anecdotal, some are readily believable and a few demand that the reader (listener) suspend her own cultural beliefs for a time to enjoy sharing the traditions and beliefs of others. Throughout, a simple charm is maintained by letting the speakers simply tell their tales without questions or interruptions. The effect is the creation of a charming sense of enjoying a special visit to the old days of the State that describes itself as Athe land of enchantment@.

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Dictation by Anne Babson (Norfolk, VA: Partisan Press, 2001), 32 pp., $5.00.

Exuberant. Witty. Playfully assertive. These aren't exactly the kind of words that one would normally associate with the corporate environment, much less connect with a collection of poems whose overriding theme is the disjunction between the poetic spirit and the oppressive conformity of the working world that even now in the twenty-first century has yet to become something other than a "[w]hite-plumed white boy's white club," but in *Dictation*, Anne Babson's first book of poetry, the words practically jump right off the page.

In a spin of sharply evocative phrases and descriptions that leave the reader reeling from their incessant pace but marveling nonetheless, Babson takes us on a tour of the hidden spaces contained between office walls: namely, the minds of the low-level, low-paid employees who work there, women who dress up for work in "polyester knock-offs" in order to take down the "pallid mumbling" of (male) executives who "undress [them] with their eyes," women who are afraid to "let [their bosses] see [their] ideas percolate with the coffee." In *Dictation*, the temps, the receptionists and the executive assistants are also the poets, and it is through them that Babson explores the psychological tensions that exist for the creative individual who has to hurl herself into the tempest's eye, the "center/of the hurricane called capitalism" in order to survive. For the poems' speakers, poetry becomes the intrusion, the unbidden survivor whose presence within the workplace must be concealed. "This is your first poem?/Hide it in a safe place," warns the speaker of "Your First Poem," which is the first poem in the book. Caught between two worlds, resenting the poem that "interrupts the marketing meeting unrepentantly" while simultaneously "[craving] rhythms muffled between cubicle barriers," the personae in *Dictation* speak to those who feel that their "profession/Of poetic hope slaps Erato and all her sisters whose only profession/Is language."

And yet, "The Goddess Takes Midtown," a narrative fantasy in which a hulking goddess storms through Manhattan destroying those who tout the anorexic waif as the image of the ideal woman, reminds us that despite the sobering portrait of American capitalism that these poems offer, what impresses the reader most is the devastating humor that slices through each poem like a surgeon's knife: precise and daring, it cuts right through to the central issue of each work, leaving the poet's obvious *joie de vivre* intact. In "Your First Poem," the speaker is shut up inside a "gunmetal tower," the poem's metaphor for the

corporate office. But in *Dictation*, the poet's language has stormed the fortress and taken Wall Street hostage.

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erased faces by Graciela Limon (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2001), 258 pp., $14.95 (paperback).

Written “in memory of those who perished in the massacre of Acteal, Chiapas 22 December 1997,” *erased faces* is a book written with passion for a people, a place, and a vision.

The plot of *erased faces* revolves around a Latina photojournalist, Adriana Mora, who has distanced herself from the fast-paced world of Los Angeles to travel in Chiapas, Mexico, looking for a story. Adriana’s search for pictures in the Mexican jungle is a metaphor for her search for herself. As she captures images on film, as she meets with and builds relationships with the people of Chiapas, she clarifies her own reality, one frame at a time.

Woven into the human drama of this novel is the tale of the actual structural and behavioral violence that exists in Chiapas. The indigenous people’s fight for fundamental rights and some degree of self-determination has been an on-going struggle that began at the time of contact with Europeans. Symptoms of structural violence -- people dying of untreated curable disease; people dying of starvation; limited access to clean drinking water; limited educational opportunities; limited job opportunities -- define the area. With no chance for upward mobility, the people of Chiapas stay poor, the area remains “underdeveloped”. Structural violence can (and often does) lead to behavioral violence -- the over, direct use of force/weapons between people in conflict. As told through the characters of Limon’s novel, the Zapatistas -- women, men, and young people - have taken up arms, have militarized themselves in self defense. They do not intend to go down, and will not sit back in silence. Their faces may be erased, but their voices are growing louder and stronger. With a mounting crescendo, Limon captures key moments and issues that have been critical to the Zapatista insurgency that continues to this day; issues of racism, exploitation, and class division.

Just as the group Rage Against the Machine is reaching to a popular audience to spread the word about Chiapas and the Zapatistas through their music and their DVD *Battle for Mexico City*, Graciela Limon is reaching out to the reader to be involved, to put down this book and to feel a need for action. Both the *Battle for Mexico City* and *erased faces* send the message that to better themselves, the people of Chiapas need capital and education to stand up and to win in their fight against "the machine."

Limon's knowledge of the history and the geography of Chiapas enriches her tale. The author's *sense of place* -- her descriptions of the landscape and the human-environment interactions -- is solid. Having spent time living in Guatemala, I appreciate her attention to small details of the environment; details that help move the reader into the novel. However, for those who have read the *Celestine Prophecy*, the plot of the novel is too predictable. A young woman comes into a village and finds her home and her ancestral connections through the Lacandon shaman, Chan K'in. I felt that the romance and intrigue of the characters took away from the book's value as an information source for the conditions and situation in Chiapas.

This book would serve as a good introduction to the Zapatistas and to Chiapas for a general course on Latin America. It would compliment and deepen an understanding of the situation as presented in most texts.

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Deadly Embrace *by Trudy Labovitz (Duluth, Minnesota: Spinsters Ink, 2000), 200 pp., $12.00.*

Zoe Kergulin, introduced by author Trudy Labovitz in *Ordinary Justice*, returns in *Deadly Embrace* to continue the exploration of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse against women in this well written regional mystery. Set in the mountains of West Virginia, where the weather is apparently uniformly terrible (there is not one sunny moment in this novel), the story revolves around the investigation of the shooting that killed the Deputy Sheriff and left the Sheriff, Ethan McKenna, on death's doorstep. Zoe Kergulin has several reasons to investigate. Rumors have spread that the Sheriff, who is Zoe's cousin, and his female deputy were romantically involved because of the seemingly amorous pose after the shooting, the "deadly embrace" of the title. Zoe is fiercely loyal to her cousin Ethan, believing him to be too wise and good to get involved in a messy office romance. Also, too gay. Ms Kergulin is determined and capable in her search for truth and justice, despite the usual warnings to stay out of the FBI's bumbling investigation. Central to the search for the truth is the evidence given by witness Ren Bertram, the world's biggest liar-- a pathetic, marijuana smoking teenager who suffers from severe psychological scars from being abused as a young child by her egotistical pedophile cousin.

Zoe manages to surround herself with victims of abuse. Her closest neighbor and friend is a woman known as Kip who is hiding out in the hills of West Virginia after being raped, beaten, and nearly killed by her husband. Kip is unable to work or even keep up through journal subscriptions, in the specialized field of physics that had been her occupation and her passion. She escaped her husband through the "Underground Railroad" of abused women first described in *Ordinary Justice*, and is now living in a safe house next to Zoe's home from which they help, and provide moral support for each other. Zoe has reason to try to keep Kip safe. It is her guilt from failing to save her best friend from being murdered and her remorse over killing the abusive husband that brought Zoe back home three years earlier from a successful job at the Department of Justice in DC to West Virginia to salve her wounds.

These are complicated and interesting characters in a plot that moves along with a momentum that keeps the pages turning. But one could wish for more richness of description of both the setting and the characters. Ms Kergulin is a private investigatorCso private that the reader of this novel knows little about what she feels or even what she does for a living. One of her friends points out to her, "You're always so close mouthed how can we be better friends unless we

share?" Where descriptions do occur, the exaggerated similes often detract with their affectation. During a snow storm, for example, Zoe encounters "trees bent under the burden of their sudden load, and branches bowed before Zoe like unctuous and obsequious waiters showing her the way to a not particularly good table."

A chase scene over terrain made dangerous by mud slides brings the plot to a satisfying conclusion that ties up all the loose ends. In the crowded field of regional mystery writers, Trudy Labovitz has carved out a niche, going beyond the usual confines of the genre with her compelling exploration of violence and abuse against women.

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American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II edited by Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 237 pp., $19.95.

Rosie, The Riveter -- the icon of American women on the World War II Home Front -- is forced to share history with other women in *American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II*. Editors Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith enlist the services of women in all branches of the military, in the U.S.O. and Red Cross, in federal government agencies, in African American women's volunteer service organizations, and, yes, in defense plants. The women are on the Home Front as soldiers' wives and war workers and at "Far-Flung" fronts, for example, as an Army nurse in North African and a United Service Organizations (U.S.O.) entertainer in New Guinea. However, on the paperback edition I use in my courses, the cover illustration solely represents three white women in war work on the Home Front -- the welder and the riveter in their overalls, their hair tied up in kerchiefs; the secretary in her proper dress, feminine yet business-like, wearing her ID badge embellished with a "Win the War" type of ribbon. It's hard to get away from that stereotypical image of Rosie and her sisters.

Litoff and Smith organized this book with an emphasis on the primary source materials: first person accounts of home front and war front action; official reports and documents, for example, from the U.S. Department of Labor, Children's Bureau ("If Your Baby Must Travel in Wartime"); and articles, for

example "The Negro Woman Serves America," which appeared in the summer 1943 issue of the *Aframerican Woman's Journal*. Photographs and propaganda posters supplement the text. There is much here that is personal and even exciting: A humorous account of SPARs (the women serving in the U.S. Coast Guard) who were often mistaken for WAVES (the women serving in the U.S. Navy). The trials and tribulations of an American Red Cross worker dispensing thousands of doughnuts from a mobile unit to soldiers not far behind the front. The fear and courage of the nurses under attack on Corregidor, the Philippines.

One of the best documents is an excerpt from *So Your Husband's Gone to War!* by Ethel Gorham, a fashion writer-turned home front reporter. She offers advice on what to write and what **not** to write in your letters to a husband in the military. Unfortunately, the editors have not included letters from wives and girlfriends to their loved ones. Ironically, Litoff and Smith's other book, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* (New York, 1991), offers wonderful letters to serve here. The little known services of the 1.5 million volunteers in the Women's Land Army are celebrated in a first person account of a woman engaged in Emergency Wartime Farm Work and documented in a recruiting pamphlet by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This army of seasonal workers supplemented farmers' labor to assure "an adequate supply of workers for the production [and] harvesting of agricultural commodities essential to the prosecution of the war."(203) However, the primary sources for African American women consist only of official reports and articles, rather than oral histories, such as the "Not Such a Good War" stories of African American women that one finds in Studs Terkel's classic collection *"The Good War," an Oral History of World War Two* (New York, 1984). A glaring lapse here is any account of a Japanese American woman in an internment camp. Certainly, the oral histories, autobiographies and letters from Japanese American women are there to be excerpted.

The editors have limited their historical commentary to an Introduction and brief explanatory remarks beginning each chapter and introducing each primary document. The explanatory remarks are too brief. For example, while the "On the Home Front" and "War Jobs" chapters contain interesting primary documents, the explanation remarks neglect to inform the reader that most housewives/mothers remained in the home. According to John W. Jeffries in his book, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front*, "Seven of eight women at home in 1941 remained there in 1944, despite production needs and recruitment efforts." (Chicago,1996, p. 102) Also neglected in the examples of propaganda presented here are the posters and magazine advertisements that targeted these housewives, recruiting them to conduct their service in their kitchens -- another

war front. Ads, cookbooks and government pamphlets instructed women how to stretch limited supplies and serve nutritious and tasty meals with rationed food and less desirable cuts of meat. The authors could have made good use of such materials.

The editors conclude the book with a chapter entitled, "Preparing for the Postwar World," but it only includes official documents, no personal accounts from women who prepared for their husbands' return with joy and anxiety. Again, letters from their text, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, would serve well here. While there is much that is useful in *American Women in a World at War*, I strongly suggest using it in combination with an in depth, critical analysis, such as the Jeffries text, *Wartime America* or Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons, eds., *The Home-Front War: World War II and American Society* (Westport, CT, 1995).

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A Fish Nobody Knew by Carolyn Evans Campbell (Evergreen, Colorado: Fireweed Press, 2001), 97 pp., $11.95.

A Fish Nobody Knew is, indeed, a masterpiece of human expression. Carolyn Evans Campbell's sixth and latest volume of quality poetry speaks for itself, drawing its depth of beauty from a spirit touching past and present in recognition of life as it is. Her poetry is alive. It comes alive for the reader in rhythmic motion and tone.

Campbell's skillful use of language in meaningful metaphor is at once poetically simple and existentially complex; earthy and creative yet humanly subtle. There is a natural flow of symbolism in the style of this Coloradan poet and writer. It reveals itself in the single poem chosen as the book's title. In "A Fish Nobody Knew" the metaphor is the reality when the poet writes,

> *witness the carnage*
> *a combo of fine bones hooked*
> *to a spine embracing a void*
> *of new oxygen, all flesh gone...*
> *fragments, a bit of pale bone*
> *and a smile picked clean.* (p.1)

Campbell's Muse speaks both to the common reader and to the established poet. One wants to read Campbell's poetry, I think, because her poems exclude no reader. Her poetry is universal in its appeal -- human to the bone; Campbell's poetic vista scans the real and authentic imagery of "the everydayness of human existence" in all our lives. This authenticity shines through metaphors but is never pedantic. Nor is Campbell immune to the *blocks* that sometime become the poet's muse asleep in the wings. She articulates these blocks in "Starving For A Poem". Here is poetic reality, both amusing and frustrating:

> *It seems I have no more words*
> *... Even no account cockroaches*
> *have packed up their images*
> *and scuttled down the cold pipes.*
> *Deserters -- all of them.*
>
> *For awhile, I saved*
> *a daddy-long-legs I fancied*
> *looked like Fred Astaire, and I*
> *his nubile partner with slim waist*
> *before I ate him, too.*
>
> *It's Time*
> *to chew up the floor boards*
> *and find a way out of here.* (p. 45)

That's Carolyn Evans Campbell B splendid poet.

One of the finest bits of praise for Campbell's poetry is expressed on the cover blurb accompanying the book. Grace Cavalieri, producer and host of National Public Radio show, "The Poet And The Poem" wrote, "I do not know of another poet writing today who brings me closer to myself."

A Fish Nobody Knew by Carolyn Evans Campbell speaks humanly and eloquently, I believe. Her word symbolism and poetic language addresses life's oft times wounded selves. Her work is durable in the best sense of the word and readers of any age-range will find something of themselves in the poet's expression of the human experience.

I recommend *A Fish Nobody Knew* with enthusiasm for its style and creative form; it evolves from the spirit of life. It becomes Campbell the poet and, her poetry becomes us.

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The Passion of Artemisia by Susan Vreeland (New York, NY: Viking, 2002), 288 pp., $24.95.

In this work of fiction, inspired by the life of Artemisia Gentileschi, daughter of mid-17th century notable painter, Orazio Gentileschi, author Susan Vreeland notes that while she omits actual characters close to Artemisia and invents others, her references to historical figures and paintings are accurate. Generally, the identifiable historical parts and characters were more interesting than the fictional characters.

Raped by Agostino Tassi (her father's friend and her teacher), Artemisia is ultimately sacrificed by her father, against her will, when he collaborates behind-the-scenes to find that rape did not occur. Her father's motives were both to allow his daughter to escape the shame that would destroy her future as a renowned woman painter, as well as, to insure his own freedom to continue his art.

As the first woman admitted to the revered Academy of Art in Florence, Artemisia gains favor from important and powerful people such as Michelangelo Bounarotti the Younger, and Cosimo de' Medici, all of whom recognize her talent and applaud her courage to paint in a style and content reserved for men. Her successes, however, heighten her husband Pietro's jealousy. His infidelity drives her to leave with their small daughter, Palmira, for a commission in Genoa followed by a series of moves from city to city in search of patrons to support her passion to pursue art.

Vreeland portrays Artemisia throughout this rather dreary story as a woman whose life, spirit, and art are motivated by her resentment of a rape unpunished and the betrayals by her father and husband. She creates her own justice by turning away, disallowing them to share in the life of Palmira. She refuses affections from other men and feels she is unworthy of "la dolce vita." She's compelled to "paint out" her own pain by depicting historical women as heroines, not victims, as was normally done by male artists. Her most

challenging, perhaps, is that of Lucrezia -- a woman known to have killed herself over her shame of rape.

Relenting to her father's dying wish, but fueled by her underlying resentment for his failure to apologize, Artemisia travels to London to help finish his last commission. Working with him, she sees the similarities of their lives and the repeated experiences of loneliness, rejection, desperation, humiliations, victories. Their only desires were art and love, but one ruined the chance for the other. They both sacrificed their daughter for their passion. The saga ends upon Orazio's death when Artemisia vows to return home to begin a self portrait -- wanting to believe she is indeed worthy to live freely and enjoy "the sweet life."

During the twenty years between her rape and Orazio's death, Artemisia's notoriety as a painter is only evident among the inner circles of wealth and power. Did she not blossom after her awakening from years of anxiety and darkness? Did her greatest works not surface later? Did Vreeland end the novel too soon? Vreeland's book seems a watered down biography with a splash of fiction or perhaps vice versa.

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