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Emplumada: Chicana Rites-of-Passage

Lynette Seator

Emplumada, the first published collection by Lorna Dee Cervantes, is poetry that defines a Mexican-American identity and so carries an "ethnic" denomination. As ethnic poetry it is art that does not dwell in the region of purely detached art, "art for art's sake," but that necessarily attempts to establish its integrity in a particular territory and time. However, for Cervantes, the role of the ethnic writer intent on affirming a personal and group identity within a clearly defined temporal and spatial context is complicated by the fact that her sense of self as a woman does not conform to the traditions of her ethnic heritage. Together, the poems of *Emplumada* tell the story of a coming-of-age in which time-honored "great expectations" are necessarily altered. The rites-of-passage of a Mexican-American woman will not fit the formula of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, nor will her rites be consonant with stereotypic sex roles in Chicano coming-of-age novels. As long as the achievement of an identity through a temporal process in which the child struggles to adulthood is male-identified, a discussion of the struggle toward an autonomous female identity will be viewed as feminist; and within the closely held values of ethnicity "feminism" is likely to be equated with subversion. Thus the poems of *Emplumada*, speaking as they do of a Chicana coming-of-age, heighten awareness of human as well as artistic complexities.

Cervantes establishes the spatial dimension of her poetry within a Mexican barrio of San José, California, where she grew up; and, though the poems of *Emplumada* identified with feathers and winging birds are poems of flight and of freeing, they are poems of place-centeredness. The ultimate liberation is not measured in distance but rather in the ability to stay on the scene where one has fought and won her/his sense of integrity. The poem "Crow" speaks of women as expert at keeping places clean and recalls the fact that Cervantes received her "literary education" as a little girl who, while her mother cleaned the houses of well-to-do families, read their volumes of Shakespeare.

She started and shot from the pine,
then brilliantly settled in the west field

and sunned herself purple.

I saw myself: twig and rasp, dry
in breath and ammonia smelling.
Women taught me to clean

and then build my own house.
Before men came they whispered,
Know good polished oak.

The poems of *Emplumada* tell the story of Cervantes' life, her life as it was given to her and as she learned to live it, taking into herself what was good and turning the bad into a comprehension of social context. She has, over the seven years of writing *Emplumada*, learned precision, economy and control. "Women taught me to clean/ and then build my own house," apt imagery for poetry that has swept out all the fuzz and bric-a-brac of sentimentality to daringly structure a clear, truly personal, and so universal, truth.

The title poem that appears on the back cover is the most lyrical of the book. It is a poem that speaks of a love of the natural world.

When summer ended
the leaves of snapdragons withered
taking their shrill-colored mouths with them.

Something beautiful is lost in the passage of time, but all is not beauty.

They were still, so quiet. They were
violet where umber now is. She hated
and she hated to see
them go. . . .

An intensity of feeling goes quickly as snapdragons, their colored mouths necessarily shrill if they are to be heard over the everyday noise of poverty and violence. So "I hate/ and I hate to see them go."

. . . . Flowers
born when the weather was good — this
she thinks of, watching the branch of peaches
daring their ways above the fence, and further,
two hummingbirds, hovering, stuck to each other,
arcing their bodies in grim determination
to find what is good, what is
given them to find. These are warriors

distancing themselves from history.
 They find peace
 in the way they contain the wind
 and are gone.

To find what is good growing up “in the shadow of the freeway” does take grim determination, the ability to be a separate entity but also to redefine and reclaim the importance of love. Mating birds present an image of physical struggle clearly visible but ambiguous in its thrust toward love or toward mutual destruction. Most striking in this poem is the young poet’s awareness of her existence in time, as a Chicana, distanced from Anglo-American and Mexican history. Both histories are of men and of nations carried on the currents that she fights and rides, but this is not her story. Nor is her story that of Chicano history as it has come down in the male lexicon with stories of real men and of apocryphal women confined in the static myth of Mary and Eve, the Whore and the Virgin.

Traditionally, time has not seemed to work in the best interest of women or even to be a viable dimension of their lives when seen through the eyes of the male poet. There is a whole poetic lexicon identifying women with flowers, futureless after blossoming. A long-standing polarity defines men in the world in a process proceeding to increased authority while women have stayed in place and kept it up. Father Time and the house-centered wife and mother still carry symbolic vibrations. Now, the ethnic writer naturally has a conservative streak. The writer who identifies self with origin and the system of values of a minority *is* a conservator. Such a scribe records a way of life and attempts to keep it intact. Yet, paradoxically, the ethnic writer is centered in and dedicated to the creation of a new vision of the ethnic self in the larger world. This dual commitment, that of the traditionalist and of the revolutionary, may move on parallel rails smoothly through a good deal of terrain but will run amuck in the male writer’s portrayal of women.

Then it is up to the woman as poet to test the air as well as the ground in considering the options she has, in restructuring the myths that have presented woman divided against herself. Cervantes does this in poems filled with images of birds and feathers and also with some of the foul stuff the tomato cannery spews out. She is a member of a household of women and looks to her mother and grandmother as progenitors of her female self and to her father as the authority with the power to name and to assert that authority in the world. The poet’s sense of identity develops out of both the female presence in the house and the temporal

heritage of the male source of authoritative reality. *Emplumada* moves freely out and away from the Mary/Eve polarities toward a center of female selfhood. Unlike the motionless image of the virginal sleeping beauty idealized for what she has *not* done, these poems develop a female as worthy for having survived the struggle to maturity, worthy for daring to leap and for having survived. The child grows up "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway."

I watched it from my porch
unwinding. Every day at dusk
as Grandma watered geraniums
the shadow of the freeway lengthened.

The circular repetition of small domestic tasks goes on under the ominous shadow. In terms of space, the dark cast by the freeway stifles and invades, yet in its time dimension, the lengthening suggests the linear movement of the life of the girl who watches it, a girl portrayed in "Meeting Mescalito at Oak Hill Cemetery" who was

Sixteen years old and crooked
with drug, time warped blissfully
as I sat alone on Oak Hill.

In "Lots: I" she fights off a rapist:

But it was the glint
of steel at her throat
that cut through
to her voice.
She would not be
silent and still.
She would live,
arrogantly,
having wrestled
her death
and won.

In the succeeding poem, "Lots: II," she is the victim of rape, and the voice brave enough to cry out while the rapist's knife was at her throat is silenced by her loss of virginity.

I made a list in my head
of all the names who could help me
and then meticulously I scratched
each one

they won't hear me burning
inside of myself
 my used skin glistened
 my first diamond

The girl's recovery from the shattering experience comes in the ironical twist: the romanticized vision of a first love and betrothal in the diamond image evoked by the girl whose virginity has been brutally violated. But her loss of virginity and so of innocence is not the end of her as a viable human being. The author does not, as so many authors before her, do away with the female victim. The poet is determined that she as protagonist live. Loss of innocence is for her, as it has always been for the young male coming of age, a beginning.

These are poems about the experience of growing up Chicana, poems that break away from old stereotypes rooted in the Mexican tradition and wrapped in the myths and the realities of both the Spanish and the Indian heritage. In these cultures, the male as warrior, as priest, and as progenitor and heir has been accorded a position in which he exercises power over women who are yielding and submissive, yet pure and inaccessible. Aztec tradition identifies woman with fecundity and with death, projecting this duality in the awesome snake-entwined goddess Coatlicue. Spanish tradition holds out an image of La Purísima whose virginity is everlasting while her primary identity is that of Mother. A necessary concomitant of the ideal of womanhood held up in the sanctified image of the Holy Virgin is that of Eve the temptress. Once the temptress loses virginity, she is the fallen woman who subjects man to death. Because she is no longer a worthy prize no man will claim her. Unclaimed, she becomes the whore, public rather than private property.

In introducing an article entitled "The Voice of the Chicana in Poetry," Miriam Bornstein gives a summary analysis of the development of "Movimiento" poetry pointing out that: "The distorted image of Chicanas in Anglo literature has been matched to some extent by the equally distorted image of women in Chicano poetry."² Before going on to explore the coming-of-age process in Cervantes' poems, let us consider briefly how old stereotypes *do* continue to have currency. Because this discussion of *Emplumada* focuses on rites-of-passage, a prime topic of Chicano narrative, narrative momentarily will be a point of reference. Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, touted as having more copies sold than any other Chicano novel, follows the young male protagonist through variously stimulating, terrifying, and painful events to self-knowledge.³ Antonio's rites-of-passage firmly establish his active right to enter manhood. While Antonio's brothers have a less promising

future than his, they have at least developed and headed out in their own direction. His sisters, on the other hand, have merely cut out paper dolls and giggled in the attic. The larger-than-life woman whose blessings the title solicits is a version of the all-comforting numinous mother. She uses her magical powers to do good and so cannot be called a witch. In Sabine Ulibarri's current collection of short stories, *My Grandma Smoked Cigars*, the title story allows the old woman to take up some of the awesome authority symbolized in the phallic cigar of the dead grandfather.⁴ In another story, a school-teaching nun who attempts to exercise authority is put in her place by male school children; yet the sheriff who shoots first and asks questions later is held up as an exemplar of male power to the young protagonist coming through the stories' episodes wisely to manhood. Both *Bless Me*, *Ultima* and *My Grandma Smoked Cigars* typify the emphasis on the male coming-of-age in the static presence of the female who is either a joke or a riddle, a threat or a blessing.

Emplumada stands out in the context of Chicano literature (as well as in the Pitt Poetry Series) as a presentation of a woman in the *process* of coming of age. Each of the poems has a particular significance in its tightly structured and intensely real yet imaginative use of language, but the poems' full impact comes in their reading, one after another. Together the poems form an episodic progression through time, adding up to rites-of-passage into the dignity of fully grown human identity.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I carries through childhood and includes the poems already alluded to, except for "Emplumada," given at the end of the book. An epigraph precedes the poems in Part I: "Consider the power of wrestling your ally. His will is to kill you. He has nothing against you." Barbara Brinson-Pineda points out that

The ally is the persona's childhood, family and early-life friends. The wrestling is a coming to terms with experiences of loss, separation and grief, and with the mixed joy of formation into adulthood.⁵

This section is capped with "Caribou Girl":

I loved Caribou Girl,
for the woman she promised
to become, for the crows
who spoke and sent her poems.

The poet holds knowledge that brings her in tune with messages sent from another place. She invokes an ancestral deity, Ometeotl, wise old man of the Aztecs and the great Manitou of Algonquian, evidence of her

Native American as well as her Mexican heritage. Her poems lift her, make her fly, realize her connection to the great feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, symbol of learning, elite Toltec god. She takes up her quill pen, her *pluma*, and becomes more than a “mere cat girl” mewing in the awesome presence of her father. She is *emplumada*, feathered, and hence winged. She looks back at the child she was, the child who dived from the rocks into the waters of summer. For Cervantes there will be other leaps, but she is not yet ready to make any as daring as those made by the “thin crazed girl” who lived her youth:

I know she can't fly.
 I've seen her trade feathers
 for those hooves, for that sleek tan skin.
 She slips from the rocks,
 a thin crazed girl,
 who wore blue-jay feathers and moccasins,
 and to whom everything was sacred.

Parts II and III are less clearly defined in the coming-of-age process than is Part I. They present the adult woman who gathers her words unto herself and gives them away, and finally, the woman who loves, the fully feathered soaring woman. An aspect of the struggle of growing up is the acquisition of language. Something of the mystical sense that comes through in Cervantes' poems is the sense of awe at the unknown, the poet as child, outsider searching for the secret code requisite to initiation. The speaking and reading of words forms a linear connection with the inner self of the poet and some great mystery that is beyond her. At the same time, this ongoing process of linguistic acquisition removes her from what the culture deems to be “normal”:

I loved the girl some thought too strange,
 too dark, who spoke the cadence
 of her own mythology, her own sanity,
 with the words from books
 trailing her lips like shadows. (“Caribou Girl”)

She associates control of language with manly prowess. She wants to speak words “like her father who lives them.” The ability to speak and to name opens up a world of secrets and of power. Her father's ability to “live his words” is the ability to move from mythic imaginings and to assume authority in the world. He is especially awesome, distanced as he is from the domestic scene, not part of the “woman family” in which Cervantes grows up. The man who comes directly into the household picture emerges in “For Edward Long”:

You were father, grandfather, the man
 who dug ditches for the county
 and knew a code so secret
 they locked it away.

He is taken in drunk and homeless by the Grandmother and stays: "long enough to give [Cervantes her] voice." The epigraph to the Edward Long poem is taken from a letter written by E. L. from the Atascadero State Hospital, Fall 1965: "There are some who are not of this world. Take what you need. Covet. The child is one. They will comfort her soon." The beaten man, fallen somewhere outside the social structure leaves his message to Lorna Dee's mother. The child he has tutored is "not of this world," neither the world of Edward Long, nor the world of her mother. He leaves her a legacy of words and disappears. Words are the only possible way of ever finding him again because she knows "wherever [he is he'll] be reading poems."

Words are conjunction and disjunction. The Edward Long poem is followed by "For Virginia Chavez," a brief and vivid story of friendship and its demise. Lorna Dee, recipient of a diploma, and Virginia, whose bare bulb lights a bookless room, are finally lost to each other. Because this poem tells of a wild freedom experienced by adolescent girls, the room imagery and its suggestion of confinement seems significant, particularly in view of Cervantes' affinity for air and flight. She clearly does not envision her life in the spatially defined structures often notable in women's art. She does not watch life from a doorway or window, nor does her reader glimpse her through apertures. She is in transition in moving through various stages on the currents of time. While movement is progress and gain, it is also loss. Lorna Dee's flights of imagination sustained by her self-directed education leave her friend behind in the past, confined in her bookless room, alone in the glare of the merciless light but unenlightened. The vision is antithetical to the theme of the collected poems, for the process of freeing is itself what *Emplumada* is about.

The friendship traced in "For Virginia Chavez" is wonderful in its solidarity, the two women valuing each other more than the boys with whom they enter into sexual exploits; but their sense of freedom is a distortion evident in the lines: "we knew love, and that was all/ we were ever offered." Of course, "making love" was not love. In the final analysis, the girls adventuring with boys who are "dumb hunks of warm fish/ swimming inside us" are themselves exploited. The poet speaks of "the child in me I let die that summer," while Virginia Chavez learns "all that the kicks in your belly/ had to teach you. . . ." For

Cervantes having an abortion is a harsh approach to adulthood, while for Virginia Chavez, pregnancy determines her fate as a battered wife. Breaking rules does not put a woman in control unless the rules that she breaks break her out of a narrow definition of gender categories.

In the household presided over by "Grandma, our innocent Queen" and defined by "Mama, the Swift Knight, Fearless Warrior," the poet exercises discipline, taking over what she defines as a male function:

I became Scribe: Translator of Foreign Mail
interpreting letters from the government, notices
of dissolved marriages and welfare stipulations.
(*"Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway"*)

She moves into the breach. The poet, herself considered strange, somewhat alien, connects the household to the foreign world of Anglo legalities and its various incomprehensible proclamations. Yet in "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington" she finds herself alien in the Anglo world of writers:

I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates
whose history reveals what words don't say.
Our anger is our way of speaking,
the gesture is an utterance more pure than word.

Even in the context of the writers' symposium, words alone are not enough to close the gap between Anglo and Mexican culture: "I don't belong this far north."

In another poem, "Oaxaca, 1974," searching for her Mexican origins, Cervantes discovers herself to be again an outsider:

Mexico,
I look for you all day in the streets of Oaxaca.
The children run to me, laughing,
spinning me blind and silly.
They call to me in words of another language.
My brown body searches the streets
for the dye that will color my thoughts.

Her words are pale, insipid, not richly colored as is her skin:

But Mexico gags,
Esputa!
on this bland pochaseed.

She finds that she was "brought up tonta!"

My name hangs about me like a loose tooth.
 Old women know my secret,
 "Es la culpa de los antepasados."

Her English-speaking identity makes the poet aware of a break in her own historical continuity. She feels herself to be a kind of strange mutant, a foreign body that cannot be taken in with ease by those who stand firmly in what she would claim as her tradition:

They give me a name
 that fights me.

But Cervantes is equal to the struggle. In the final analysis, the language disorder is cleared up. It is ironical that language, her source of strength, makes her aware of being weak. Language calls up her critical powers, asking her to strive for more. Because of language, Cervantes has a future. Having a future, she can dare to be a woman with a past. But when Cervantes looks to language to connect her to her past, she finds a rupture, a rupture that her words attempt to bridge. She calls on Spanish sounds and turns of phrase to capture a non-Anglo vision. "Barco de refugiados," "Refugee Ship" in its bilingual presentation, attests to the skill the poet has acquired in both languages, affirming her bicultural connections. Language is the linear progression of her history giving her more than a possibility of being. Language is a way of becoming.

Cervantes' poems present her life as process as well as palpable existence. She recognizes both the temporal, traditionally male dimension of herself as well as the spatial, the locus-centered life for centuries assigned to women. She makes no privileged claim to either. Neither does she dwell on any particular female version of pain and suffering. Significantly, the first poem of *Emplumada* is "Uncle's First Rabbit":

He cried all night and the week
 after, remembering that voice
 like his dead baby sister's,
 remembering his father's drunken
 kicking that had pushed her
 into birth.

The Uncle's determination to get away from home is not realized until he goes off to war and takes another lesson in brutality:

He pounded their voices out
 of his head, and awakened
 to find himself slugging the bloodied
 face of his wife.

Like his father he becomes a wife beater, that is, he becomes his father. The uncle who continually imagines taking off on the next train, moving through time to an open destination, is trapped by the static, place-centered woman. First the boy's mother, then the wife, keep him turning in a circle of guilt and pain. The young male victim becomes the adult male who, aware of himself as victim, uses his physical power as a man and his authority as a husband to act out his anger on his wife. The roles of victim and of brute are laden with horror and guilt. Cervantes portrays both with compassion and pity, pity for the male child, compassion for the man as enmeshed actor driven to violence. Nevertheless, it is important to remember here that Cervantes has daringly revealed intimate knowledge of violence against women, particularly Chicana women. This breaking of a false vow is part of a process in the breaking down of confining structures, structures that cut off and deny life at the root.

In an article entitled "Sexual Politics and the Theme of Sexuality in Chicana Poetry," Elizabeth Ordóñez delineates a progression in feminist consciousness among Chicana poets. The poet begins by expressing awareness of herself allied with the men of La Raza. In these poems there is a tendency to celebrate maleness, an awareness that the male has defined the stance and that the woman will follow "como la Adelita/ siempre al lado/ del guerrillero."⁶ Ordóñez' thematic approach to Chicana poetry facilitates the identification of what may be called a second phase of Chicana awareness. After a celebration of the female self entering the male ranks comes anger. Attempting to be a comrade in arms with her Chicano brother or lover, the Chicana becomes painfully aware that she would be allowed full freedom to "go out into the streets provided that the frijoles were on the table in time for supper."⁷

"You Cramp My Style, Baby," a poem by Cervantes published when she was twenty-three and included in the study by Ordóñez but not in *Emplumada*, serves to characterize the second phase, anger, in which awareness of strength and potential for joining forces with the male gives way to awareness of being wanted

como un taco,
dripping grease,
or squeezing masa through my legs,
making tamales for you out of my daughters.⁸

Such raw indignation does not characterize the voice of the poet speaking in *Emplumada*. The more mature poetic expression is the product of a writer who has developed a way to control her life more fully as well as her line. In a view of succession, *Emplumada* is third phase poetry in

which the Chicana overcomes her open-eyed anger. Viewed in a dialectical process, she moves from thesis (I will join forces with you, my brother), to antithesis (You cramp my style, Baby). Finally, in synthesis, there is a redefinition of womanhood. The Chicana "reinvents" herself, leaving behind both the honorary male self and anger that, once expressed, is used to fuel the creative work of constructing a whole vision of male and female identity.⁹

The poems of *Emplumada* are not a full portrayal of the poet's life, but they do tell the whole story in the sense that she does not create a mythical other as a tabula rasa on which to write her life. Her central core of self does not emerge at the expense of loss of self by another. Still, as autobiographer she is at the center; and in assuming this role, she takes on power. How does she use this power in terms of an assertion of *identidad chicana*? The answer is that she uses it in the best interests of the Chicano image in the world. She calls up origins in the gods Ometeotl, Quetzalcoatl, and the great Manitou, and in doing so creates images devoid of clear gender identification. The myth according to Cervantes' reading of it is androgynous. The violated woman and the saintly woman do not set up a polarity dividing her from herself nor from her male counterpart. In breaking down these polarities she frees the male from playing the limited role of either the man subject to woman or the man who subjugates her. Chicana coming-of-age is a totality of experience authenticating what it is to be Chicano/Chicana.

In order to understand the terror that the child feels at being raped or the terror that she feels when her drunk stepfather comes to the house and rattles her locked bedroom door, the poet does not evoke ghosts and magical apparitions:

In the night I would hear it
 glass bottles shattering the street
 words cracked into shrill screams
 inside my throat a cold fear
 as it entered the house in hard
 unsteady steps stopping at my door
 my name bathrobe slippers
 outside a 3 A.M. mist heavy
 as a breath full of whiskey
 stop it go home come inside
 mama if he comes here again
 I'll call the police

inside
 a gray kitten a touchstone

purring beneath the quilts
 grandma stitched
 from his suits
 the patchwork singing
 of mockingbirds.

A stark polarized vision is terror of the man, but terror is stifled in the comfort of the quilt into which the woman's hand has stitched scraps of his suit. This is, after all, a human phenomenon. The drunken raid on the woman-family staged by the stepfather is a show of weakness rather than a display of strength. Evident here is a reason the Chicana can more naturally write about her male counterpart than he can about her. The arbitrary assignment of strength to men and weakness to women has typically allowed exceptional behavior of men to be explained in terms of human frailty, thus somehow controllable and easily forgiven. On the other hand, behavior inappropriate to the woman, deemed typically frail, has tended to conjure up a terrifying image of supernatural or usurping power: the evil stepmother or *la llorona*.¹⁰ The image of the crying wanderer in a curious way turns the human despair of a woman heard at night weeping in the barrio into a dreadful specter. Not burdened with a stultifying mythology, Cervantes never loses touch with human reality even in poems in which the child soars in wonder or in the verses from "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" given above portraying intense fear of the man.

The child is giving birth to the woman, the woman who keeps her head and gives good advice, who takes strength from a nurturing center identified with her grandmother. Mama, Swift Knight, has had to go out and do battle not for glory and power but merely in order to survive. She cannot reconcile her anger or let down her guard until she finds a defender in a hostile world. But the daughter has a sense of her own capabilities that frees her from the longing for a chivalrous hero and Mama's dreams of taffeta and foot-high tiaras. The poet has an integrity of being and a capacity for love, and love does not look for a protector/guardian, a life support system, but rather for a sensitive partner.

Back. The freeway is across the street.
 It's summer now. Every night I sleep with a gentle man
 to the hymn of mockingbirds,

and in time, I plant geraniums.
 I tie up my hair into loose braids,
 and trust only what I have built
 with my own hands.

In these womanly propensities the poet follows her grandmother. Her sense of womanhood goes to the traditional core. Removed from her grandmother in time, Cervantes carries the old woman's attributes into the contemporary world. The poet is not cut off from tradition; neither is she denied the future. She accepts the strengths of her heritage and adapts them to the world in which she finds herself.

Cervantes' work moves on a continuum in which traditional values are respected but false icons are no longer revered. The writer comes to her work with knowledge rather than with innocence and with the knowledge not only of herself but of her male counterpart. She writes in a temporal progression aware of what has gone before while looking to future development. The poetry makes no attempt to obliterate male/female identity but rather to recognize at what place these realities converge. The poet does not distort reality in order to arrive at some preconceived notion of an ideal, yet is idealistic in her formulation of a life in progression, an adult life that has experienced both hard wins and tough losses. *Emplumada* is not an uprooting but a lift-off, carrying tradition into new forms that allow for both conservation and liberation.

As a member of an ethnic minority, Cervantes has had to work for a great deal more than for her liberation as a woman. "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races" makes her knowledge of injustice clear:

I believe in revolution
because everywhere the crosses are burning,
sharp-shooting goose-steppers round every corner,
there are snipers in the schools . . .
(I know you don't believe this.
You think this is nothing
but faddish exaggeration. But they
are not shooting at you.)¹¹

Besides being marked "by the color of my skin" and having to dodge bullets "designed to kill slowly," the poet has had to avoid the trap of wanting to be, like her mother, "Princess instead." In "Beetles" she writes: "I'm an ugly woman, weedlike,/ elbowing my way through the perfect/ grass." The poet's time-measure movement is not all air-born. As winged beetle she is too awkward to fly. As shy woman weighted with a definition of woman as body in the eyes of a male world, her forward movement slows. What is significant, however, is the continuing progress: "I burrow and glow." The Chicana writer is twice distanced, and it is distance that creates the seer. As a minority woman,

Cervantes is doubly admirable for not being caught in a double bind. Mythic imagery might speak of these poems as a source, a confluence where streams converge. Such metaphors of flowing and feeding have for a long time been assigned to woman. However, in Cervantes' poems nothing is washed away but rather what is and has been is defined and understood in human terms; and it is this clear definition derived from the art of the writer who represents a dual minority identity, that of woman and that of Chicana, that gets it all together. What might have been the bottom is the final line, the last definitive word. What might have been a double loss is a double gain.

Revelations of the woman who is not a blushing bride but a human being with scars and expectations, accomplishments and potentials, a woman who finds her roots in tradition and enters history, move her toward selfhood across a background of traditional gender configurations. *Machismo*, the cult of masculinity that sets women apart from an existential process of becoming something in the world, draws sharp images associated with Latin culture but not peculiar to it. In this context, the picture is most clearly seen. Definitions are without ambiguities so that the woman who exercises a right to choose knows what she is choosing. "Lorna Dee Cervantes," as Susan Mernit puts it, "is a writer who knows exactly who she is and how she got that way."¹²

Emplumada is poetry that affirms Mexican-American identity as well as the identity of the poet as woman coming-of-age. The complexity of this dual sense of being threatens to pit the subject against herself but becomes a source of artistic as well as of personal strength. The child whose world is split by violence and by family strife as well as by her determination to be herself rather than to aspire to "ideal" womanhood grows to assume responsibility for reassembling and realigning gender-based cultural expectations. These are poems that dispel old myths of the eternal woman as a gift bestowed or as a curse laid down. Cervantes is aware of herself as a Mexican-American woman who possesses gifts and who knows how to use them.

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Notes

1. Lorna Dee Cervantes, *Emplumada* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).
2. Miriam Bornstein, "Voice Of The Chicana In Poetry," *Denver Quarterly*, 16 (1981), 31.
3. Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley: Tonatiuh International, 1972). Bruce-Novoa in a well crafted review of *Emplumada* comments: "It is the story of

- the making of a poet. Cervantes structures her work into a logical whole, almost like a narrative. It should be read in sequence and treated as a unit." *Nuestro*, June/July 1982, p. 5.
4. Saine R. Ulibarri, *Mi abuela fumaba puros/My Grandma Smoked Cigars and Other Stories of Tierra Amarilla* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, Inc., 1977).
 5. Barbara Brinson-Pineda, "Our Own Words: *Emplumada*," *El Tecolote Literary Magazine/Revista Literaria de El Tecolote*, 3, No. 3 (1982), 8.
 6. Gloria Pérez, "Mi hombre," in *Voices of Aztlán*, eds. Dorothy E. Harth and Lewis Baldwin (New York: Mentor, 1974), p. 183. These lines might be translated: "Like Adelita/always at the side/of the fighting man."
 7. Elizabeth Ordóñez, "Sexual Politics and the Theme of Sexuality in Chicana Poetry," in *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*, ed. Beth Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 317.
 8. Lorna Dee Cervantes, "You Cramp My Style, Baby," *El Fuego de Aztlán*, 1, No. 4 (Summer 1977), 39.
 9. I am indebted to Carolyn Heilbrun for the term "honorary male": the woman who enters the ranks because she is determined not to be like women, and, of course, for the concept of "reinventing womanhood." "If women can take as their own the creative possibilities, the human aspirations once the property of men only, can they not also adopt male role models in their struggle for achievement?" *Reinventing Womanhood*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 95.
 10. "In a small Mexican village long ago, a woman discovered her husband in an affair with another woman and in revenge she killed her three little children and hid their bodies. But she hid them so well and in such a jealous rage that afterward she could not find their tiny bodies. God condemned her to search for the bodies so they could have proper church burial or she would never have peace. With that story firmly implanted in my little mind, should I be naughty as a little boy, my mother would shush me, tell me if I heard the wind in the trees or noises outside the house, it might be *la llorona* searching, searching, for her niños, and unless I behaved, *la llorona* would carry me away. If you listen to the wind in the trees, particularly in the Southwest, it does seem to be a woman calling out for someone, for rest, at least it does to me." Armando B. Rendón, "Chicano Culture in a Gabacho World," in *Chicano Studies*, eds. Livie Isauro Duran & H. Russell Bernard (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp. 351–52.
 11. This poem with its unabashedly rhetorical title is a poem that in Cervantes' public readings leaps free of the printed page, adapting itself, altering words and their order in the way of flamenco or jazz. An article by Leland Joachim, "Poetry in the family: Sister and Brother Find Achievement in the World of Poetry and Music, Universities and Critics," emphasizes the performance side of Cervantes' art. *San Jose Mercury News*, 20 Oct. 1982, pp. 9–10.
 12. Susan Mernit, "Finding Our Own Words," *The New Women's Times Feminist Review*, Sept. 1982, p. 3.