

INFORMATION TO USERS

This dissertation copy was prepared from a negative microfilm created and inspected by the school granting the degree. We are using this film without further inspection or change. If there are any questions about the content, please write directly to the school. The quality of this reproduction is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original material.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help clarify notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. Manuscripts may not always be complete. When it is not possible to obtain missing pages, a note appears to indicate this.
2. When copyrighted materials are removed from the manuscript, a note appears to indicate this.
3. Oversize materials (maps, drawings and charts are photographed by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

UMI[®]

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

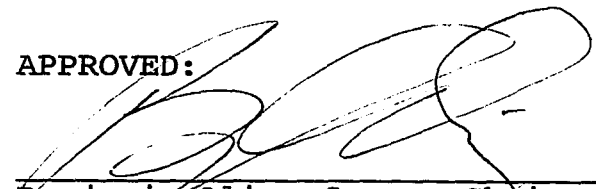
PREVIEW

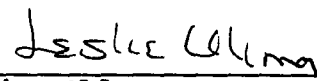
PAGINAS DE MI VIDA

DIANA L. MONTEJANO

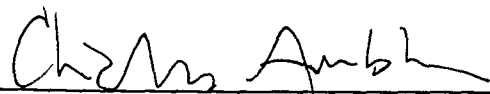
College of Liberal Arts

APPROVED:


Benjamin Alire Saenz, Chair


Leslie Ullman


Dennis Bixler-Marquez, Ph.D.


Associate Vice President
for Graduate Studies

Dedicated to my father,
the late Juan H. Montejano,
who always found the time
and space to believe in my dreams.

PAGINAS DE MI VIDA

by

DIANA L. MONTEJANO, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
on the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

College of Liberal Arts
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May, 1997

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I want to give thanks to our Creator, for blessing me with the talent for creative expression, for my vivid imagination, and far-reaching memory. I want to thank God for my family and friends who have strongly supported my endeavors to earn my MFA in Creative Writing. I am sincerely grateful to my alma mater, Incarnate Word College, now known as University of the Incarnate Word, for believing in me.

I have been blessed in my life to have associated with many visionaries, most notably my mentors, mi compañero, Ceçilio Garcia-Camarillo, and the late Dr. Ricardo Sanchez, two of the founding Fathers of Chicano poetry, who encouraged and inspired me to walk el camino de letras y poesía. My special thanks goes to García-Camarillo for inspiring Páginas de mi vida, which initially began as a response to his poetry chapbook, Fotos, (1993).

I am glad to have been a part of the Creative Writing Department at the University of Texas at El Paso, am grateful for my associations with Leslie Ullman, Benjamin Álire Saenz, and Rick DeMarinis. I am deeply appreciative for all their efforts on my behalf. And I particularly feel indebted to Ben Saenz, my Project Director, for his guidance and his suggestions regarding the format of this thesis. I want to extend my sincere appreciation to Dr. Dennis Bixler-Marquez, director of Chicano Studies, for always being available to help me out, for knowing that questions and their answers never adhere to a schedule, and especially, for all his pep-talks.

Finally, but certainly not the least, I want to extend my warmest regards to the fine friends I have made in El Paso, for their unwavering support of me and my poetry. I acknowledge María Teresa S. Sánchez and Jacinto-Temilotzín. For being there, mil gracias. All my relations.

Preface

The thought of analyzing, of telling the story behind the "tick" in my poetry, of saying why I write what I do, became for me, tantamount to being in the confessional. I found myself feeling an aversion for the entire process. I did not want to make autobiographical explanations, but I knew there was no way to escape autobiography, because my poetry, like most poetry, is primarily rooted in my experiences, on my awareness of self, and of others. It is a testament to how I have experienced life -- as I have dressed it up, dressed it down, disrobed it, dirtied it, and bathed it, only to start the experience again. Poetically speaking, this alone, in spite of all the philosophical or analytical implications, makes a vast common ground to walk on, and as such, should have made me less apprehensive about sharing the reasons for my creative drive to write poetry. But there is a great measure of vulnerability and risk involved also. Each step is an individual one, unique, and inherently one's own. Putting it in this manner opens the door to contradictions, pero, ¿qué es la vida sin las contradicciones? And what is poetry if it is not about life and all its ramifications?

My own colorful life includes two memorable school experiences. I was once told by a former elementary

principal, in church, before my parents, on my graduation day, that I was the future female Al Capone. Among the "crimes" I had committed, one of the most prominent was breaking the right hand off the giant Jesus statue I used to scale. I had also refused to participate in religious activities, like Mass, going to confession, or receiving Holy Communion. On my graduation day, however, I was angered and humiliated. I can still remember my mother asking me repeatedly, "What is wrong with you?" I could not answer, because I did not know. Not then.

When I was in high school, a nun named Sister Sabina (now Sister Margaret), my English teacher, took an innovative approach to correcting my errant behavior. I had not changed much since elementary. I had already spent many after-school hours doing detention. It was no biggie for me. But Sister Sabina said that punishing me in the "normal" fashion -- like kneeling with my books on top of my head -- did nothing to deter my behavior, in fact, it seemed to produce an opposite effect. My punishment: I was assigned books to read. My first assignment was J.D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. I read Elridge Cleaver's The Iceman Cometh, Sinclair Lewis' The Jungle, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. I read the poetry of Countee Cullen, Imamu Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones), Langston Hughes. I also read Byron, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Eliot, and Frost. Carl Sandburg became a favorite

poet of mine, so did Margaret Atwood. Without being asked to do so, I started writing short critical essays on these writers and their voices. I wrote a short story, "Jana," then turned it into a play. I was voracious in my reading of Sor Juana de la Cruz, determined to grasp a full sense of this creative feminist literary presence in the Baroque colonial and patriarchal era of Mexico. Then, I read Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "The Bean-Eaters," and wrote my first poem, "Crying," as a response. Sister Sabina was impressed by my writing, and circulated my poem in all her classes. She urged me to run for school editor. I won by one vote. I wrote several controversial editorials protesting the Vietnam War, segregation and prayer in the schools. I advocated the right of 18 year-olds to vote, brought up the issue of marriage for the clergy. My viewpoints landed me in plenty of hot water, but Sister Sabina defended my right to use the editorial pages as a medium for raising consciousness. This perceptive Irish woman, by capturing my interest with "underground" literature, set me upon the writer's path. Yet, in spite of all my reading, of all my novitiate writing, the road to becoming a writer wasn't a smoothly paved one.

I do not want to dwell on these aspects of my life, for the label of "troublemaker," or why and how this writer's "promise" once fell by the wayside. All the reasons are related to my life, my sensitivity, my awareness of the world

I had been placed in, and how I chose to live in it. I illustrated these two polar school experiences, setting them up, because I wanted to share a revelation I had in my reading of the Autobiography of Malcolm X. I read this book in 1966, at a time when it had been banned from most schools -- many considered it as hate propaganda. But I saw the truth (and still do) of what he wrote about -- the need to become aware of self, and the internalized mechanisms which kept that self oppressed, in turn, created entire oppressed peoples. I knew what he said was paramount to survival, to existence as a human being. Learning to recognize what made one "tick," the internal and external sensors (and censors), was necessary to becoming whole. This "wholeness" involved a constant but complex process I call examination of self in relation to others, and the world around that self. Of course, this led me to questions of race, of gender, of sexuality, of family, of spirituality, of all the influences that made me "me." I was positive these two school experiences would adequately epitomize the gamut of what makes me "tick." One made me angry and sad, the other provided a release for this anger, this inner turmoil, this sadness. One made me feel hopeless, the other filled me with hope. And I may not have recognized the polar dynamics at work when I was sixteen. However, these dichotomies became sharper, more focused with time. I discovered I could not

isolate one from the other. One could not exist without the other. This personal trek to make the connections between the dichotomies, the duality of self, with its realities of anger, sadness, hope, has manifested itself through my poetry. This component, however, has other foundations. The influences of my immediate surroundings, of people, of a larger world, are very intricate parts of who I am: a thinking, feeling, complex human-being, who happens to be Chicana, and woman, and activist, and poet, and writer in a constant flux of making connections, and reconnections, to the past and present. All these perspectives form an inextricable affirmation of "Diana" (pronounced: Dee-ah-na), of why I write.

On June 12th, 1993, I read an article, "La llorona wanders weeping for today's lost children, too," written by educational consultant, poet, and author, Barbara Stanush, and published in the editorial pages of the San Antonio Express-News. The beginning reads:

Connections. Those tenuous ties between people that transcend time and place, that glue this world together. We need them. We need to create, to recreate, these connections.

She was writing about Claudio San Miguel, and his "sense of disconnectedness" from his past, and how he metaphorically

compares this experience to the legend of La Llorona, the woman who drowns her children, weeps for them, "and forever wanders, searching for them." Stanush tells of San Miguel's struggles to become a writer who shared "similar stories" with other Chicanos/Latinos/Hispanos "who had never thought of them as having any value, [or] that anyone would be interested." Stanush, in writing about San Miguel's dedication to helping children make the connections with their heritage, struck upon a very important point. Let me summarize: there was no room for las historias, las canciones, las danzas, el arte, el idioma, the cultural expressions of a people in a dominant society confined to monolingual spheres. The Chicano/Latino/Hispano bilingual-bicultural presence within Euro-Anglo, Greco-Roman parameters was relegated to "folk" status: ours was folk art, folk tales, folk dance, folk music, folk life, etc. But there was so much more. What this presence encompassed was a fusion, a marriage, a mixture of norms and customs that were not entirely Mexican or Latino or American. The living organic elements of our mestizaje culture, the indigenous, Asian, African, Moorish, and Spanish-European bloods, further characterized the depth, the breadth, and also, the tenuousness of making the connections on a scope, on a plane of reality too large to fit in a monistic society. And I know all too well how making these statements lead to

discussions of the historical, political, philosophical, educational, spiritual, and socio-economic vestiges of La Raza. To be truthful, I had hoped to circumvent my opinions, political and otherwise, but I found in writing this preface that I could not separate myself from any of these complex tangents. And this leads to another very important dynamic at work in my writing.

I am an intelligent woman highly aware of the patriarchal dominance of all the above-mentioned cultural infusions which make up my mestizaje. In fact, I am the only female offspring in my family, and I was raised in a predominantly-male barrio. My formative experiences are significant because I was protected, ostracized, categorized, and stereotyped for being female. Furthermore, I was nurtured and groomed to assume an acquiescent, supportive, reproductive role for my culture. These aspects underscore another experiential polarization, because my femaleness was conditioned and expected, regardless of potential, to preempt any other aspirations I may have had, such as wanting to become a writer. Let me provide a brief example: I once overheard a male relative telling my mother I didn't need an education to learn to make tortillas and have babies, that all I needed to know could be learned at home. This example may be drastic, but it is also common, the delineations clear

and very narrow. What is really weird is that I can't remember my mother's response. Whatever it was, the whole scenario added another dimension to my inclinations for rebellion. The male and traditional female projection about who and what I should become, marks the very contentious point I had been trying to prove all along: I was not who "they" said I should be.

Summarily, all these perspectives, the Catholicism, the education, the physical and psychological mestizaje, the male dominance, the roles portrayed by women, the problems, the trials, and the blessings of a culturally-diverse human being, serve as the springboard for my writing. And the release of my in-born creative energy, through the writing of people-oriented stories and verse, has produced both an inner struggle and a sense of balance. The inner struggle evolves from a hidden set of codes which dictate what to write about, when, how, and why. These codes tell me to be discreet, to masquerade, to circumvent, to gloss over as much as possible closet-like themes, such as child abuse, insanity, violence, spousal neglect, infidelities, addictions, abortions, etc. They tell me, "You can't reveal this," "You can't write about that," "What will so and so think?" Even more terrifying, "What will your mother think?" or "What is wrong with you?" They involve doing battle with myself, and coming out victorious. They involve arriving at a delicate balance

through the recognition of those internal and external sensors which make up my self.

There is a dedication written to me by one of my mentors, the late Dr. Ricardo Sanchez, which reads, "Your poetry is an outcry which liberates." These words synthesize what my writing does for me. The process liberates me, even if the liberation aspect implies a negation, a suppression, an oppression of some kind. It brings to mind the tenet that nothing positive exists without a negative, and vice-versa. Certainly, nothing could be truer in my case, because I was a minority in the fullest sense from the day I was born. I say this not to evoke sympathy, or draw a stereotypical picture of being disadvantaged. Yes, there was the poverty, the discrimination. But the process of liberating myself began in knowing just what and where those negations were for a Chicana. It seems to me that self-identity can only be based on what that self is not. I express this only to stress, as a writer who happens to be Chicana, and woman, Sanchez' words are perceptive and I have etched them in my heart and soul as if they were the 11th commandment.

I remember writing to Leslie Ullman, director of the Creative Writing Department at UTEP that if I did nothing else with my talent, I would devote my entire writerly life to sharing el sentido behind my experiences as a Chicana, as

a woman. I had a very strong need to write the poems, the stories I am sure other Chicanas, other women, had also experienced. And by doing so, I would be sharing with my audience an inner and outer landscape. Of course, these landscapes are not all the same, and each one's reality can be perceived differently, but nonetheless, how can this distinction be made if they are not shared in some form? By the same token, how will the similarities be known if no address is given them? I am aware of these facets lying out in the wide-open field of writing, waiting for me to stumble upon them, flesh them out, characterize them, attach or detach myself to or from them. I am conscious of the similarities also. Nothing has given me greater satisfaction in my writing than hearing, "I feel or have felt just like that," or "I know who you're talking about or what you're referring to," or "You just described my abuelita, mother, sister, tia, best friend, worst enemy, etc." or "I have never thought of such and such in that way." Having this satisfaction is another integral part of my drive to write, to share the experiences.

When I wrote to Ullman that I wanted to address a particular audience, *la mujer Chicana*, I became conscious of the expectations, and the so-called marginalizations such a purpose would bring. It isn't as if I couldn't see outside myself, or my Chicana world. It isn't as if I could find no

other things to write about. But the angles, the takes, the themes of our culture are limitless, and rooted to our survive-ability. To our human-ness. The Chicano/a literary realm is a relatively young one, and there is enough fertile ground for me to walk on, plenty of rooms for me to rummage through. There is ample space for me and my voice.

I also realized the precariousness of placing myself (as a writer) in this position -- the most obvious being that my writing will be taken as the "biblical" constructs of all Chicanas. This should not happen. Mine is but one voice in a vast range of voices. And each one of those voices should be, as poet Angelica de Hoyos writes, his/her "own messiah." Each one should affirm, confirm, repel, expel, connect, reconnect, acclaim, and reclaim all the embodiments of self in relation to others in a kaleidoscopic world. This viewpoint hardly seems constricting to me.

I had wanted to write about my bilingualness, but have chosen not to devote too much attention to it. To do so involves a reiteration of who I am. While language, the braiding, the code-switching, is important to my writing, I do not solely employ mixing two languages to form a complete sentence, or dialogue, or thought. I can write in proper Spanish, proper English, or slang in both languages. I can even write in Baroque or Elizabethan, and I can translate my

own use of either language. I am fortunate to be able to do this, but the freedom to express myself poetically or otherwise, in whatever linguistic form, has come through acquisition, through experimentation, and through a great deal of study. The braiding or code-switching is one form I feel very comfortable with. It is my natural voice. I am not a linguist or theorist, I can't tell how the "switching" comes about, or why. I know I cannot deny its presence.

What I prefer to conclude with is that being a creative writer encompasses so many other facets. Yes, having the talent, the flair, the love for writing is a key component. But this talent also requires self-discipline, a willingness to spend a huge chunk of time and energy to perfecting this chosen craft. It requires not just imagination, but the freedom of imagination to roam among immense, and sometimes, shady areas. It requires a deep sense of responsibility, for accepting what the talent, the self-discipline, the imagination combined has produced. And it requires lots and lots of reading. One of my favorite writers, Toni Morrison, in Playing in the Dark (1993), puts it in proper perspective:

Writing and reading are not all that distinct
for a writer. Both exercises require being alert
and ready for . . . the world that imagination
evokes . . . Writing and reading mean being aware