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Book Reviews

Susana S. Martínez

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Together, these books, *The Iceworker Sings and Other Poems* and *Pláticas de mi barrio* showcase the diversity within the Chicano communities of the Southwest. Although each has a unique style and covers a wide range of topics, the general themes of family, cultural identity, migration to the U.S., and love across both sides of the border serve as unifying forces in the books under review.

In *The Iceworker Sings and Other Poems* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press 1999), the late Andrés Montoya presents a brutally compelling collection of poems that immediately reach out to the reader. Throughout the collection, we hear the loud banging and clanking of machines and swelter in the oppressive summer heat of the barrio of Fresno, California. Not surprisingly, the iceworker's only refuge is the graveyard shift at the ice plant. Desperately alone, he sings as he marches back and forth among the rows of ice, which under his command become, “a huge army of petrified water standing at attention.” The coldness and alienation that he feels at work follow him home as he walks the streets that could just as easily be any barrio. In the opening poem, entitled “sight,” Felix is an eyewitness to a senseless murder. He hears conflicting rumors about the brown body that lies at a safe distance from him; was he a gangster “who got what he got/which is what he deserved”? Or was he the boy, “barely a man/who slung rocks/with a smile/in front/of the boarded-up house/or maybe/he was no one/in particular, just a man/on his way to the public phone/to call his woman.” The violence and chaos of the urban setting, however, do not overpower the tenderness that also characterizes the collection. “In search of aztlan,” for example, blends fantasy with the everyday pressures of the real world: “I came looking for aztlan/but couldn’t find it/it had been hidden with names/like Fresno parlier earlimart/I came asking questions of my family/but my family could only remember/how the last paycheck/ was swallowed mysteriously/by the valley’s hot air.” Amid the ever-present sirens and the cries of police brutality, these poems remind us that even though life can often be as hard as concrete, there is still room for love, as we see a series of short pieces that conclude the collection. The romantic simplicity we witness in “prayer”: “you are hot./i can barely/breathe/you smell/good,” and in the poem titled “education”: “I am learning/the Braille/of your breath/your word/your voice/leaping /up from the page/into my mouth,” offer a temporary sanctuary from the extreme heat and coldness of the everyday.

*Pláticas de mi barrio* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press 1999) by Carlos Ponce-Meléndez presents 16 independent vignettes written in Spanish with some English that stimulate and satisfy the reader’s cravings for intimate details, gossip, and neighborhood secrets. Narrated in first person accounts, the stories capture the memories of elderly Mexican Americans from Texas.

In his preface, Carlos Ponce-Meléndez describes the ethnographic techniques that he employed to record these personal reminiscences. As a social-scientist and reporter for the radio, Ponce-Meléndez was inspired by the housewives and retired couples that he interviewed and immediately saw the need to record their everyday experiences. The stories are told in such a personal style that we can almost hear a younger family member in the background yelling out, “Ay no, abuelito, not that story again!” But readers of the Latin American testimonial genre and those interested in oral history will surely recognize the importance of documenting the stories of the Mexican American elderly. Like the Latin American interlocutor that hides in the textual margins in order to give voice to the Other, Carlos Ponce-Meléndez does not intervene explicitly in the text. Instead, he transmits the entire conversation as if it were narrated in one sitting. In this way, the reader voyeuristically glimpses into the lives of a range of individuals that we’d perhaps never encounter by any other means.

Besides taking in the neighborhood secrets and decade-old memories, the reader’s attention and curiosity quickly shift to an appreciation of the richness of both languages. Although the interviews were conducted in Spanish, the stories are transcribed to retain some archaic forms more characteristic of rural zones in Mexico such as “ansina”, “muncho”, and “naiden.” In a delightful story titled “Doña Bilingue,” we see spanglish or tex-mex in full effect. Doña Bilingue begins her story by stating, “No es que yo no quisiera aprender ingles bien, si no soy tarada, es que no hubo chanza. My dad always talked to me in Spanglish y mi mama también . . . Mi josband didn’t know English muy bien que digamos y mira que salió cañon pa los business.” The glossary of terms will provide assistance (as well as a good laugh) to fully understand this queen of code-switchers. Here, we find words that would not appear in a standard Spanish dictionary as well as colloquialisms such as—"ajuera" instead of afuera, "arejuntarse" defined as unirse sin estar casados, or living together, "biles" for cuentas, "bloques" for cuadras, "bolillos" for anglos, "carpeta" for alfombra (carpet), and "pos" instead of the standard *pues*.

After putting down *Pláticas de mi barrio*, the reader can literally feel that he or she has just returned from an intriguing afternoon—full of humor and wisdom—listening to stories of strength and courage though challenging times.