

Poetry Saved My Life: An Interview with Lorna Dee Cervantes

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Chicana poet and activist Lorna Dee Cervantes was born in the Mission District in San Francisco, California, on August 6, 1954, to a working-class Mexican American couple. Her mother was a homemaker and her father was an artist. In 1959, after her divorce, Cervantes's mother, Rose, moved with her two young children to San José, California, to live with her mother. Cervantes grew up in East San José in a barrio called "Horseshoe," where poverty, gangs, and street violence were ubiquitous. Although the poet experienced a tough childhood and adolescence, as she writes in some of her autobiographical poems (i.e., "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway"), she survived and thrived, thanks to the love and support of her maternal grandmother. Poetry also played an important role in her life; at the age of eight, when she penned her first poem, Cervantes discovered that writing poetry enabled her to make sense of her experience as a poor urban Chicana. Later in her teen years, when she joined several civil rights movements (the National Organization for Women, the Native American Movement, and the Chicano Movement), poetry became her weapon to denounce racism, sexism, violence against women, and the oppression of the disempowered. Indeed, these concerns inform all of Cervantes's works.

Since the publication of *Emplumada* (Pittsburgh Press, 1981), her coming-of-age debut collection, Cervantes has garnered critical acclaim by scholars and writers alike. Fittingly, Chicana dramatist

Cherríe Moraga has called her “our Chicano poet laureate” (qtd. in Kevane and Heredia 104). *Emplumada* received an American Book Award and is a fundamental text in Chicana/Latino studies. In comparison to *Emplumada*, Cervantes’s second book, *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* (Arte Público Press, 1991), is more lyrical and abstract. It centers on the poet’s experiences with loss brought on by divorce, her mother’s death, and historical discontinuity. Although *From the Cables of Genocide* has not enjoyed a wide readership because of its hermetic nature, it has received several accolades, including the Paterson Poetry Prize and the Latino Literature Prize. In *Drive: The First Quartet* (Wings Press, 2006), a fifteen-year project, Cervantes continues her commitment to justice by denouncing political violence (i.e., the 1997 massacre in Acteal in the Mexican state of Chiapas) and genocide—particularly that of her Chumash ancestors, whose bones are still entombed in the adobe walls of the Santa Barbara Mission.

Cervantes is one of the best read and more anthologized Chicana writers; her work appears in major anthologies such as the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, and the *Hispanic Literary Companion*. She has been honored with several awards, including the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant for Poetry in 1978 and 1993, Outstanding Chicana Scholar by the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Scholars (NACCS) in 1993, and the Wallace/Reader’s Digest Writer’s Award from 1995 to 1998.

This interview took place on May 31, 1999, in Davis, California, in the home of Chicano poet and educator Francisco X. Alarcón. For over two hours, Cervantes spoke about poets who have influenced her work, such as Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, Mexican poet José Gorostiza, and American poets Elizabeth Bishop and Bob Hass. She also provided insights into the themes and symbolism found in her poetry and offered her perspective on the future of Chicana and Chicano poetry.

Sonia V. González: Who were the poets that influenced you at each stage, when you were writing *Emplumada*, *From the Cables of Genocide*, and *Drive*?

Lorna Dee Cervantes: I started writing when I was eight years old, and there were a couple of influences right around the same time. Pablo Neruda has been a sustaining influence since I first discovered him when I was fifteen years old and my brother brought home *The Heights of Machu Picchu*. I have a real clear memory of being in the backyard, sitting there reading the whole book, because all the poetry I read before—I was reading the Romantics, the transcendentalists, but especially the Romantics, Byron, Wordsworth—[made me think that] poetry had died out a hundred years ago. . . . Also, I had this sense that poetry was for the aristocratic classes who had the leisure to sit around and write it. . . . *The Heights of Machu Picchu* . . . was the first thing that was speaking to my *cultura* [culture]. From then, I read everything I could find. Luckily at that point, there were translations just coming out, [like] the Robert Blythe translations.

And then around that same time, it was 1969, 1970—1970 was a watershed year for African American women poets. That was when Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published, then, that same year Alice Walker, June Jordan, Sonia Sánchez, and others. I had read an anthology that included Phillis Wheatley's work and that touched me, the whole idea of the slave woman writing poetry to assert her humanity and to gain her freedom. And then from there, there was Gwendolyn Brooks. That year there were these anthologies of Black poetry and Black women's poetry. Then suddenly, for the first time, I realized that it [poetry] was not a class-bound thing and that there were living poets right now. So I've always wanted to write a poem called "On thanking Black Muses," because I've said often that poetry saved my life, on a literal level as well as on a figurative level.

Reading African American women poets politicized me. And it was the fact that poetry politicized me that had to do with then saving my life. Then all of the sudden, I started questioning; that's the dynamic of oppression, and especially as a child and as a woman, a girl coming into it. You look around, and you don't see anybody like you in positions of power, and you don't even question it. You just assume that you are not going to achieve anything and [that] no one expects anything from you. And so

when I started reading this poetry, then I started questioning and questioning real hard. And I got angry.

By the time I was fifteen years old I became a committed activist. . . . I started working as an activist for NOW [National Organization for Women]. I got involved with the Chicano Movement, the Chicano Moratorium. It was like a newfound sense that I could recover and investigate my history, my *cultura*. Also, I was very influenced by the socialist poets, globally, and then Bertolt Brecht's poetry. Again, because it was this class-consciousness. For the first time, seeing this subject matter in poetry had a tremendous influence on me. And now, there is a new anthology that Carolyn Forché put out called *The Poetry of Witness*. And that anthology is sort of [a] convenient way to answer that question.

SG: What influenced you when you were writing *From the Cables of Genocide*? In 1999, you mentioned to poet Francisco Aragón that Elizabeth Bishop had influenced your writing.

LDC: First of all, I conceived of this book as a literary triptych, and that was just one part of the triptych. The other was "Bird Ave," and the other one was "How far is the War?" "How far is the War?" [are] more politically-engaged poems, coming back to the persona that's developed in *Emplumada* (1981). . . . *From the Cables of Genocide* (1991) was written to indulge in my love of poetry, of language, of the lyrics.

But also, [*From the Cables of Genocide*] came out of a very difficult time for me after the murder of my mother. My mother was murdered in 1982, in the fall of 1982, and I stopped writing. I gave up [writing] poetry as if I was in charge. I would write in the dark, literally, because I did not want to read what I was writing. But I was not writing, and I went back to school. [I] got my BA, and then from there, [I] went to UCSC in the History of Consciousness Program, not doing literature, not studying literature [or] poetry. "Drawings" was the first poem that I started writing again after about a five-year absence. Most of these poems sort of erupted in about a year's time. There's a long poem, "Shooting the Wren," that was written with four other poems. They were all written in one night, so this sort of flood, very intense, very

different, not poems written and conceived in the same way *Emplumada* was, which was written for someone else. In a sense, I was trying to give back that gift that had saved me when I discovered, again, African American women's poetry. I was having this vision of some little Chicana in San Antonio [Texas] going, scanning the shelves, like I used to do, scanning the shelves for women's names or Spanish surnames, hoping she'll pull it out, relate to it. So it was intentionally accessible poetry, intended to bridge that gap, that literacy gap. Whereas in writing *From the Cables of Genocide*, I was not even thinking about publication. It was just very intense, personal poetry that I did not even think about publishing or how people would react. I was just writing it. Can I go back to the Bishop question?

When I went to Vassar [College] in February [1999], I was asked to give a talk for an Elizabeth Bishop seminar. They said: I don't know what connection you have with Bishop. And I said, Bishop has been a very interesting poet to me. I was a voracious reader as a child. All I read was poetry. After I got out of high school, I spent the next twelve years reading nothing but poetry. But what I was saying before, about scanning the shelves for women, well there was Gabriela Mistral;¹ there was Sor Juana,² Marianne Moore, then Sara Teasdale—and again this sort of middle-class [poetry]. And Bishop, I guess I started reading her when I was about fifteen in the library. I discovered her through Moore. I really felt some kind of connection to her and to what she was doing in poems. There's a poem called "The Fish" and there's another one about going to the docks. At the end something starts reverberating out of them, of just the ordinary, actually very simple, straightforward language—even though it is a very intricate, metrical construction.

At that time, I was writing *From the Cables of Genocide* and coming out of a major [writing] block. One of the things I was doing when I was writing that book in order to get out of the block was translation. I started translating José Gorostiza's *Muerte sin fin*. He's a Mexican poet from the forties and fifties. . . . I could not find a translation of it in English, but I was just enthralled by this poem. It took me a year and a half to translate it.

There was something that was happening as I was translating *Muerte sin fin* that was working on me that I can see when I look at

a poem like this ["Drawings"], "Shooting the Wren," and "Pleiades." First of all, I wanted to play with all of the thirty connotations of cables. My intention in the beginning was to do these short poems, like cables. But when I started writing in earnest, then this voice came out. And it was years later that I realized . . . that's the way *Muerte sin fin* is. It's very long, long lines and very complicated dense imagery. So that you get to the end of a line, and then, there's another complication. And then, there's another clause, another clause. So just when you think you finally get to the end of the line then, there's another twist and it goes on.

I was interested in the idea that there's this poem that you can read in this other way. For example, he has this poem in the *Songs to Sing in the Boats*, "Who Will Buy Me an Orange?" "¿Quién va a comprarme una naranja?" At that time *naranja* [orange] was a term for girlfriend in México City, and that's the refrain all the way through the poem, that every time you get to that line it sort of changes and it changes. Who will buy me an orange? An orange shriveled in the shape of a heart? There's this heart imagery all the way through this book. Of course, it was an amazing challenge to try to translate all of that and keep that sense of those different ways of reading. How many connotations can I juggle here and make all of them work on all these different levels?

What happened was right that same summer, when I was writing this book [*From the Cables of Genocide*, 1991] there was this article in the *American Poetry Review* about these found poems. These lesbian, homoerotic poems, or lesbian erotica that Bishop had written; and they discovered that she had a lover for twenty years in Brazil who had committed suicide. See, that was the thing about Bishop that I picked up upon when I was sixteen years old in my reading of these poems—because Bishop is not considered a passionate poet, right? But I was getting something from these poems. And this was my connection, more than with Marianne Moore. There was something about Bishop, even though she never wrote about it directly, about her personal pain, but it was in there. She has a poem about Valentine's [Day]. Clearly, this is a lesbian love poem. No one was writing about that, so to see this article and this beautiful poem that she had written to her lover

in Brazil. When I started saying my story, she [the professor who invited me] said, "Oh, you are talking about the poem I found." She had just published a book, so she gave me her book. But later, I went back again to reread Bishop and just went, "damn, that's where those sea lions are coming from. That's where this ocean imagery is coming from," and, of course, Gorostiza, *también* [also], *Songs to sing in the boats*. There is all this sea imagery. And again that idea of playing around with connotations, and this unsaid that comes and erupts through the poem . . . I was getting from a poet like Bishop.

SG: You dedicate this book [*From the Cables of Genocide*] to Sylvia Plath, Frida Kahlo, and Violeta Parra. What influence did Sylvia Plath have on your book?

LDC: Well. First of all, it appears to be a dedication. The original idea was to have cables, little short poems like urgent telegrams. This is an urgent telegram to the earth, to the world. The ship is going down, SOS, SOS, right? So the cables are to [someone]; the book is not for [someone].

My mother listened to records of poetry. In particular, my mother loved Edgar Allan Poe. She would recite "The Raven" in a really scary voice. She read poetry, and she read a lot. She was very literate. But she was very bitter. She had to drop out of high school before graduating, and she had bought into the whole thing of the woman's place is in the home and marrying. And then, she gets divorced, and then, no future. And so, she would punish me for reading books. I had to read books under the covers, or outside. I would have to read books in the closet. Because if she would see me reading a book, she would say: "The only thing you are going to be is a maid. It's the best that you can get out of this life. So you better make sure that you know how to clean the toilet, 'cause no one is ever going to pay you to read books.'" Now they pay me to read books!

But there was this reverence for the written word at the same time. There's this irony. From the very beginning since I was a little kid, there was always this consciousness of the relationship between power and language, as my mother used to say. Being a home girl, a *chola*, she would always correct my grammar, and I

would be punished for speaking Spanish. She wanted me to grow up without an accent because she said people are going to judge you by how you speak. So there were all these messages, and again this idea that they [her Native American ancestors] lost their land due to the written word. So this is my relationship to history.

SG: What were some of the stories that your grandmother shared with you? You write about the constellation of the seven sisters in "Pleiades from the Cables of Genocide."

LDC: That was the only one. Unfortunately, she was sold when she was eleven years old. The tie was broken anyway with the decimation of the bands because they [the Chumash] had to hide out.³ So as far as any stories, their culture, that was it. My connection with my grandmother was that. Every evening, my whole childhood, I worked in the garden with her. And, it was there when she was working in the garden that her indigenous side came out, her relationship to the plants, her relationship to the birds. This is the origin of all this imagery, looking at all these things. The idea is that things speak to us. This is not an intellectual manufacturing of images. This is paying attention and listening, and trying to put them into written language, what these things are saying to us. It was around this time that she would talk about Pleiades. She would say that we came from them. We came from up there. And she would get real sad because she had forgotten. She had forgotten her mother's stories. She had forgotten the song that her mother would sing to her. She couldn't remember, and she would get bummed out. And it's interesting because when I grew up, I started to study about the Chumash. We came from the Pleiades, the seven sisters. I've always thought about going back [to Santa Barbara] because one of her greatest joys was riding her horse the few days off she had or time off that she would have taking care of this family. She said that she would spend the three days following, not even telling the horse where to go, but going where the horse went, just wandering those hills. She would describe that whole area.

SG: Obviously in *Emplumada* you have that really strong connection with your grandmother, and you take on some of your grand-

mother's characteristics. There seems to be resentment towards your mother. In *From the Cables of Genocide*, where you talk about her death, there's more regret.

LDC: I don't know. I would have to think about that. I never thought about it in those terms. I mean, certainly in the first poem, "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," that's what that's all about, trying almost not trying to choose one over the other one, but find some sort of synthesis. I really didn't think about it. Most of those poems were written, not like I was writing poetry for anyone to be reading. The answer to that is a new book and some of the poems in the new book [*Drive*]. "California Plum," in particular, where I say: "I suppose I was a derelict. I was a derelict's kid." Because my mother was very bitter, and she was a chronic alcoholic. She was a derelict. My grandmother kept the house, so that's the only reason why we weren't homeless. Even though we were—I've always been—welfare class. But, I don't know how to answer that.

SG: I see "Drawings" as a microcosm of the collection [*From the Cables of Genocide*]. Did you see it that way? Why did you choose to put that one as the first poem?

LDC: Just about when I was writing *Emplumada*, I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to write, how the book was going to be structured, even before some of the poems were written. And, that's why it took me so long because I needed to write certain poems, to fill in certain slots, because I knew that this is what I wanted to do. This book [*From the Cables of Genocide*] was much more difficult. And finally, I did have a hard time arranging it. . . . As one poet said, the book is the last poem because the book is a poem and each individual poem is like a verse or stanza in the long poem. I was really frustrated. I kept taking poems out, to try to figure out what the structure of the book was. And it was almost as if I was shuffling. I dug my thumbs in the middle of the book and turned everything inside out, literally. I mean like this [she demonstrates], so that "Drawings" was almost in the middle. It was the last poem in this section that was in the middle.

There is a friend of mine, a student, Luis Alberto Urrea. He was a student of mine at UC Boulder and a friend too. He was more of

a peer than a student. And I was reading in a seminar that another professor had invited me to, and the first question was his [Urrea's]. And he goes on about . . . "Drawings," about how difficult it is. He says: "It's almost like the Zen master, the hardest poem. This is a test." And I went to answer it, and I just burst into tears. It was the first time that I had talked about this book. And I quoted a poet, Steven Davinson, who once said: "I write poetry to keep from putting a bullet into my head." This isn't true of my work and me. But it was when I was writing this. "Drawings" was [written] first because it was the night that I came across this: "If you had enough bad things happen to you, you might as well kiss off the rest of your life."⁴ Then, I started this poem. I almost wrote like a suicide note, kiss it off, kiss it off. Nah, I said, I am not going to do that, but I'll write. And then, when I got to "evidently they haven't a word for regret," I put the word down there, "full heart." Then, I started getting happy, and I wrote: "Well, someday I can write us out of this mess." I finished the poem, and I wanted to go dancing. But I had no intention of anybody reading it, and I cannot change it. I cannot put it back together into a simple narrative. I cannot do anything more than that. That's it.

So when I decided to start off with this poem ["Drawings"], I put my thumbs in it and turned it; and I said, "Yes, this is where it begins." And in a certain sense this is where it begins for the book and me because this just opened the floodgate, all of these poems.

SG: The title of the book [*From the Cables of Genocide*] seems to be working on different levels, like drawings, images through painting, and also the idea of drawings, that whole thing with the poker game. ["Drawings" employs symbols that appear on poker cards such as "queen," "ace," and "jack."]

LDC: Yes. I intended all of that. And this is what I like about this, and drawings like draw, like the gunman. I call this the shoot out, the high noon draw. That was also my intent as well as drawings; draw a bucket back to the cables and the whole idea about drawings. Have you ever found that review that this woman wrote in *The Latin American Review*? This woman deconstructed the title. She went [on and on about] how many different ways you could

interpret cables because there are different ways, including torture. Then there are the cables for drawings, of drawing up a bucket. So it's negative, and it's positive. Whereas genocide, there is only one way to interpret that word, just like oppression and repression. Oppression has a lot of different ways of manifesting, a lot of different levels of oppression. There is only one way that you can interpret repression; that's torture; that's pain; that's force; that's imprisonment; that's genocide.

SG: In that same poem, you mentioned Wassily Kandinsky. I've done some research on the expressionists in both literature and painting. I also saw the connection with "Drawings" in the fact that in expressionism the images are superimposed. I wanted to know if there was any influence by the expressionists.

LDC: First of all, there's all this biographical stuff. So, my ex-husband, who never used to draw or do any art until he met me, started painting. Kandinsky was our favorite painter at that time. His paintings were similar to Kandinsky's [paintings]. He once gave me one he did one for me, where he had this subtitle: "Lorna meets Oliver North and she kicks his butt."⁵ In a way these poems are abstract expressionism.

SG: Superimposition. There are layers, layering, no divisions.

LDC: This is the conscience of trauma. This is a grief book. That's how I refer to it, privately. It's my grief book because my mother was murdered, and raped, and battered. Then they burned the house down. I was dealing with that and with my divorce, and all of that stuff. When people ask me, do you believe that everybody can write poetry, in a certain sense, yes, in a certain sense, no. Not everybody can write poetry. However, I believe that every human being experiences these deep lessons in life, and experiences grief, and these moments where you are changed and transformed. And most people cannot articulate and cannot isolate the different images and how they can come together. But then, there is the poem. When we experience grief, every grief is a layer. You lose someone, and then you lose someone again. It's layered, the feelings, a hone. It clusters around things. And the kid who cannot

cry, one day he sees his father's funky shoes in the closet, and everything he feels about his father, negative and positive, then suddenly it all comes in this rush, the smell of his jacket, his tobacco, everything. It's sort of what is coming from this space, the psychological space that I was in at that time. That would sort of explain it. That is the idea of abstract expressionism; it's kind of a montage.

SG: In *Emplumada* you seem to have this connection with food and memory.

LDC: My mother was a derelict, and she did not have food in the house. She did not have it together to even cook beans. It seems like the whole time when I was growing up, [there was] this constant quest for food. . . . There's this line again in the new book where I talk more directly about this. There's a line about choosing my troops by the contents of their refrigerator. I did not realize that there was any food in *Emplumada*.

SG: There's a poem, "An Interpretation of Dinner by the Uninvited Guest."

LDC: Yeah. That's a political poem. That's a rewriting of "Poem for the Young White Man."⁶ I wrote this in Provincetown. I wrote it then because I had a little studio that was next to this house, literally looked down. And all I could see was this little window, and they [the family] were so punctual. I did not come from a family that was punctual. They had this elaborate dinner, so exactly, wow clockwork. It was such a trip to be up there using the studio to write, and then I would look down and watch this whole thing. I wanted to explore writing political poems that were not overtly political, but [that] to me were political. This is a political poem, the hands that "reattach themselves / and who knows what countries their bodies dwell in." To me that's a political poem. It's a poem about the classes. This is why Neruda has been sustaining, you know. He is the man because he can do these politically engaged rhetorical poems. And I mean in a positive sense, almost in the original sense of rhetoric. This was the language of the lower

classes to get something done, to demand something, to show, to persuade.

SG: There were two poems where you include epigraphs, and one of them makes a reference to Paul Zweig.

LDC: He's an American poet who died in the 1970s, and some of the poems I never read anymore. I call this book Bob's curse. My teacher was Robert Hass. I should have included him in the influences because he is my teacher. He was my mentor for five years. I walked into his class without even being enrolled. I heard him read at a Foothill College Writer's conference. I was still in high school, before or after my high school graduation. It's interesting because he always incorporated California history. In particular, he grew up in Palo Alto, always incorporating historical facts in his poems. He was reading one about the Californios and the Fremonts, and the Native population. It just blew me away, and I got the lines for the "Poema para Californios Muertos" poem. I wrote it in the middle of his reading. I got up from the reading. I went into the bathroom. I sat in the [bathroom] stall. I scribbled out the poem. I came out, sat down, and he was still reading.

And then, I went where does this guy teach? Then, I found out that he had a Tuesday night class at San José State. So that fall, the first day of class, he does the roll. And of course, I am the only Chicana in the class. He takes roll and finishes with the roll, and he looks at me. I don't say anything. He let me stay, and the next semester I came back. He believed in creating a community of writers, and how important that was, and continuity in the workshop. So eventually, I ended going back to San José State and enrolling so that I could continue to take his workshops and get credit for it. So it was five years altogether, semester after semester. So that poem came out of that. Ah, Paul Zweig.

SG: I asked about "The House He Falls in Love With," about the epigraph.

LDC: There are certain poets who are the poets of the poets, the Roland Blythes of the world. And then there are poets' poets that only poets know about or discover because they are not flashy.

James Wright is a good example of that. It was not until real recently towards the end of his life, right before his death that he really started getting credit, the acknowledgment. So Paul Zweig was a critic and a poet, and he died in the '70s of a brain cancer. His last book was written knowing that it was probably going to be published posthumously. Within that book, here is this man who knows he's dying. He built this house out of stone in the South of France, and he had this wife [there]. And she hated living there, and he loved it, this house that he had built with his hands out of stone. So he has the poem called "Wasps." It's about killing the wasps in the house, the honeycomb and the beehive, and seeing the dead bees. And, all of the sudden, again, is that same thing about Elizabeth Bishop, at the end of the poem, suddenly it starts resonating and taking on connotations of the hives and the multiplying of the cancer cells and death, and killing oneself and pestilence. It's all very straightforward, a little poem about killing and getting rid of the bees, the wasps. Then all of the sudden, there's chemotherapy in there.

And yeah, Bob's [Robert Hass's] curse, so when I showed Bob the manuscript [*From the Cables of Genocide*], his first comment was, "Well you know the problem with dedicating a book of love poems to one person is that by the time the book is out the relationship is over." And sure enough this happened. So I hate to read from this book.

SG: What are some of your current projects?

LDC: There's *Drive*, which is five books in one. I think it's done. There are about a dozen poems from *Drive* completely unedited. I do an exercise with my students that comes from this woman Natalie Goldberg, where you write something like a title, a word a phrase, put it in the hat, and then, what you do is draw one. Someone draws one. Then we have this word of this title, and then we have seven minutes or less to write a poem with that working title. I don't tell my students to have that as a working title, but I usually use the title. So they are completely spontaneous, unedited poems with given titles. I have about a dozen more of them that are going to be in the book. "Bananas" and "Coffee" are part of four poems

that I hope to write that I am working on. So right now, what I am working on is oil. So there's "bananas," there's "coffee," there's "oil," and there is one called "Californium." Do you know what Californium means?

SG: It's a metal.

LDC: Yes, it's a transuranic metal, a man-made element, and it's also the most expensive substance on the planet. You know how much it is a pound? Five hundred and thirty billion dollars a pound. And then, I am writing some new poems right now. At this point, I just know that they are the next book, but I don't know where it's going. And I have some biographical essays, short little things. I had a prose block, a serious prose block. And recently, it kind of smashed through a bit, sort of like Galeano.⁷ So I have this book that I have been working on for a long time, but not actually writing more of headwork. It's called "I know Why the Caged Quetzals Die." Maya Angelou, [I am] going back to the beginning, kind of autobiographical.

SG: This is a really broad question, but where do you see Chicano poetry going right now?

LDC: Wherever your heart desires. You know for me, coming back to the idea of Phillis Wheatley, one's humanity and the sense that poetry saved my life—I have this common debt. And that is what in a sense where poetry is. I think that it's very different than the "anxiety of influence." It's more in a sense of mothering, than of killing the authoritative father. Certainly this is true in Chicana poetry. But when I was starting out, there was Luis Omar Salinas, Ricardo Sánchez, Alurista, José Montoya, and Lalo Delgado. But there was something about discovering the poetry of Luis Omar Salinas that kind of personal, a little surrealist and reading Raúl Salinas, or Ricardo Sánchez, or José Montoya. Then, I can build on or take off on them. And there was this very keen sense of participating in building our *cultura*. I have always written, but I haven't always thought of myself as publishing. But my impetus to call myself into working as a poet has to do with recognizing that this is my contribution to my *Raza* [my people]. This is what I can give

to my *Raza*. I don't have organizing skills, but I can do this. That's why it was important to me to document my personal history. Again, not so much to express some sort of deep personal pain, but to document my personal history that I didn't see anywhere, and I did not see in the work of these men, Chicano [Cervantes stressed the "o"—meaning poetry written by males] poetry. I was very conscious of this. It was liberating. This is the ground, and we take off from them. This is the essence of strategy. This is the essence of freedom. Now I can remember what I wanted to say, and I can connect to this.

You were asking earlier about hunger, because when I think about politics, race, class, gender issues, when I think of oppression, I think what are these barriers? Cultural barriers? What is it that separates us? It has come down to hunger, the experience of hunger. I have always wanted to do something to turn hunger of memory into memory of hunger, as José Antonio Burciaga said to me. Because the experience of being hungry and not being able to do a damn thing about it, is an experience that really separates. The experience of being hungry and not being able to get any food, that really seems to be a lever, a common ground. As far as the direction of Chicano poetry, it's an on-going thing. I have always thought of Chicana poetry as becoming more globalized as oppression becomes more globalized. And that in a sense, there's this chicanization of the planet, and the transnationals accrue more and more power. And that is poetry of strategy; poetry is not of the participant class, but of the observer class. I think that that's one of the strengths of Chicana poetry. It's this power of observation that is the difference. Whereas the men's poetry was more linguistically free, when Chicanas started publishing it was all about perceptions, what was observed. To me, it's not history, oral history, written. It's a matter of the relationship between power and language. But again, that kind of participation through the language was for us one of our strengths. It's the keen power of observation.

SG: In *Drive*, I noticed that you are writing a lot more in Spanish. At some point in the interview, you said that in *Emplumada* you were trying to write bilingually, but that you decided not to do it

anymore. And then, in *Drive* the use of Spanish seems to be a lot more natural.

LDC: Well, that's the consequence of finally being able to speak it. Living in Mexico, when I was doing the translation of Gorostiza, I realized *Basta ya* [enough already]. At this point in my life, I have to learn Spanish. So I spent about a year off and on in Mexico and continuing with the translation. And then I met Javi's [Cervantes's only child] father. That is one way to learn the language. It's interesting to me that it's coming out more and more in these spontaneous unedited poems.

SG: Do you think that you will be writing more in Spanish?

LDC: I hope so. What I used to say, and what I believe, is that you have to write in the language that you dream in.

Notes

1. Mistral (1889-1957) was a Chilean poet, educator, and diplomat. She was also the first Latin American recipient of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1945.
2. Mexican nun and writer (1648-1695), considered America's first feminist.
3. Cervantes's maternal grandmother traced her roots to the Chumash—a Native American nation that originally lived near the Santa Barbara coast in California. At age 11, her grandmother was removed from her family and became a live-in maid for an Anglo family. She stayed with this family until she was twenty-four years old. During that time she had very little contact with her six sisters and immediate family.
4. This epigraph precedes "Drawings," and was a statement made by a social worker that asserted that children that have difficult childhoods were destined to a life full of misery and hopelessness.
5. This was the painting's title and also a line quoted in "Drawings."
6. Long title: "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War between the Races?"
7. Eduardo Galeano is a Latin American historian, journalist, and essayist.

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