

**Karin Rosa Ikas: *Chicana Ways: Conversations with Ten Chicana Writers*.**

**Reno & Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002**

By Claudia Leitner, University of Vienna, Austria

1 Based on ten in-depth interviews with female Mexican American writers, Karin R. Ikas's *Chicana Ways* pays tribute to the consolidation and dynamics of Chicana literary discourse over the past thirty years. Focusing on women of Mexican American descent - or *Chicanas*, to use the politically and culturally more biased self-denomination that also allows for gender inflection -, the book draws innovatory strength from its specific outlook: "It is the first collection of interviews exclusively with female writers of the fastest-growing minority group in the United States," as Ikas points out in her introduction (XVI). There is another peculiar feature of the conversations assembled in this book: With a young German scholar acting as interlocutor and editor, *Chicana Ways* appears as a particularly interesting instance of inquiry and dialogue in an intercultural context.

2 The book is designed to appeal to a wide audience, its purpose being "to present the multiplicity and diversity of Chicana voices to an international audience and to stimulate further interest in these writers and their works in the United States" (XVIII). An emphasis on polyphony is also manifest in the aptly chosen title of the book: While *Chicana* - as opposed to the masculine term *Chicano* - indicates the dual focus on gender and ethnicity, the term *Ways* highlights the importance of positionality in the articulation of subjectivity and helps to display cultural identification as a variable and fluid process. It is in fact even possible to detect some historico-political resonances, taking us back as far as the 1960s: The plural term *Chicana Ways* appears to invoke and question the much-discussed "Chicano Movement" and the normative, monolithic model of cultural and political identity which it implied.

3 With an exclusive focus on women writers, Ikas sets out to counter prevailing homogenized versions of ethnic identity, organized around a paradigmatic male Chicano subject. As these writers reflect upon their lives and works, stereotypical images of the self-sacrificing, devout, submissive and inarticulate Mexican (American) woman fade. What emerges instead is a rich panorama of articulate and indeed very literate women "daring to speak out and tackle the multiple forms of discrimination within Mexican American culture and society in general" (XIV).

4 The publication of *Chicana Ways* comes at a fortuitous moment: it coincides with the third edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2002), a book that may not only be considered a foundational text for Chicana literature, but also a

cornerstone of Women of Color's Feminism. It is indeed one of the strongholds of *Chicana Ways* to have the two editors of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, look back and reflect upon the specific circumstances that made them bring out their pioneering anthology in 1981. Anzaldúa vividly recalls her experience with former academic hostility towards Chicana issues, "The adviser told me that Chicana literature was not a legitimate discipline, that it didn't exist, and that women's studies was not something that I should do" (4).

5 The amazing rise of Chicana subjects both in theory and literary practice that has since taken place is documented not only in Anzaldúa's and Moraga's accounts. Several of the other writers interviewed - Lorna Dee Cervantes, Denise Chávez, Lucha Corpi, Jamie Lujan, Demetria Martínez, Pat Mora, Mary Helen Ponce, and the late Estela Portillo-Trambley - are also well-established figures in the literary and academic world. Although the two Chicana authors who have most successfully entered the US literary mainstream, Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo, are not among those interviewed in *Chicana Ways*, continuous references to them in the conversations recall their importance.

6 The ten writers and artists (especially actress and theater activist Jamie Lujan seems more involved with the performative aspect of literature) with whom the book is concerned are presented in alphabetical order. They appear not only in text but also in image as each entry is begun with a photograph of the interviewee. Conducted in a period between September 1996 (Chávez) and April 1997 (Martínez), the interviews in *Chicana Ways* comprise between seven (Portillo-Trambley) and twenty-five pages (Ponce). The time and place of each interview is conveniently stated in a separate line below the heading. Each interview is moreover preceded by a short introductory note and followed by a bibliography listing the respective author's works. Especially readers not yet familiar with the writers and works in question will be grateful for the compact presentation of basic information and the valuable frame of reference provided in these bio-bibliographical notes.

7 Trained at the University of Würzburg, Germany, as well as at several universities of the American Southwest where she has conducted research, Karin R. Ika is to be credited with an impressive array of publications on Chicano/a literature, Cultural Studies, and Feminism. In *Chicana Ways*, she keeps posing questions that are currently debated in and about Chicano/a culture as it is silhouetted and refracted against Latino/a culture, Anglo-American culture, and global issues. Recurring concerns are the writers' family backgrounds, their access to education and literature, their professional choices, literary practices, influences and affinities, bilingualism, choice of language and of genre, ethnic identification,

religion and spirituality, body images and cultural icons, site specificity, personal and social space, cultural heritage and generational matters as well as commitment to social change and resistance.

8 In moving from interview to interview, readers will be able to perceive not only the diversity of the individual writers' approaches, but also various strands of convergence. While most of the older generation authors interviewed still acknowledge their affiliation - even if it was only peripheral - with the Chicano civil rights movement, the overt political didacticism characteristic of earlier Chicano/a literature engaged with the Movement has given way to more subtle approaches. As many Chicano issues, in Cherrie Moraga's words, "are already understood now [...], people can go on to ask more complex questions about how class, gender, race, and sexuality intersect" (155).

9 Chicano ethnic nationalism, with its bipolar opposition between Anglos and Mexicans, as well as its idealization of Mexican "homeland" and culture, has notably disappeared. In fact, in these women writers' testimonies, Mexico is only one possible source of inspiration and identification among many others. Lucha Corpi, the only first-generation Chicana among the writers interviewed in this collection, actually casts quite a critical, ambivalent look back on Mexican society and the Mexican everyday culture she grew up with before emigrating to the USA at the age of 19 (72-74).

10 Steadfast bipolarity thus gives way to an enhanced attention towards diversity and a more nuanced look at regional and historical developments. Local differences and global dynamics are in the foreground when Demetria Martínez emphasizes New Mexico's historical isolation from Mexico and relegates the most Mexican of all icons of Mexicanness, the Virgin of Guadalupe, to the poor place of a "recent immigrant, brought by recent immigrants from Mexico" (122). As Lorna Dee Cervantes comments upon her Chumash ancestors, Native American culture in California becomes discernible (38). In New Mexico, both Denise Chávez and Demetria Martínez draw on local native as well as Jewish cultural heritages (59 and 124). Pat Mora's observation that identity ought to be regarded as "multiple" and "situational" (138), is corroborated in Mary Helen Ponce's reflections on the "culture shock" a Chicana is likely to experience even *within* Chicano/a communities when moving, for instance, from California, or Texas, to New Mexico (194)

11 New, more complex perspectives on "core" topics of Chicano/a culture are complemented by a considerable widening of thematic interests. "More and more," as Gloria Anzaldúa observes, "I am asked to speak about global stuff, international subjects" (18). Among the younger writers interviewed in *Chicana Ways*, Demetria Martínez appears to be

the one who most obviously continues the tradition of social protest and political activism so typically assigned to Chicano/a literature. As she comments on subjects as varied as NAFTA, the international movement of capital, Vietnam, Central America, Argentina, and her involvement with the Sanctuary Movement, it becomes clear, however, that her commitment reaches far beyond Chicano/a or Latino/a communities in the USA.

12 The literary works discussed and documented in *Chicana Ways* also reveal an astonishingly wide range of genres. Perhaps in response to the fact that the alignment of Chicano/a literature with ethnic and socio-political protest has itself become a limiting stereotype, several writers figuring in *Chicana Ways* have chosen forms of expression not immediately associated with ideological agendas. Detective fiction (Corpi) and children's literature (Anzaldúa, Chávez, Corpi, Mora) may be genres that will require more critical attention when it comes to assessing Chicano/a literature in the future.

13 Most of the writers interviewed in *Chicana Ways* display a strong commitment to feminism. Even those who do not openly subscribe to a feminist agenda tend to acknowledge the importance of feminism and gender issues - together with issues of lesbianism and bisexuality - for their works. Thus the views articulated in *Chicana Ways* coincide with what has been recognized elsewhere: Chicana feminism is definitely one of the most influential currents in contemporary Chicano/a literature and criticism.

14 The work of gender in the reformulation of Chicano/a forms of consciousness may well be exemplified by the effective establishment of Malinche as a role model for Chicanas. In contrast to Mexican and Chicano nationalist discourse where Malinche has been vilified as a scapegoat for colonization and selling out to the dominant culture, Chicanas tend to affirm their affiliation with the woman who, as interpreter in the conquest of Mexico, gained mythic stature as a mediator between cultures and as a symbol of *mestizaje*: "we are not *hijos de la chingada*, meaning the woman who was raped, but *hijas de La Malinche*, meaning the woman who was very able, intelligent, and capable" (Corpi, 78). Explaining the implications of her novel *Mother Tongue*, Demetria Martínez relates Malinche with the concern for the voices of indigenous people and the recovery of Spanish in a predominantly English-speaking context (123).

15 As one of the Chicano/a "mother tongues," Spanish is given its place in this volume. The way Spanish words and expressions are integrated, however, poses some problems. Among the several spelling mistakes which occur in *Chicana Ways*, the ones in Spanish tend to be more unfortunate. The Uruguayan poetess Delmira Agustini, for instance, quoted twice as a source of inspiration by Lucha Corpi (70, 79), is misspelt as "Augustín" the second time

she is referred to (79). This may lead to the false assumption that there are two persons implied - particularly since the error manifests itself also in two different entries in the Index (217, 218). Similarly, the bilingual show title "¿iQué Nuevas!? - What's New!?" becomes "¿iQué Nueves!?" in the Index, which does not make sense in Spanish (221). Finally, the famous Carmen Miranda song "Mamá, yo quiero" mentioned by Jamie Lujan is not quite accurately translated as "Mama, I love you" (110n.9)

16 Another set-back of *Chicana Ways* is the uneven listing of the individual writers' works. While the slight variations in the organisational principle of the bibliographical entries may be of little concern, some limitations in the overall scope of bibliographical information given are rather disturbing. Whereas Denise Chávez's, Lucha Corpi's and Mary Helen Ponce's literary productions, for instance, are amply documented, including works published in anthologies, journals and magazines, other writers' bibliographies are surprisingly short, limited often to monographs, i.e. books written or edited by the respective author. In any case, this selective approach produces a rather distorted image of the bibliographic facts. Why is it, to give just one example, that Lucha Corpi's contribution to the anthology *Cuento chicano del siglo XX* (ed. Ricardo Aguilar, Mexico City: UNAM, 1993) is listed (89) but Estela Portillo-Trambley's short story "El vestido de París" ("The Paris Gown"), included in the same collection, is not (see 213)?

17 All in all, the selective bibliographies in *Chicana Ways* tend to downplay the vital importance of anthologies for the promotion of Chicana/o literature. Cherrie Moraga's landmark text "From a Long Line of Vendidas," for instance, gained international visibility precisely through its inclusion in publications of wider availability such as *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (ed. Teresa de Lauretis, London: Macmillan, 1988). The same holds true for Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, extracts of which came to represent postcolonial theory in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). An international readership would certainly have appreciated to find the corresponding bibliographical references in *Chicana Ways*.

18 These few shortcomings, however, are more than compensated by the book's attractiveness. *Chicana Ways* successfully updates and opens up Chicano/a issues for a wide public. This work is a positive balance to old stereotypes of Chicana women, and it is broad enough in perspective to avoid essentialisms and tokenizations of other kinds. It offers delightful, informative reading for both scholars and nonspecialists, and is destined to become a valuable source of reference for anybody interested in Chicano/a studies.

19 One of the most compelling virtues of Ikas's book is the way it links highly personal

data to more general concerns and developments, thus effectively displaying the intercultural dynamics and multivocality of Chicano/a existence. Readers will perceive quite a few instances where the writers' standpoints unwittingly enter into friction and debate with one another. So while there is a general agreement as far as the consolidation of Chicana literature is concerned, opinions diverge when it comes to discussing rivalry or a possible generation gap between established Chicana writers and those who started out later. Portillo-Trambley gives a plain negative answer to this question (208), whereas Anzaldúa admits that there might be some rivalry, yet regards herself as "out of it because they look at me as a *gente grande*" (20). Cervantes is probably right in concluding, "But no, there definitely is a very exciting new generation of Chicana writers right now" (36). Profiling this new generation in context, and placing it within the achievements of its *grand(es)* precursors, *Chicana Ways* helps the reader to understand what the excitement is all about.