

## **Seeds of Change: Fruit and Chicana Ecological Activism in Lorna Dee Cervantes's Poetry**

Chicana author and advocate Lorna Dee Cervantes became a poet at age eight and started her career as an activist at age fifteen. Her work in both of those arenas has been ceaseless ever since. While Cervantes has previously been involved in political work encompassing her various identities, from the National Organization for Women (NOW) to the American Indian Movement, her current efforts revolve around the field of environmental conservation, particularly as it is expressed in art through ecopoetics (Napikoski; Dowdy). Cervantes's ecological perspective has influenced her poetry's natural symbolism. In "Freeway 280", "Bananas", and "Pachucando", she uses fruit specifically to warn readers of the ways in which capitalism and consumerism are threats to Chicano and indigneous identity, as well as to celebrate resilience and encourage communal solidarity in these groups.

Cervantes's environmental activism stems from, and is a way of connecting to and bringing together, her indigenous and Chicana identities. When asked about her Chumash grandmother's penchant for storytelling, Cervantes emphasized her grandmother's relationship to the natural world as an essential aspect of Cervantes's current writing. Cervantes believes this relationship to nature is connected to her grandmother's Chumash identity:

My connection with my grandmother... 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... to the birds. This is the origin of all this imagery, looking at all these things. (González and Cervantes, 170)

Cervantes's connection of nature and her indigenous past is a view shared by many Chicanos. In his article "Chicano/a Land Ethics and Sense of Place: A Review Essay", Ruben Martinez discusses the US government's appropriation of Chicano ranch land in the Southwest United

States. He explains this experience was seen not only as the loss of land, but as “culture loss” as well. It is not just land but specifically the natural aspect of it that has been lost; Martinez argues that “orientation to nature” is a “key dimension” of the Chicano relationship with the land (Martinez 116, 114). Thus the connection Cervantes draws between nature and her personal cultural identity reflects wider experiences of not only indigenous communities, but also members of the Chicano diaspora.

In “Freeway 280”, Cervantes asserts the resilience of Chicano and indigenous communities by describing the perseverance of plants in an unforgiving space: under a highway. “Freeway 280” features the loss of a neighborhood to a recently-built freeway and the new nature that begins to grow beneath it. Cervantes’s narrator reflects both on those who interact with this garden, and on her decision to re-enter this space after previously keeping her distance. Cervantes uses this setting to highlight the continual and historical endurance of nature-based Chicano identity, even in the face of inhospitable environments—the “old gardens/come back stronger than they were”, the “viejitas” still come to gather greens, and wild mustard “remembers” even under “the fake windsounds” of the unnatural highway. Throughout “Freeway 280”, Cervantes’s narrator becomes more comfortable with the natural aspects of her cultural identity: she describes once wanting the “rigid lines” of the highway to take her away “to a place without sun”, away from this garden, but in the final stanza wonders whether the garden is precisely where she will find herself. At the end of the stanza, Cervantes’s narrator describes the missing part of herself as “mown under / like a corpse/ or a loose seed”, thus at last joining herself with the natural aspects of her community, capable of growth even when buried by murderous, anti-natural powers. By connecting her communities to the natural world she

describes, Cervantes affirms her cultures' ability to persevere and condemns the forces that hold them down.

Cervantes's poem "Bananas" reveals these anti-natural forces—e.g., the highway in Freeway 280—specifically as capitalist and consumerist political ideologies. In "Bananas", Cervantes denounces large companies as toxic to the natural world and the communities that live alongside it. She characterizes one such company as a destructive pest: "The United Fruit Company / train, a yellow painted slug, eats / up the swamps and jungle". Not only is it "eating up" the environment, but it also does not belong in the first place; it is a "painted" slug, an unnatural blight. Cervantes then details the victims of the wreckage:

Campesinos

replace Indians [...]

hacked into coffins: malaria,

tuberculosis, cholera, machetes of the jefes [...]

Their hands [...]

now twist into death, into silence

and obedience.

Both "campesinos" and "Indians" are reduced to their ability to work, viewed as disposable and "replaceable" by the "jefes" that wound and twist them into "silence / and obedience". Belinda Linn Rincón offers a similar analysis of one of Cervantes's earlier poems, "Coffee", in relation to the Zapatista anti-consumerist movement of the 1990s. Just as "Bananas" rallies readers against the United Fruit Company, a threat to the natural world and to the communities that live alongside it, "Coffee" "implicates popular consumer brands... in the massacre of Indian communities" (Rincón 62). Cervantes makes this connection "in order to

unite the severed ties between our daily consumptions, political privileges, and the atrocities committed in the distant and more recent past” (62). In both these poems, Cervantes argues that the everyday act of buying fruit cannot be separated from the suffering profit-hungry companies inflict onto agricultural workers.

With the real bananas in “Bananas”, Cervantes introduces a means to fight against those unnatural forces: via community and working-class solidarity. In the poem, Cervantes’s first-person narrator sends banana bread to Estonia, where money is tight and bananas are a privilege, as an act of solidarity between very different cultures. “I am thinking of children in Estonia with / no fried plátanos to eat with their fish,” she writes, before even discussing the horrors of the agricultural industry. In “Estas Son Mis Armas”, Rincón explains that “Coffee” also bridges national gaps and “reverses transnational solidarities” (66). Part of “Coffee” tells the story of a Jewish German man who is saved from Nazis by a French stranger. Rincón connects this story to “Coffee”’s previous recognition of indigenous genocide in the Americas, specifically the Acteal massacre in Mexico; the attempt to create justice for communities affected by these atrocities unifies groups that would otherwise remain distant. Cervantes’s interest in these human-rights related solidarities is applicable in “Bananas” as well. Cervantes’s narrator, grocery shopping in the US, cares deeply about and is driven to help people she does not even know, across the world, in Estonia and Colombia.

Cervantes elaborates on healing through community support in “Pachucando”, a poem about women collaborating to protect themselves in their sex work. The women she writes about are compared to fruits meant to be experienced—smelled, tasted, stared at—by outside viewers: “we were cold / fish eyes / ice skinned / grapes / fragrant”. This sensuality recalls Carol Dietrich’s claim that modern poetry links fruit’s sensuousness to luxury and sexuality (Dietrich,

16). But Cervantes's fruit symbolism does not stop at sex. Fruit is also the women's reward for teamwork:

that's

what girls

did in

the barrio

[...]

shoot out the lights

cut the hoses

walk the fence

get 'simmons

nuts

blood

oranges

in winter

plums

figs

in the fall

The work they do, expressed as the “shoot out the lights”, “cut the hoses”, and “walk the fence” prior to getting “15 / minutes / of fame”, is explicitly a joint effort. Cervantes uses “we” throughout the poem—“we formed / our own assaults / [...] teamwork”—and portrays these women's work as connected to a wider community: “we did / the work / of many”. Further, the vibrant color of these blood oranges, plums, and persimmons against the backdrop of winter and

fall recalls Dietrich's argument: these fruits are a reward, symbolizing luxury and indulgence. These women are thus able to achieve indulgence through solidarity despite being objectified by outside threats. Similarly, as the natural world and the Chicano and indigenous identities that include it are threatened by consumerism, it is solidarity that will bring the fulfillment due to these communities.

Lorna Dee Cervantes' poetry draws on the connection between her Chicana and indigenous identities and the natural land that fosters them. Specifically, Cervantes uses fruit to argue for solidarity against consumerist destruction and reassure readers that, with solidarity, these communities will persevere. Her work highlights the relevance of conservation to every aspect of our lives; if politics belong in poetry, surely they also belong in our daily thoughts and actions. Cervantes demands that we remember, with each action, that we are resilient together, that we can recover from capitalistic greed, and that the action of many communities together can lead to growth. Together, she promises, our work will be fruitful.

## Works Cited

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