

## A BRILLIANT CULTURAL CENTER

Edén E. Torres

*With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians.* By Catrióna Rueda Esquibel. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006. 245 pages. \$50 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

When I was twelve years old, Benny Ramírez had a crush on me. We had been buddies through four years of building forts in the woods, oiling the new leather of baseball mitts, and fishing for hours at the creek. I loved him like a brother. That was perfect when we were eight and ten, but not exactly what he wanted at fourteen. Right before my eyes, the neighborhood bully turned into a mush face and tried to kiss me. I fell down I was laughing so hard. *Pobrecito* Benny kicked up some Texas dust and shouted, “Piss on you. Why don’t you go back to Lesbos?”

When I got home, I looked up “Lesbos” in the dictionary and found out that it was a Greek island. Puzzled about why Benny thought I should go there, I found an encyclopedia in the library that said it was a “brilliant cultural center.” For a few months, I thought Benny had been telling me that I was too smart for him. The mythology and the meaning of the reference gradually seeped into my consciousness over the next several years. Reading Catrióna Rueda Esquibel’s new book, *With Her Machete in Her Hand*, brought back to me the memory of Benny and that phrase, “a brilliant cultural center.” Along with it came the pride I felt in being associated with such a place.

In reality, I have as much to do with the production of Esquibel's book as I did with that Greek island in the Aegean Sea. But as a Chicana who has loved, read, analyzed, taught, and written about Chicana lesbian literature and characters for almost twenty years, I have no qualms about claiming this book as part of my intellectual and cultural history.

While it is clear that Esquibel respects the work of scholars in related fields and genres, she firmly centers her work within Chicana/o Studies scholarship. Though rooted in her own discipline—English—Esquibel takes a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach and writes in an engaging and accessible style. The subtitle of the book, “Reading Chicana Lesbians,” alerts us to the fact that it is not limited to the examination of self-identified lesbian or bisexual Chicana writers. It also analyzes and illuminates the representations of Chicana lesbians by writers who do not identify in this way. This gives us a fuller picture of the cultural production relevant to constructing and understanding a Chicana lesbian identity.

Although the eight chapters remain manageable in length, the reader quickly realizes that Esquibel has taken on an exhaustive review of the literature from 1971 to the present. The first chapter takes us through the benchmarks in Chicana literary production and criticism. However, this is more than a mere list. Esquibel provides readers with an insightful view of a dynamic space where authors and critics are debating “what it means to be a Chicana lesbian” (2006, 21). She admirably lives up to her claim that she has no desire to create or police a bounded canon but to begin a “discussion of what Chicana lesbian fiction accomplishes” (2). The author also breaks down existing boundaries that have grown up around the icons of Chicana lesbian literature and

scholarship. In doing so, she not only broadens our understanding of what these women have produced, but also what their containment has meant. She asserts in the introduction, for instance, that while we do not want to make Gloria Anzaldúa the one and only embodiment of Chicana lesbianism, we must also be careful not to isolate Anzaldúa's much-discussed theories of borderlands and *mestizaje* from her queer identity. Such an impulse, Esquibel seems to be saying, would surely narrow the scope of Anzaldúa's intentions *and* her purpose within the larger contexts of Chicana/o Studies, as well as a variety of other fields.

Chapters two and three explore the way that writers have depicted, disputed, and recreated representations of the dominant female images in colonial folklore, *La Llorona* and the Aztec princesses respectively. In chapter four, Esquibel focuses on another icon, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, examining the celebrated intellectual's hold on the imaginations of Chicana, Latina, and Mexican writers. It is in chapter five that Esquibel convincingly fleshes out her argument that texts like Cisneros's *Mango Street* and Chávez's *Menu Girls* should be considered Chicana lesbian texts: "Not because the characters (or their authors) self-consciously claim a lesbian identity, but because . . . they inscribe a desire between girls" that should be named lesbian (91).

Exploring lesbian characters in rural settings and historically charged events, Esquibel uses chapter six to demonstrate the importance of documentation through narrative forms in the creation of a political identity. This leads naturally into chapter seven, which deals with "the representation of Chicana/o politics in queer Chicana writings" (145). Here, Esquibel's detailed and thoughtful analysis of two plays by Moraga is intellectually exquisite.

Chapter eight circles back to the title, “With Her Machete in Her Hand,” using the work of singer Tish Hinojosa to reiterate the argument that narratives (re)create Chicana subjectivities and that queer desire has always been present.

There are many things that mark this book as the only study of its kind. Esquibel doesn’t spend a lot of time describing the erasure of lesbian experience from literature or criticism. Instead she demonstrates the way in which that invisibility constitutes a readable representation. Like any artistic genius, she pays attention to the negative spaces and the discernible images they construct. While she outlines the way in which lesbian writers combine critiques of heterosexism and homophobia with a working-class consciousness in political calls to action, she is careful not to see this purely as a return to a nationalist impulse that essentializes all of us as poor. She likens it more to Emma Perez’s “decolonial imaginary,” or a space between the colonial and postcolonial where complex transformations can occur—a space where different choices can emerge and new possibilities can appear.

Though she explains some of her process and tells us of the resistance she encountered in the academy, Esquibel does not waste time justifying her own work. She begins with the astute assumption that “Chicana lesbians are central to understanding Chicana/o communities, theories and feminisms” (3). This is one of the book’s great strengths, as it immediately frees us, the readers, from heterosexuality as a starting point yet simultaneously allows us to read Chicana lesbian writers and representations as an integral part of a larger cultural context.

Many of Esquibel’s general topics and much of the literary work addressed will be familiar to readers and scholars. But Esquibel also looks at literature

that has been either invisible or neglected in previous criticism. In addition, she rediscovers work that while written about in another era needs to be resurrected and discussed anew. While older analyses may have resonated with us in their time, they can no longer transcend the constraints of earlier heteronormative or nationalist assumptions. Esquibel asks questions that most of us could not have imagined or asked twenty years ago. Yet, she deftly shows us, that in the queer Chicana imaginary, these challenges and interventions were always already there.

The importance of this book to literary, ethnic, gender, and cultural studies scholars goes without saying. But it also has significance for historians, folklorists, and social scientists of many disciplines who hope to gain some insight into the Mexican American community and the way that identity is created through active engagement. One of the overriding themes of the book is that writers have given us a complexly woven history of Chicana lesbian lives where none has officially existed. Esquibel in turn constructs a workable chronology that takes us from the archetypes of folklore, indigeneity, and conquest, through colonialism and late twentieth-century coming-of-age stories, to the agents and activists of contemporary discourses. Esquibel successfully affirms the expected—but often unacknowledged—connections between queer Chicana writers, Mexican American literature writ large, and the scholarly production of culture.

In many ways, Esquibel is the ultimate insider and the perfect person to be writing this book. By her own admission and experience, she is embedded in the historical context as well as in the social and scholarly environment she seeks to analyze. While she seems fully conscious of the fact that this

standpoint nevertheless produces a particular perspective—only one vision—I applaud her lack of false modesty as she proclaims herself to be the scholar with all the *chisme*. She not only knows many of the authors personally but also has talked with them about their work. She is the close reader who knows all the historical references, understands the allusions to folkloric heroines, recognizes the literary mentions of lesbian hangouts, and yes, is privy to the gossip. And to her audience's great fortune, she uses this insider's perspective to show us the brilliance and the cultural significance of the work she studies. Further, Esquibel clearly demonstrates the value of "Reading Chicana Lesbians" not only for Chicanas/os, but also for everyone else.