

## TRACE ELEMENTS OF RANDOM TEA PARTIES and LIKE SON: The Chican@ Queer Borderlands

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*Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* by Felicia Luna Lemus. Farrar, Straus, Giroux Books, 2003. 250 pages. \$23 hardback. ISBN 0-374-27856-3. Reprint Seal Press, 2004. 256 pages. \$13.95 paper. ISBN 978-1580051262.

*Like Son* by Felicia Luna Lemus. Akashic Books, 2007. 270 pages. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 987-1-933354-21-7.

Felicia Luna Lemus, a self-described postmodern queer Chicana, is a beguiling storyteller. Her novels *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* and *Like Son* provide powerful narratives of modern gender and sex queer Chican@ life. Her work dramatically intertwines memory and reality with the dreamlike quality of Cherríe Moraga's *Giving up the Ghost*, but with the no-nonsense narration reminiscent of Ana Castillo's prose.

Felicia Luna Lemus' first novel, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, gives a snapshot of a young Chicana lesbian living on her own terms. Both dykedrama and Chicana coming of age story, *Trace Elements* reveals the power of familiar stories to comfort and teach. The novel's main character-narrator Leticia is a Chicana gender-bending dyke who tells stories and occasionally talks to her homegirl and patron saint of the anxious, Weeping Woman. Leticia works to find a permanent love connection and tries to maintain ties to her only family, grandma Nana.

Southern California tea parties with bar flies, friends, and her Nana set the mood for casual storytelling about dramatic events. Because she modulates

between a princess and a gent, Leticia's serial-monogamy takes a backseat to her refreshing portrayal of boy-dyke dynamics. Occasionally, Leticia's gender queer life conflicts with her traditional family upbringing, causing her to hide her boy-dyke persona, but not for long because she is terrible at girl drag.

Growing up, Leticia copes with her troubles by confiding in Weeping Woman. In fact, the novel reappropriates the folkloric *la llorona* as a powerful female archetype. However, when Leticia's life spirals into unforeseen chaos and Weeping Woman does not pay a visit, Leticia turns to her Nana. In her Nana's soul-healing style of storytelling, Leticia develops her own skills to heal both the anxiety she feels and the heartache she finds. In doing so, Leticia finally understands that some things are meant to be, and that it is possible to combine both elements of her life.

Frank, a self-assured Chicano transgender man who was born Francisca, raised in Southern California, narrates Lemus' second novel *Like Son*. Frank has little contact with his family, but, like Leticia, struggles to integrate his family's past into his own present. *Like Son* is a moving New York City romance between Frank and Nathalie. Their relationship becomes entangled by the mysterious power of Nahui Olin, a Mexican avant-garde contemporary of Frida Kahlo. Central to the novel is the idea that Frank and his father are somehow haunted by a photograph and book of poetry that Nahui Olin gave Frank's paternal grandmother as symbols of lesbian desire. Using Nahui Olin's photo as a metaphor, the novel explores the trajectory of history and desire.

Trying to end the tradition of heartbreaks in his family's past, Frank learns that true love is far more complicated than superficial artifacts of love represented by photos, poetry or love letters. As if that is not enough, Frank must come to terms with his mother's rejection and his father's illness. Baggage and all, Frank,

a post-trans man, is a very normal and fascinating character. Once again, Felicia Luna Lemus successfully allows her main character what he wants, to live life freely, but not until he has been properly schooled by his demons. *Like Son* is a beautifully sensitive novel about finding one's path—not through acceptance from family, lover or society—but through reflection on one's inner strength in this often less-than-tolerant world.

*Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* and *Like Son* are written so attractively that readers will hang on every word. Both novels use cutting edge, direct narration and both end leaving readers wanting more. With extra effort essential to decode the ending, readers will admire how Lemus creates compelling cliffhangers. Lemus' prose transforms Leticia and Frank into larger-than-life characters with their profound refusal to conform to lesbian and Chicana/o norms. With their refusal, both characters break down gender dichotomies and widen the boundaries of Chicana feminist, lesbian and gay identities. The novels do not question Frank's identification as male just because he is pre-op, nor do they interrogate Leticia's unapologetic duality as both princess and boy-dyke. Instead, the novels present the main characters' queer identities without pretense, gently reminding readers that the physical gender markers cannot be equated with gender self-identification. Lemus' novels signal the next generation of Chicana writers. Her work is both smart and intriguing. *Trace Elements* and *Like Son* go beyond Chican@, gay and lesbian issues and introduce readers to the world of queer folk.