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Interventions: An Interview with Estella Gonzalez by Frederick Luis Aldama

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Fictions that forever stick to my soul are those that breathe exquisite nuance and sharply magnified details of character, setting, and life. James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom’s post-prandial (he eats with “relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls”) inauspicious start to his Dublin-set 24-hour mind and foot perambulations. William Faulkner’s Miss Rosa’s molasses thick detail that brings to life all those at Sutpen’s Hundred. John Rechy’s Amalia Gómez’s spotting of a silver cross in the sky prompts her to venture beyond her dilapidated bungalow and set out on her 24-hour, LA-barrio odyssey. To this swift and cursory list, I must urgently add: Estella Gonzalez and the panoply of East L.A. denizens that make up her *Chola Salvation* (2021).

Perhaps, this should come with little surprise. The East L.A. setting and its characters are the life that pumps through Estella’s veins. She was born and raised in East LA, surrounded by working-class, worldly-wise realist Chicanxs like tía Rosa, abuelita Fina, mamá Merced, hairdresser Beto, and a coterie of fierce coming-of-age Chicana protagonists. What’s remarkable is how Estella gives shape to these characters and their storyworlds. She brings to her fiction what she calls here in this interview (and elsewhere) an “East Los real” style — an alchemical amalgam of the brutal and harsh with the playful and (darkly) funny. That is, she powerfully puts at arms-length the syrupy sentimental and victim porn that so often characterizes fictional reconstructions of Latinx life in the US.

As such, Estella’s been working long and hard to hone her craft. She carefully read and studied literature at Northwestern University (BA) and learned from greats such as Helena María Viramontes at Cornell University (MFA). She’s published fiction and poetry in literary journals such as *The Acentos Review*, *Kweli Journal*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Huizache* as well as in anthologies like *Nasty Women Poets* (2017) and *Latinos in Lotusland* (2008). She’s been significantly recognized, including by the Pushcart Prize, the Pima Community College Martindale Literary Prize, and as finalist for the Louise Merriwether First Book Prize and James D. Houston Award for Western Literature.

When I read Estella’s fiction I think of Joyce and the others I mentioned above. I also think of my first encounters with titans of Latinx literature such as Helena María Viramontes (*The Moths* [1985]), Sandra Cisneros (*House on Mango Street* [1984]), Ana Castillo (*Women Are Not Roses* [1984]), and Denise Chávez (*The Last of the Menu Girls* [1986]). Just as their careful attention to the minutia of everyday life sent tingles through my brain in ways that changed me forever, so too did the work of Estella Gonzalez. I recently had the great pleasure of meeting with the deeply learned, gentle, graceful — and playful — Estella Gonzalez.

Frederick Luis Aldama: Estella, gosh it’s been over a decade since we shared creative space together in Daniel Olivas’s *Latinos in Lotus Land: An Anthology of Southern California Literature*.

Estella González: We were with so many incredible people in that book: Rigoberto González, Helena María Viramontes, Luis Alberto Urrea, John Rechy, and Salvador Plascencia. What a great collection!

FLA: Let’s jump right in, Estella. How do you see your fiction intervening, politically, and culturally in the world?

EG: Writing about East L.A. Chicanas who disrupt stereotypes is a political act. It unsettles people. I think back to when I was in my MFA program. There was an instructor who was critical of me creating characters who wanted to have light skin; they were clueless to the colorism in our community. They also thought I should make my stories more universal by including white characters. Another student in the program commented that the stories didn’t seem to be set in East L.A. because I didn’t write about graffiti and gangs.

My fictions are about the richness of life in our community — and not the stereotypes seen in the movies and depicted in newspapers. They show those facets of Chicano and Chicana life that outsiders don’t see. In this way and others, they unsettle. They are political.

FLA: I love that your characters unsettle, too, in the way they are steeped in all of pop culture, including *Los Tigres del Norte* and *New Order* and *Duran Duran*.

EG: The first thing I go into is the voices, the music — the sounds. I want the sound of my childhood, my youth, my community in my stories. It grounds me.

FLA: TV culture?

EG: Absolutely! TV shows are another one of my obsessions. TV shows also help ground the story in an era. I love pop culture.

FLA: The 1980s also had a dark side.

EG: Absolutely. The Reagan era. For some people, it was a time of excess. For us, it was a time of backlash. I was at Garfield High — famous for

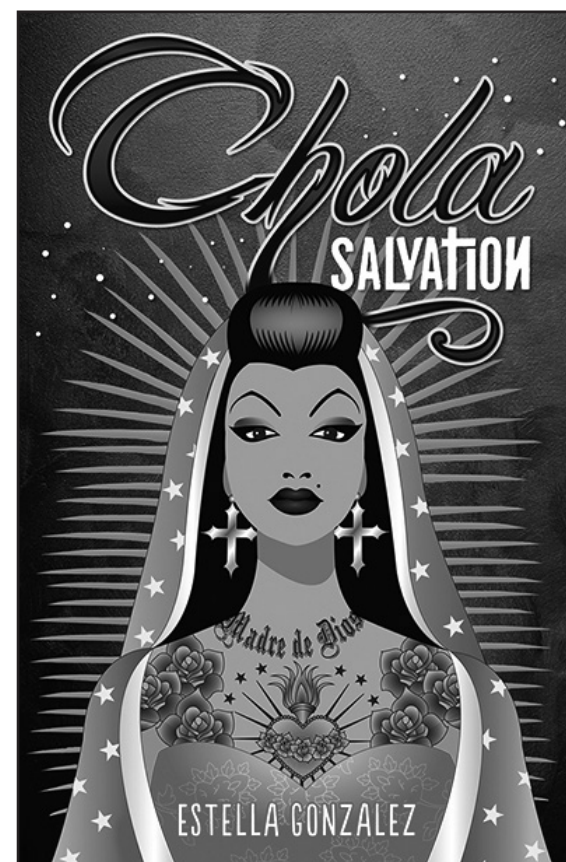
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the late 1960s Brown Blowouts that my cousins took part in — and any and all activism at school had been stomped out. For me and people of color generally in the US, it was a time of cultural and political repression and suppression.

Yet, I still found pop cultural phenomena like music to be freeing. If I wasn’t reading at the table, I was listening to my fake Walkman (we couldn’t afford the real one) or to my favorite radio stations KROQ or KISS FM. Chicano Punk in L.A. was on the rise. Unfortunately, there was no way my parents would let me go out to the clubs to see Alice Bag. If I’d been a boy, it would’ve been different. But since I was L.A. niña, L.A. muchacha, I missed out on that scene.

FLA: Clearly 80s pop culture has had a strong influence on your creating of your characters. What else might you point to that really shaped you as a Chicana writer?

EG: Living in East L.A., my family, and my early love of reading. It was life in a working-class, immigrant family that led me to become a voracious reader when I was younger. I was the kind of kid who would read everything, including the cereal boxes and whatever book at the kitchen table. While everybody was yelling at each other or doing their



own thing, I’d read. At our East L.A. library, I loved discovering Jane Austen and Rosemary Sutcliff. I was also fascinated by the huge stone replica of the Aztec calendar.

FLA: In addition to fiction, you write poetry. As a means to express your thoughts, feelings, and imagination, does one form call to you more than the other?

EG: I love both forms. When I was applying to MFA programs, you could only focus on one genre. I had to choose which baby I loved more. In the end, my first love was fiction. At community college, I took short story and poetry writing courses at the local community college. As an English Major I read epic poems like *Paradise Lost* (1667), *The Fairy Queen*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Iliad*. I read Sandra Cisneros’s sublime poetry, too. As a writer, you write whatever resonates.

When I’m writing, I’ll follow whatever speaks to me, sometimes it’s a poem or a piece of flash or a prose poem. In graduate school, I wrote a script for a play. If you love writing, you’ll love any kind of writing, and whatever prompts you to write the way you want to, you’ll do it. Hopefully, you have that sense of freedom to write in whatever form you want.

FLA: How about longer form fiction?

EG: I’m working on a novel actually right now. It’s based on a short story in the *Chola Salvation* collection. Hopefully, I will finish it in the next couple of months. It’s my MFA thesis. At that time, I couldn’t figure out how to give it shape in terms of how the story arc’s structure and point of view. So, I focused on the short story collection and let the novel sit for a while.

FLA: It’s interesting that you bring this up and relate the novel to *Chola Salvation*. When I was reading the stories “Happiness Is Right Next To You” and “I Hate My Name,” I started thinking of the collection as a braided narrative.

EG: Yes, you’re right. Those two stories are told from the point of view of the same character, Lucha, at different stages of her life: junior high school

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and then in college. She’s still figuring out what love means and why we hang on to loves that are probably not very good for us.

FLA: In crafting the stories that make up *Chola Salvation* you use what you’ve called elsewhere an “East Los Real” style. I love this push against mainstream reviewers that always want to pigeonhole our fiction as *magical realism*. You bring such a blunt, muscular realism to the shaping of your stories.

EG: By East Los Real I meant to convey the no nonsense blunt style I use. If you grew up working class, you grew up with this bluntness. At the end of a long workday for my mom, if you didn’t like the dinner, you didn’t eat. If she wasn’t pleased with your behavior, she told you straight up. She didn’t speak like Carol Brady on *The Brady Bunch*. It’s the tough-skin survival style you read in the stories of Junot Díaz and Sandra Cisneros; although I think she has more gentle way with her narration.

FLA: You shape your fiction with words and phrases in Spanish, Spanglish, and English.

EG: Language is music to me. Hearing Spanish mixed with English — Spanglish — is beautiful. Mixing languages has always been in literature. I remember reading, T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922). He had all these languages. He had French, German, and Sanskrit. But it was always white writers like Eliot and Tolkien with Elvish, among others, who seemed to be the only ones allowed to do this. People took issue with it when I moved between languages.

FLA: Your interplay of languages is both a cultural marker — and an *aesthetic*.

EG: I think it does add to the beauty of it all. I remember reading Richard Wright’s use of terms and syntax in *Black Boy* (1945), that I wasn’t familiar with. I nerded out on his and other author’s use of language and word placement. This is what feeds, like you said, the aesthetic vision. This is the way it should sound like. This is what moves me. This is what brings out whatever feeling I’m trying to bring out.

FLA: Your fiction is blunt, raw, and that doesn’t always lead to moments of self-discovery.

EG: True. Many of my characters don’t experience the big epiphany — and sometimes not an epiphany at all. Isabela’s comes when she realizes that her only act of resistance to her father is to run away; that to save herself, she must run away from family. That’s her power. Felipe would rather hold onto his sense of pride than come into any type of healthy realization about how destructive that pride can be. Pride’s all he’s got, after all. It’s his only form of

control. When Lucha tells Jorge she still loves him even though she knows it’s a false love, there’s an acceptance. And with this, there’s a certain kind of power too. That’s how we are. Sometimes we don’t make healthy realizations.

FLA: Hair plays an important role in your stories as a source of self-healing and character interconnection — and as a source of trauma.

EG: Hair’s my obsession. Make-up not so much. Growing up, my aunt, mom, and dad were tyrannical about the way we looked; they policed our looks — our bodies. My dad was always on my sister about being overweight. He would get on me about getting a boyfriend by fixing myself up, plucking eyebrows, painting lips, wearing high heels and dresses. My brother never got any of that. None of the boys that I knew ever got any of that.

So, yes, hair was traumatic. I wanted the right hairstyle, and when it went wrong, I didn’t want to go to school. When I’d cry after a bad haircut my mom would remind me that at least I had hair. When she’d get her hair done, it was all about community, chatting with the other women

There are so many more Latina authors now than there were when I was coming up as an author — I feel like I’m in Chicana nerd paradise, with all these beautiful writers.

with the music or a TV telenovela going. Women’s hair salons made me feel comfortable. I remember going to barbershops with my dad. They were very macho with lots of arguing, radios blasting announcements about soccer or baseball games. They were intimidating spaces — like in my story “Little Soldiers.”

FLA: In the story “Pepper Spray” you begin to explore Asian and Latinx interactions.

EG: In East L. A. we have those little corner markets owned and run by Korean Americans. Yet, there’s never really any true interaction. This really came to my attention during the L. A. riots. Ironically, I was in Japan when I saw the image of a Korean store owner with a shotgun wearing a t-shirt with Malcolm X’s saying: “By Any Means Necessary.”

FLA: Estella, why not publish *Chola Salvation* with an East Coast publisher?

EG: During my MFA, my cohort met with an East Coast publisher. After he read one of my stories, he was critical of my use of Spanish and told me he didn’t understand who the Virgin de Guadalupe was and that nobody would. He disdainfully told me that if I want to write for a mainstream audience, this

wouldn’t work. I studied Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and many others for years. I made the effort. Yet, this guy wasn’t willing to try. Once I stripped the experience back, what I saw was the implicit racism in the moment and that’s permeated the industry for decades.

My stories are like my babies. I’m not going to subject my babies to people who refuse to make the effort to try and understand. I’m not contorting myself for these people ever.

FLA: You published *Chola Salvation* with Arte Público.

EG: Arte Público is the gold standard for me. Arte first published Sandra Cisneros and Helena María Viramontes. They get it. I submitted the manuscript on Friday and Nicolas got back to me on Sunday. I want my fiction to reach an audience. Arte Público reaches that audience.

FLA: You mentioned a terrible experience with an East Coast publisher while in Cornell’s creative writing program. Can you share more about the cons and pros of these types of writing spaces?

EG: The pros are many. You have time to write. At Cornell every year, they only select four people for fiction and four people for poetry — and all with fellowships. You don’t have to pay for tuition and only have to teach in your second year; in our first year, we work on editing the well-known literary journal, *Epoch*. And, I was able to work with Helena. I really, really wanted a Chicana writer to work with. I also didn’t feel a lot of pressure at Cornell. I know people who come out of the granddaddy of writing programs, Iowa Writers’ Workshop, who say the pressure and competition is immense. And, the program would bring in guest writers such as Sherman Alexie and Sandra Cisneros. The cons: Cornell and writing programs generally are still very white and invite publishing individuals like that editor I mentioned earlier in our conversation.

FLA: Who are some of today’s new gen Latinx authors that are grabbing your attention?

EG: There’s such an abundance. I think readily of those I’m reading now, including Ivellisse Rodriguez (*Love War Stories* [2018]) and Richard Santos (*Trust Me* [2019]). Of course, there’s Myriam Gurba, Kirsten Valdez Quade, and Caribbean Fragoza. Fragoza’s getting a lot of buzz with *Eat the Mouth that Feeds You* (201). I was in a writing group with Myriam and Caribbean — and Griselda Suárez, who a poetry collection, *Concrete River Boulevard* (2009). For Latinas, these writing groups are so important. When feeling like crap after being rejected by a publisher like the one I mentioned earlier, it serves as a space for us to encourage and support one another so that we keep writing.

There are so many more Latina authors now than there were when I was coming up as an author. I feel like I’m in Chicana nerd paradise, with all these beautiful writers. I celebrate them all.

FLA: Do you have any advice for future gen Latinx writers?

EG: Find your community of writers. Find your writing groups. Join as many as you can. And, in addition to writing, read, read, read —as many Latinx and Chicana authors as possible.

FLA: Beautiful! Thank you, Estella.

