

JOURNAL

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Teaching Demetria Martinez' *MotherTongue*

Robert C. Mossman

emetria Martinez' novel *MotherTongue* (1994, Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue) is both unique in its style and fresh and relevant in its settings. For students in and of the Southwest, the novel should be both friendly and challenging. From a pedagogical perspective, *MotherTongue* offers several intriguing avenues for teaching both stylistically and thematically. Most intensely, though, for the high school or college student, *MotherTongue* is a love story, passionate, evocative, and finally bitterly-sweetly realistic about love. For all of these reasons and extraordinary prose, the novel deserves to be taught.

The author explores a powerful, complex novel.

From the very first sentence in which the nineteen-year-old heroine avers, "I knew I would one day make love with him. . . . His was a face I'd seen in a dream. A face with no borders" (3), we know this is going to be a love story and one with lots of passion. For students, of course, this immediately engenders interest. After all, many of them are great believers in and fervent, if naive, practitioners of love at first sight:

Love at first sight, this is how I explained the urgency that would later shed its skin and reveal pure desperation. Some women fall in love in advance of knowing a man because it is much easier to love a mystery. And I needed a mystery—someone outside of ordinary time who could rescue me from an ordinary life, from my name, Mary, a blessing name that had become my curse. At age nineteen, I was looking for a man to tear apart the dry rind of that name so I could see what fruit fermented inside. (10-11)

Clearly, we are witnessing the passion, the romance of youth. It is fashioned by rebellion, the rejection of the symbolic name, *Mary*, and as Mary confesses a few pages later:

Yet surely wrongdoing was at the root of the thrill for a Catholic girl who had indulged in sex for the first time the year before, who had learned that

breaking the law is pleasure more poignant than sex itself. (12)

The rebellion in which Mary indulges is the love she has for this man who is completely in her control, completely in her life, completely in her romance of the way things should be. Yet, of course, our heroine/narrator has already stealthily foreshadowed the future, a future that does not include this heroic even mythic figure. Like several mythic figures, the hero, the object of love, names himself. Like Adam, like a chameleon, and like the political refugee that he is, the hero gives himself the very ordinary name of Jose Luis. He is recreating himself at the same time he is losing himself.

Jose Luis is a refugee from El Salvador. Mary's first view of him is in the Albuquerque International Airport where he has arrived, disguised in a Yale T-shirt. Mary is to be his contact, *compadre*, and confidant and is to expedite his safe arrival and assimilation as an illegal refugee in the United States. But, of course, besides this politicized charge, she also has other designs on him. It is this plan which, of course, immediately engages the students. They intuitively understand such designs.

BACKGROUND OF MOTHERTONGUE

In the teaching of this novel, students need to be aware of the Sanctuary Movement, and the events in Central America, and especially in El Salvador which led to its necessity. It is surprising how little my students know of either especially since Tucson was one of the major centers of the movement and still is for that matter; but then again, these events were the headlines of the mid-1980s when my students were only seven or eight. Politics and foreign policy were not high in their interest then, nor, unfortunately are they as high now as they should be.

Thus, some background is necessary. Some of the events are detailed poignantly in the novel including a devastating autobiographical narration given by Jose Luis at a church on how the priest of his parish in-

spired their congregation to dig wells, was subsequently murdered, and then Jose himself was sought by a death squad and he had to flee the country. Many students will wonder about contemporary parallels. These can all too easily be researched and documented. This can also lead to more general discussion about immigration, both legal and illegal, and about initiatives both for and against immigration such as California's Proposition 187 or the upcoming presidential campaign. When these issues were open for debate in my class, they provoked one of the most heated and animated discussions in my classroom all year.

POLITICS IN MOTHERTONGUE

The discussions eventually returned to the issue of politics as a subject for the novel. When introducing the novel—before students had begun reading, I had discussed the French literary notion of *engage*, a literature which is committed to or supports a political and/or social cause of some type. I had also discussed propaganda and what it is and how one can recognize it. The author's tone is, in my estimation, an instructive example of American *engage* writing. For several of my students this was what was more problematic about the novel. While they agreed it was too sophisticated and too rich to be propaganda, they still objected to being "manipulated" by the writer, by having their emotions pulled in different directions because the protagonist was so sympathetic. Asked if most great novels—even those without such an overt political commitment—in some way engaged, indeed, "manipulated" them through such sympathetic characters, students agreed but argued that political agendas in the novel were too transparent. This cheapened the novel for some.

Another student engaged by this connection retorted that it was precisely that she knew what Mary was trying to do that made the book so compelling. For once, she said, there was none of that hidden meaning which teachers love to foist on their students as being so evident, if only they could see! She said this with a roll of her eyes; this had been a bone of contention with her all year. We all know students like this. I might add that this student was the only female in the class, and she found the novel attractive in its romantic pain and turmoil so eloquently scrutinized from the female perspective. It

vindicated for her the importance of the female voice and redeemed what it had been, by default, a male-dominated class.

USE OF MULTIPLE GENRES IN MOTHERTONGUE

But in supporting her arguments for the transparency of the political agenda, she alluded to a very obvious passage, an "Urgent Action Alert." In the tradition of the political rhetoric of the 1960s, the alert was a recitation of "KEY EVENTS in El Salvador for the month of AUGUST" (60). It was obviously written from a leftist position and culminated in a call for "Urgent Action," i.e., a letter to El Salvador's president and to the White House *et al.* Inadvertently, this student had put her finger on one of the most creative and subversive novelistic strategies, the use of many different genres within the text, most quite commonplace and downright ordinary. In *MotherTongue*, there are numerous letters, several newspaper accounts, a recipe, a grocery list, a Zen tale, journal entries, poems from Mary and Jose Luis and from Claribel Algeria, revolutionary quotations, horoscopes, a lamentation, and, of course, the "Urgent Action Alert."

Almost universally, this variety of genre, this weaving of genre into the collage of the narrative was very appealing to my students. As one said, "It is unlike any book I have ever read because I never knew what to expect next." Students do like surprises, and this book provided them in a devious manner, not by straightforward narrative devices of suspense and conflict, although these are also created initially and do reoccur in the novel, but Martinez subverts them quickly by using narrative leaps of twenty years and even mentioning Jose Luis' death on the fifth page of the narrative. Normal narrative development is abandoned by Martinez; instead, we confront a woman's memories; memories arrive and depart in fleeting and disparate moves, some intense, some distant, some peculiar. Some are provoked by the everyday minutiae of life, like horoscopes, recipes, smells, images, and yes, even "Urgent Action Alerts." This novel is a study in narrative strategies and the amalgamation of genres, both complex and simple, to create a coherent puzzle of a story.

POINT OF VIEW IN MOTHERTONGUE

While most of the novel is told from Mary's point of view, Jose Luis' observations are revealed in journals and poems, and in Part Five near the end of the novel, there is one final, very salient and new point of view Perhaps with mythic intention, per-

haps because it seemed logical, perhaps because it seemed a romantic touch, and because it seemed inevitable, there is a son, the progeny of these two mismatched, ill-fated, yet terribly-in-love people. His name is Jose Luis, too. He narrates:

It was my big idea to come here. After she told me about my father, I said we have to try and find out if he's dead or alive. Even though the peace accords were signed ages ago, the San Salvador archdiocese is still trying to figure out what happened to everyone. (111)

Jose the younger is a bit of a computer nerd. His mother, naturally, wants him to study Spanish,

but Jose Luis loves science and computers. His mother marvels:

How different his universe is from the one Soledad knew. Jose Luis and his friends cast bottles upon oceans of computer screen, and in an instant, their messages wash up as far away as Africa. . . . He and his friends talk about saving the planet. I wish I could say they were exaggerating. (86)

And on the next page, she laments as all mothers must do: "My son, as all children must do, indicted me on charges of conspiring to control him. He presented the evidence. And he grew up. Right there, one terrible afternoon, my baby grew up and became himself" (87).

If this passage alone is not enough to spark some resonance in the teenage mind, I am not sure what will. We have moved full circle, and the symmetry within the novel is

brilliant from Mary's rebellious desire to control her sex life to Jose Luis' desire to roam the world via the Internet. Both are 1990s dilemmas, both are dilemmas detailing the generation gaps of the 1990s. One has existed since the onset of puberty; the other is as contemporary as the advent of the computer chip. Both provoke teenagers, and for that matter, adults as well.

PROSE IN MOTHERTONGUE

Finally, after all the business of what must be labeled analysis of literary devices and the elements of the novel, I should hasten to add that for me personally, at least, the most compelling reason for teaching *MotherTongue* is quite simply the beauty of its prose. Martinez writes with the fluidity of a poet (although I found the attempts at poetry within the novel rather unremarkable), her prose scintillates, it tantalizes, it shimmers. I offer just one example from many:

The kitchen always smelled of Guatemalan coffee beans ground with almonds. Or sometimes the air was spiked with lime, tomatillo, and cilantro that women mashed in a molcajete made of porous volcanic rock. Nameless women who appeared at night and rose with the heaving of garbage trucks to cook, to make themselves strong before North Americans bundled them off to other houses, further north. A. Romero and I sat at an oval oak table where newspaper articles that Soledad had clipped leaked out of manila folders. All the wars that passed through her house ended in a fragile cease-fire at this table, where plates of black beans and rice steamed as refugees rolled corn tortillas like cigarettes. This is where A. Romero and I lifted blue pottery mugs of hot coffee to our lips like communion chalices. (8-9)

I used this passage to teach a class the significance of active verbs and describing using the senses. These are simple writing techniques, of course, but they also are easily overlooked by novice writers. Martinez uses imagery effectively throughout the novel. In several places, she merely lists images. Students can see how such lists are then used, built upon and later referenced by the author allusively. This, plus the variety of ordinary genres, emboldens new writers and shows that all kinds of writing can and do count.



Demetria Martinez, author of *MotherTongue*. Photograph by Jeff Strath.

CONCLUSION

I firmly believe my students should read varieties of writing from a variety of cultures, but I also believe as much as possible that this literature should be of the best literary quality. *MotherTongue* succeeds brilliantly.

This novel presents personal issues of relevance such as what is love, how to deal with lost love, and how to deal with the generation gap. It confronts key political issues: immigration, American foreign policy in Central America, the Sanctuary Movement, and how one should or can personally participate in these larger issues. It also provides instructive lessons in the craft of the novel, the blending of genres, techniques of narrative strategies, different voices, and, of course, the matter of style. Fundamentally, *MotherTongue* teaches how to read and appreciate a beautifully written book. All this in 121 pages. It's quite a package.

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EJ TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Schools Are in Denial of Reality

"Schools are places in which reality is denied at every turn. In many ways it resembles the prison or the church, for it demands a life style unlike the style of the street or the home. It supposedly 'elevates' the human above his 'animalistic banality' to a spiritual or intellectual alternative. It is natural, therefore, that most educators react in horror when Harold Robbins is mentioned. They argue that Robbins writes only about sex and violence. That may not be an unjust appraisal, but it does suggest that the headlines of the various newspapers and the content of the television and radio news deserve closer scrutiny. In fact, Chaucer himself might be investigated on the first count. This can become quite absurd, of course, and all it really suggests is that man is indeed a strange animal. This strangeness is better handled in a classroom than in an alley, however."

Brian J. Curtis. 1972. "The Necessity of the 'Rod McKuens'." *EJ* 61.9 (Dec.): 1327.

INSTITUTE IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

The **Eighteenth Annual Institute in Technical Communication (ITC)** will be held **June 14-20, 1998** at Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi. Session topics will include: capturing student interest, resumes and letters of application, computers in the technical classroom, teaching audience analysis, teaching the formal report, collaboration and teamwork, developing case studies, and document design and visuals. Nationally known faculty will include: Ron Blicq of the Roning Group, Rebecca Burnett of Iowa State University, Don Cunningham of Auburn University, Ann Laster of Hinds Community College, Rich Raymond of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and Elizabeth O. Smith of Auburn University. For more information or application, please write to Penny Sansbury, POB 100548, Florence-Darlington Technical College, Florence, SC 29501-0548, or phone 803-661-8137; e-mail: sansburyp@flo.tec.sc.us. Interested persons may also write to Faye Barham, Box 10422, Hinds Community College, Raymond, MS 39154, phone 601-857-3259; e-mail: fayebarhm@aol.com. ITC is sponsored by The Two-Year College English Association-Southeast, an Association of NCTE.