

Sandra Maria Esteves. *Yerba Buena*. (Greenfield Center, New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1980) 91 pp., \$5.00.

With this, her first anthology, the New York born Puerto Rican poet Sandra Maria Esteves should establish herself as the “first lady” among the Latin poets in that city. Esteves, thirty-three, whose poetry has appeared before in twenty magazines¹ and who is an acknowledged painter, combines in her best work her own ghetto experience with nature symbolism, political, cultural and racial awareness and a determined woman’s perspective.

One of the evident aspects that shape many of the sixty-three poems included is a yearning for oneness with nature and with the human body. This is the case even when it finds expression in the negation or the absence of this harmony, as in “I look for peace great graveyard”: “trees are where I wish to live/and play the dance of chinese windchimes/here the ancient pipe the breath/that touches my eyes to see.” (p. 9) Sometimes her mystical closeness to nature reaches the intensity of Indian incantations, their deceptive simplicity and their sincerity: “Look to the sun/rising high/everyday/Look to the sun.” (“Look to the Sun,” p. 6) Nature means strength, harmony, example and encouragement, refreshment and beauty for Esteves, who was born in the South Bronx and is holding out there. Poems like the prayer “A sleepless night” (p. 30), “In praise of life” (p. 46), or “Celebration” (p. 80), in which she puts herself and the human race in the vast context of creation, gain a wistful, romantic, almost a heroic atmosphere if the reader is aware of the author’s biographical and geographical facts.

The New York experience is, however, not missing in the collection: “I am of the bleak/manhattan isle of spite and hate.” (“Manhattan,” p. 13) In about a dozen poems the grimness of the life of the poor is dealt with. She is most successful in her moods of caustic humor, in the absurdly comic universe that peoples the work of her poet colleagues Pedro Pietri and Victor Hernández Cruz.² In “News from the front” she reports from the “war zone” of a subway line: “We lost graffiti battle no. 3/but reinforcements are on the way/from lexington avenue.” (p. 82) Esteves’ poem on her own habitat, the South Bronx, does not spare the reader her view of a brutally violated and neglected area: “I live amidst hills of desolate buildings/rows of despair/crowded together/in a chain of lifeless shells,” but turns the tableau by her lifesaving magic into a more human, animated scene: “the shells breathe/and take on the appearance of second cousins/or sometimes even look like old retired ladies/who have nothing more to do/but ride empty subways from stop to stop.” (“For South Bronx,” p. 84) A good example for a terse work blending surreal effects with nature symbolism and social comment on life in New York is “Ahora”:

“and when the center opened/I saw myself/and I saw my mother/the Moon/walking to the white man’s factory/so she could catch sunsets/on the 18th floor/of the projects.” (p. 67)

A major concern of the poet consists in defining herself and vocalizing her Afro-Antillan womanhood. Works falling into this group, like “Bedford Hills is a woman’s prison” (p. 32), which draws some of its superb militant strength from oral tradition, “From the Common Wealth” (p. 49), which in a cutting argumentative style repudiates the traditional Latin male-female role playing, and her important poem on the great Julia de Burgos (who ended miserably in the streets of New York) are highlights of this book. The fierce determination that ends “A Julia a Mi,” “my fist is my soul/it cuts into the blood of dragons/and marks time with the beat/or an afrocuban drum” (p. 51), is a rejection of victimization and a step ahead in the fight for her integrity.

Esteves is realistic enough—she has to be to survive—to see and acknowledge the burden of history, the odds of her and her people’s cultural, political and social situation: “My name is Maria Christina/I speak two languages broken into each other/but my heart speaks the language of people/born of oppression” (“My name is Maria Christina,” p. 63), but is able, in part through her art, to overcome, fight and endure.

If Esteves’ work shows occasional weaknesses, they lie in the danger of a too crude and rhetorical didacticism which tends to turn poems into prose, and worse still, into pamphlets. (“Improvisando,” “Esclavidud,” “Here,” pp. 16f., 18, 20). Her prose poem, “Some people are about Jam” (p. 42f.) totally avoids this trap by its irresistible humor.

The well-printed book is prefaced by an “Introduction” from Louis Reyes Rivera, the editor of the Brooklyn based Shamal Press. It also contains twenty examples of Esteves’ drawings. It is easy to predict that *Yerba Buena*, a book of healing and proof of a truly original poetic voice, will soon become a collector’s item.

—Wolfgang Binder
University of Erlangen, W.
Germany

Notes

¹S. M. Esteves's work is included in the following anthologies: Joseph Bruchac, ed. *The Next World. Poems by Third World Americans*. (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1978); *Womanrise*. (New York: Shamal Books, 1978); and *Ordinary Women. Mujeres Comunes*. (New York: Ordinary Women, 1978).

²See Pedro Pietri. *Puerto Rican Obituary*. (New York-London: Monthly Review Press, 1973); and Hernandez Cruz. *Snaps*. (New York: Random House, 1973) and *Mainland*. (New York: Random House, 1973). Efraín Barradas and Rafael Rodríguez edited an interesting anthology of Puerto Rican poetry written on the mainland: *Herejes y mitificadores. Muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en los estados unidos*. (Rio Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1980).