

Pineda Unbound

An Interview With Cecile Pineda

by Jeff Biggers

The young man or woman writing today," William Faulkner declared in his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself, which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." Addressing the state of writing in his time, Faulkner went on to admonish future writers to teach themselves the old verities and truths of the heart.

If only William Faulkner could have read Cecile Pineda. Born in Harlem to a Swiss mother and Mexican father, a longtime innovator in the San Francisco Bay Area experimental theater world, and the author of six internationally acclaimed novels (including a poetic childhood memoir), Cecile Pineda has raised Faulkner's concerns and conflicts of the heart in the late 20th century to a new level of dreamlike lyricism and dazzling artistry.

Writers, readers, teachers, and creative writing classes, take note: Cecile Pineda is an American original, a literary treasure, and her prodigiously inventive and important work, finally returning to print in a landmark and long-awaited reissue, deserves a place in the forefront of American literature.

Beyond the politics of identity—despite the fact that Pineda opened the New York publishing door for Latina writers in the mid-1980s, shattering the limits of genre—few American writers have demonstrated such a bold mastery and originality in the last 25 years. Her awards range from a Sue Kaufman Prize, by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, to a California Gold Medal; in 1992 her novel *The Love Queen of the Amazon* was selected as a *New York Times* notable book of the year.

Consider Pineda's novels: *Face*, originally published in 1985, written in a precise and unnerving narrative, depicts a Rio de Janeiro man's struggle to come to grips with the irreparable scars of a nightmarish accident. Immediately acclaimed as an existential classic for its broader social implications of place and being, *Face* was hailed by Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee as an "extraordinary achievement." Pineda followed *Face* with *Frieze*, set in medieval India and Java and described as a slow parable on the resistance of human life. She then published perhaps her most widely read work, *The Love Queen of the Amazon*, in 1992, a raucous and wildly inventive Latin American farce. At once a satirical spin on the male-dominated fury of magic realism and a lush tropical saga, *The Love Queen* chronicles the licentious travails of Ana Magdalena in the vagaries of Peru. Pineda's last three works are *Fishlight: A Dream of Childhood*, a poignant look at a child's erratic parents and her ability to stitch her quandaries and exigencies into her imagination, and *Bardo99: A Mononovel* and *Redoubt: A Mononovel*, two experimental novels dealing with Pineda's themes of place and displacement amid the ruins of our times.

Finally, the reissue of Pineda's work has been made possible

by the Herculean efforts of Wings Press, the best little publishing house in Texas. Led by the indefatigable publisher Bryce Milligan, a true San Antonio hero and literary wizard, Wings Press has ventured beyond its south-by-southwestern borders to launch a series of original publications and reprints that deserve as much national recognition and distribution as possible. Along with Pineda's novels, Wings publishes the works of poets Donald Hall and John Howard Griffin, author of the controversial *Black Like Me*, including a previously unknown third novel, *Street of the Seven Angels*. *The Bloomsbury Review* caught up with Cecile Pineda this past spring.

The Bloomsbury Review: *The compelling, dreamlike narrative of Fishlight, weaving stories of angels and insects in the voice of a child, helps to cushion a lot of heartbreak. How did you envision writing the memoir from the perspective of the child as opposed to an adult looking back, or, in fact, do you see all children as storytellers in their need to make sense of the confusion and harm around them?*

And a second question: I was curious how you see your writing influenced by your longtime work in the theater, especially the work of Artaud. For example, some of your work posits an unnerving premise—such as the protagonist's disfigurement in Face or the ruins of Bardo99—that unfolds into an illuminating and often hilarious story. Are there connections with Artaud's concepts of shock and "beneficent punishment"?

Cecile Pineda: My beginnings as an artist go far back into childhood: Writing, painting, dancing, singing (yes, I trained briefly as an opera singer), and music—all these are alluded to in *Fishlight: A Dream of Childhood*, the faux memoir of my early years. I say "faux" because in every work I favor truthfulness above truth, especially when it comes to the vagaries of memoir.

By the time I felt ready to embark on a life in the theater, producing and directing for my own experimental theater company, I discovered that all the pursuits, all the skills taught me by my past, came directly into play in creating a theater based on physical movement that would engage the actor's psyche: feeling, thought, and imagination, drawing on dream and archetype.

Theatre of Man was a poet's theater, an experiment in non-linearity whose central modality consisted of event, in contrast to the more conventional notion of dramatic twists and turns. My theater represented for me a search to stop time and a transfiguration of apparently staged events into moments during which something real occurred, albeit in a circumscribed space, something real, say, in the change of a facial expression or in the moment of silence which framed such an event, lending it a present and separate verity.

I came to my vision of the theater and what it might embody through reading, seeing, and experimentation. One of my first student projects was to grapple with Lorca's text from *Blood Wedding* in which the Moon speaks. I was not interested in producing a narrative. Rather, I was looking for ways in which Lorca's world might appear in the lunar reflection cast by a humble pot lid reflecting the theater's work light—that naked bulb mounted on a tripod that remains lit—much like a sanc-

tuary light when the theater goes dark. Later I was to discover Artaud and to find in his writings a vision akin to my own. Particularly I refer to Artaud's concept of "the plague," by which he referred to existence at the edge of Being. That is where I desired to locate my theater, and that is where I locate much of my writing.

To respond to the other specifics of your question, I have deliberately tried to eliminate aspects of shock or sensationalism from my work because they appear to me untruthful in the sense that frequently they are used to mask emptiness.

Certainly with texts like my debut novel, *Face*, and with the resolution of *Fishlight*, there are moments when punishment seems to yield to some kind of beneficent transformation, but mine are not Judeo-Christian texts: The emphasis, I would like to believe, is more on transformation than on punishment.

One of the elements shared equally by theater and literature is voice in the sense that voice carries with it the stamp of identity and at the same time provides the vessel, the matrix if you will, of any narrative. Change the voice, and the narrative becomes other than itself. In my way of seeing, writing chooses the writer, not the other way around, and similarly the narrative chooses the voice through which it may best express itself.

The child's voice of *Fishlight* was not a conscious choice, not a question requiring deliberation on my part. There was no other way. I'm reminded here of Arthur Danto writing about Leonardo da Vinci: "When Leonardo drew a horse, he was a horse." How is it possible to create a narrative of childhood without re-becoming a child? How will you enter such a fresh and surprising mindset in which consciousness is constantly fixed on negotiating the parameters of an external world without donning the small, sashed dress, the clumsy shoes, the knock-knees, the vulnerable and trusting eyes, the awkwardness of childhood? That is Torah; the rest are commentaries. What I mean to say is that I am trying as much as is in my power to write something in contrast to writing about something. It is the difference between event and story (although narrative in my view may include both).

TBR: *Bardo99* and *Redoubt* are referred to as "mononovels," where the narrative often occurs in a stream of consciousness. How did you happen to select this form for these two books, as opposed to a more conventional novel?

CP: I refer to my later work as mononovels, that is, writing that occurs in the singular mind of one protagonist: visions, conversations, happenings, sensations, events—all within one imagining mind. With both *Bardo99* and *Redoubt*, locating the narrative, casting it if you will, in the consciousness of one mind was a deliberate choice in the sense that I found the challenge engaging and because to come to some thematic understanding, there seemed no other way.

Much of my writerly impulse comes from answering the question, what's bothering me at the time? What grain of sand irritates me sufficiently that it gives me the momentum to encase it entirely in nacre? With *Face*, certainly, the question has to do with identity: identity lost, identity found, identity lost again, and found again, and again and again and again, as in life; with

Frieze my life in the theater with its thankless betrayals; and with *Love Queen* the contrasting mustachioed and clean-shaven political caprices of the hemisphere. The change comes with *Fishlight*. It was written during a period in which the oppression I was experiencing reminded me of the oppressive confines of my childhood. One of my governing tenets working with actors was to urge them to use the pain yielded them by their lives, to consider it a blessing in the double meaning of that word. So with *Fishlight* I endeavored to transform my condition into some kind of art.

TBR: In Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" views, defined by his experiences between the world wars, history is "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage." This seems more relevant today than ever, given the latest war in Iraq. Yet Benjamin concludes that a "hermeneutic of restoration" presents a possibility of redemption for our future. Do you feel your work shares elements of Benjamin's vision? Do you find our own history and politics have provided your stories with a redemptive possibility?

CP: For some time, I had been contemplating the 20th century. I puzzled how all its grief, horror, and mayhem might best be encountered, how they might provide the sand grain of the century as I experienced it both personally and painfully. It occurred to me that the 20th century must be *Bardo99*'s protagonist, and what better name to lend him than *Viek*, meaning 100 years.

Early in the course of the AIDS pandemic, I had attended the bedside of a dear friend and actor in my company. Every day I observed his eyes, comatose, yes, but charged with the wonder and immensity of his dying hallucinations. That revelation gave *Bardo99* permission. Additionally, *Fishlight* had shown me how to enter the fever-dream visions of childhood. It was the transitional work which made *Bardo99* possible.

TBR: Your work is occasionally compared to the question- and idea-soaked novels by Milan Kundera, Italo Calvino, and Carlos Fuentes, often presented as a male-dominated club. Your meditative *Redoubt*, though, grappled with questions and ideas of gender and consciousness, of living without history, and of asking "what is the place of woman in such a consciousness?" Have women and women writers been left out of the literary dialogue in this respect?

CP: I have wanted to disclaim identification as a novelist of ideas (the Kundera/Calvino/Fuentes axis) but rather as a novelist of image because more than anything, it is the life of the senses that carries me as the narrator. But I remember as a child arguing with the mad father of *Fishlight* who claimed, against my better judgment, that ideas possessed no emotive component. It seems to me that although the male axis may lay claim to the novel of ideas, those ideas so constituted are devoid of the necessary humanizing estrogen required for any fully realized idea to take root.

In my work in the theater I had first discovered the hazards of taking a director's role. In 1972-1973, my company created a theater piece, *After Eurydice*, based on sexual role expectations, through which I began to address questions of gender, problems I have consistently experienced in my condition as a woman.

For a long time, and certainly supported by my experiences of pregnancy, I have held the idea that people are already who they are, even in the womb. Life is simply an elucidation of that first principle. It occurred to me that in the moment of birth, the first awakening, woman is pure Being in the same sense that man is pure Being—free of any of society’s gendering strictures. *Redoubt* attempts to come close, to touch the essence of that first moment of life in the first drawing of breath, in the first perception of light.

TBR: *In the 20 years since Face was published to great acclaim, a new generation of writers has emerged as chroniclers of the Latina/o experience. Marveling at the literary intelligentsia in South and Central America, novelist Alfredo Vea noted in an interview in The Bloomsbury Review [Jan/Feb 2000] that Latino writers in the States have “allowed ourselves to applaud the provincial in literature. That time is over. The artistic bar of literary fiction has been set for our time by Nabokov, Bellow, Faulkner, et al. We should study that bar—aim at it with every intention of leaping over.” Do you share Vea’s admonition?*

CP: I am in agreement with Vea’s notion that Latin letters have too closely hugged the margins of a provincial shore. But by contrast, I would set the bar past the province of Nabokov, Bellow, and Faulkner (another male axis) to encompass the great ocean of letters, Gaia split into many continents: Frame of New Zealand; Abe of Asia; Coetzee and Breitenbach and Achebe of Africa; Beckett and Joyce of Ireland (a literary continent unto itself); Schulz and Bachmann of Europe; Lispector of South America; Hedayat of the Middle East; and that greatest prestidigitator of all, Juan Rulfo (of Mexico) who discovered the possibility of creating a novel devoid of any of the traditional locators, depending only on the signature phrases of each character’s voice, as if to say: “Look, Ma, no hands!”, because hands may not be required except by outdated literary conventions at all. Which is to suggest that art must occupy itself with breaking barriers, upsetting comfortable mythologies, whether of content or form.

TBR: *Inevitably, your work is also placed aside Latina/o writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Sandra Cisneros, and Julia Alvarez, in some respects due to the great acclaim and success of The Love Queen of the Amazon. Do you see your work as part of this legacy in contemporary Latina/o writing, or part of another arena of contemporary writing?*

CP: I know I am viewed by people eager to claim me as a Latina writer, and this acclamation certainly makes me proud. But it is not entirely representative. My mother bore me. She was as mired in the notions of the Old World, in its rationalities, its explanations, its conventions, its certainties, and its Protestantism, as my father was a product of his Catholicism and of his own colonial past. Perhaps in the tension between the two I managed to find a voice. But more than mere genetic or cultural considerations, I claim necessity. I live in a world in which 40 men control wealth equal to that of nearly 80 countries, where to maintain their hegemony, countless acts of mayhem and massacre must occur every day. This is the reality that forms and re-forms my days as it does those of all the people on this hapless planet. I do not think anymore that writing—mine or

another’s—can change the world. Perhaps in their small way, writers can answer for those who are voiceless in their extreme deprivation and suffering. But at best, in the very smallest scheme, writing can provide a moment of grace, both for her who writes and him who reads, in a very dark world.

INTERVIEWER: **Jeff Biggers** is a writer based in Illinois and Italy.

For more information on Cecile Pineda, visit her personal website: <http://home.earthlink.net/~cecilep/>.