

Going for the Jugular: Strategies of Resistance in the Fiction of Helena María Viramontes

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In the essay “The Politics of Poetics: Or, What Am I, A Critic, Doing in This Text Anyhow?”, Tey Diana Rebolledo states that “it is very difficult to work on living authors: authors who read what you write and agree or don’t agree” (HERRERA-SOBEK & VIRAMONTES, 1996: 208). Although I do think she is absolutely right, I should say that, fortunately, this does not apply to Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes. After having been introduced to her collection *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985) by Professor Leila Harris, and having fallen in love with Viramontes’s strong concern for women under the rigid rules of patriarchy and with her unusual narrative strategies, I decided to send her an e-mail saying that I was writing my Master’s dissertation on her work and asking her about her novel *Their Dogs Came With Them*, as I was not sure whether it had been published yet. I may confess that I was not expecting an answer. After all, I was trying to contact a well-known writer with an obviously busy schedule. To my surprise the answer came on the same day (February 16th, 2005) and that is why, for me, it was not difficult to write about this “living author”. In her answer, Viramontes said: “I am deeply honored that you are writing a thesis on my work and I am more than happy to assist you wherever I can”. She went further in her generosity as to send to me her then unpublished novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*.

Bearing in mind Rebolledo’s statement that if we become “overly enthusiastic” about something concerning a writer’s work, we may “confuse the authorial voice with that of the narrative or poetic voice” (HERRERA-SOBEK & VIRAMONTES,

1996:208-209), I feel compelled to say that, sometimes, the author and the speaker are intertwined in Viramontes's works since, as a New Mestiza, Viramontes has embraced the "Theory in the Flesh" and portrayed her own childhood experiences in many of her texts.

Viramontes's *testimonio* "Nopalitos: The Making of Fiction", written in 1989, attests to the fact that many of her experiences have been crucial to her writings. The essay was revised and expanded during the summer of 2005 and I was lucky enough to receive a copy. I consider it a treasure. Its fourteen pages allow readers and critics to share the author's intimacy and, thus, better understand her work. From its very beginning one observes, simultaneously, Viramontes's powerful use of language, her commitment to writing, and the influence her life has had on her work.

Postcolonial writer Stuart Hall argues that "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history, and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*" (HALL, 1990: 222). The "diaspora experience and its narrative of displacement" which inform Hall's writings are also fundamental in the fiction of Helena María Viramontes.

Viramontes's parents were migrant Mexican workers who met while they labored in the fields of California picking cotton. Born in East L.A., Viramontes, one of eleven children, grew up in a crowded house as her mother, a very kind person, used to welcome whoever needed shelter. That is why, since her early childhood, Viramontes was able to listen to all sorts of stories which, as she says, "offered me lessons in life".

In the section "On Speaking/Not Speaking Spanish", Viramontes wonders about the loss of her mother tongue and its consequences in her life. She says that, although she can still communicate with what was left of her Chicana Spanish, it is totally

impossible for her to feel it is her own language and, therefore, write in it. Acknowledging that English is also her language, she admits she does “not feel comfortable in either language” (VIRAMONTES, 1989: 37, personal correspondence).

The sense of displacement of which Viramontes speaks together with the loss of one’s language is commonly experienced by diasporic populations. Since World War II, continuous, massive migrations – legal and illegal – to the U.S. and European countries, brought about mostly by economic and political reasons, have contributed to the creation of “ ‘third-world zones’ in supposed ‘First World’ nations” (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2003: 11).

Among the ethnic groups living in the United States, Hispanics represent nowadays the largest minority group, a fact that Anzaldúa had foreseen in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. According to data released by the Census Bureau in January 2003, Hispanics constitute 14% of the population in the United States and, taking into consideration the country they have come from, Mexicans encompass 63% of this Hispanic population (The New York Times, January 23,2003; Newsweek, May 30, 2005). People of Mexican origin came to be known as Chicanos, once a derogatory term, which was reappropriated by the activists of the Chicano Movement (60s/70s) and has since then been employed with a political connotation.

Chicanas have been affected both by gender and (post) colonial oppression. As Bill Ashcroft argues, both patriarchy and imperialism exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate and women’s experiences under patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in many respects (ASHCROFT, 2002: 101-102). The reappropriation of myths has proved to be an

affirmative tool for Chicana writers who decide to confront postcolonial and neocolonial domination as well as patriarchal ideology.

In *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Joseph Campbell wonders why “whenever men have looked for something solid on which to found their lives”, their option has not been the facts, but “the myths of an immemorial imagination”. He explains that myths work upon people, “whether consciously or unconsciously, as energy-releasing, life-motivating and directing agents” (CAMPBELL, 1959: 4). Campbell states that what is “grave and constant in human sufferings” leaves imprints on the human psyche, providing material for myths to come to being (CAMPBELL, 1959: 50).

Among the various imprints on man’s mind, one is of particular interest for my work as I will be dealing with the literature produced by a Chicana writer who fights for women’s self-assertion and voice in a male-controlled world, by using myths as strategies of resistance. As Campbell reports, one of the most profound imprints on the human mind is related to:

[...] the mysterious (one might even say, magical) functioning of the female body in its menstrual cycle, in the ceasing of the cycle during the period of gestation, and in the agony of birth – and the appearance, then, of the new being (CAMPBELL, 1959: 59).

These phenomena were responsible for others such as fear of menstrual blood, women’s isolation during their periods, rites of fecundity and rites of birth. Campbell points out that this fear of woman and of all the mystery involving her have become “impressive imprinting forces” for man, as strong as the fears of the mysteries of nature (CAMPBELL, 1959: 60).

Therefore, it seems plausible enough to state that those imprints on man's mind, which give origin to myths, explain men's behavior towards women, and the subsequent patriarchal societies spread throughout the world. Afraid of women's power and mystery, men end up by controlling female behavior. This reasoning finds echo in many of the myths. Among them, a myth told in New Mexico by Jicarilla Apache Indians is worth being narrated not only because it illustrates men's necessity to "domesticate" women and control their sexuality but also because it sheds light on the focus of this work.

Campbell tells us there was a murderous monster named Kicking Monster. He had four daughters known as "vagina girls" because they were the only women in the world to have vaginas. Although they lived in a house full of vaginas, the four girls were the only vaginas in the form of women. News being spread about the vagina girls brought many men to their house. However, Kicking Monster, their father, used to kick them into the house and nobody saw them again. It was then that a courageous boy hero known as Killer-of-Enemies decided to do something to solve the problem. He entered their house and was, soon, approached by the four girls who were anxious for intercourse. He first asked them about the men who had disappeared, and the girls immediately replied that they had eaten the men up simply because they enjoyed doing that. The girls tried hard to embrace the boy hero who shouted at them: "Keep away! That is no way to use the vagina. First I must give you some medicine, which you have never tasted before, medicine made of sour berries; and then I'll do what you ask". He gave them sour berries of four kinds while he said: "the vagina is always sweet when you do like this." The girls ate a great deal of sour berries and got happy as though they were having intercourse with the Killer-of-Enemies. Actually, they were experiencing

moments of ecstasy provoked by the medicine. Their teeth were destroyed as a consequence of the power of the sour berries, preventing them from eating any other men. That is how the boy hero domesticated the toothed vagina girls (CAMPBELL, 1959:74-75). It becomes clear that the disempowerment of women and the consequent empowerment of men have been perpetuated since pre-historical times.

The problematic issues concerning Chicanas' struggles against various forms of domination, especially patriarchy, are all intertwined and perfectly epitomized by the resemantization of old Aztec myths and Mexican legends in *The Moths and Other Stories* and *Paris Rats in East L. A.: A Novel in Short Stories* (this one has not yet been published in a single volume), by Helena María Viramontes.

Viramontes revises and subverts history through stories in which the protagonists are feminine figures, whether of historical or mythical origin, such as La Malinche, La Llorona and The Hungry Woman. In some of her short stories, Viramontes makes clear allusions to mythical figures. In "The Cariboo Cafe", La Llorona is directly portrayed, although representations of La Malinche and the Hungry Woman also play a prominent role in the story. Viramontes's resemantization of myths is more evident in "Tears on My Pillow", in which a variant of La Llorona's legend brings out the urban Llorona, the woman who undergoes oppression, cries, suffers, works, but does not kill her children. Viramontes uses variants of La Llorona aiming at denouncing women's sufferings and, at the same time, criticizing repressive and totalizing governments.

When there is no direct reference to myths, Viramontes's female characters' attitudes remit readers to them, as her protagonists behave as the mythical figures did, transgressing, resisting, refusing to be stopped. In "The Long Reconciliation", Amanda

reminds us of La Malinche as she aborts her child and commits adultery, breaking taboos and transgressing against her culture.

Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* represents a very special moment in her career, as she goes beyond the common tropes usually addressed by Chicana writers. In her gendered version of the plight of Mexican American farmworkers, Viramontes uses other strategies of resistance, such as focalization, and endows her thirteen-year-old protagonist with a mark of difference. Estrella, who labors with her family in the fields of California, undergoes a process of transformation, of interpretation of the world and, consequently, acquires voice and agency to resist totality and subalternity. The mark of difference Estrella carries with her begins with her name. She is really a star, the one who will guide her family, will shine by empowering herself, and who, significantly, in the end of the novel, is at the top of the barn, close to the sky, "as an angel standing on the verge of faith" (176).

Viramontes's choice of names for her focalizing characters is also significant. Alejo, from Texas, is taken to hospital after being sprayed by pesticide (alejo, in Spanish, means someone or something that is distant). Petra, Estrella's mother, is turned into a stone due to a life of misery. Perfecto, who lives with Petra, is a decent, responsible and helpful man and differs from most of Viramontes's male characters.

By using four focalizing characters, who are marginalized, Viramontes avoids essentializing migrant workers, highlights individual perspectives, and makes clear how social locations and social ideologies have a strong influence on characters' identities. According to Paula Moya, what makes *Under the Feet of Jesus* transgressively different is the bridge Viramontes establishes between reading, identity and effective agency. When Estrella learns to read in the sense of discerning things, not only distinguishing

letters in a word or sentence, she becomes able to read her social world, the other and her self (MOYA, 2002: 213).

Viramontes does more than merely portraying the peripatetic lifestyle of farmworkers and their invisibility. She defies us to follow her narrative zig-zag and her characters' partial perspectives, causing a certain discomfort so that we may identify with the migrant workers' predicaments. By provoking an understanding of the mechanisms of exclusion and abuse in a capitalist and repressive system, she leads her readers to experience a transformation of consciousness similar to the one Estrella undergoes. Readers will hopefully identify with the farmworkers' plight and end up by acknowledging their importance in society.

Although at times, when observing the violence and the misery spread in the world Viramontes feels discouraged, she keeps on writing, as her belief in "the power of the written word" to promote social change remains strong. In her words: "Our destiny, yours, mine, the starving and the marginalized, is not lodged in cement. We can determine its destination. Some use the soapbox; others use weapons. I choose to write" (VIRAMONTES, 1989: 38; personal correspondence).

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