The Deconstruction of Cultural Icons in the Fiction of Sandra Cisneros and Helena María Viramontes

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The view of the nation as unitary muffles the 'poliphony' of
social and ethnic voices within heteroglot cultures.
(Ella Shohat 2006)

I wear garments touched by hands from all over the world
35% cotton, 65% polyester, the journey begins in Central America
In the cotton fields of El Salvador
In a province soaked in blood,
Pesticide-sprayed workers toil in a broiling sun
Pulling cotton for two dollars a day.
(Bernice Johnson Reagon 1985)

Trinh Minh-ha contends that there is no Third World without its First World and no First World without its Third World. Ella Shohat elaborates on Minh-ha's formulation, stressing that "Contemporary U.S. life intertwines First World and Third Word destinies" (235). The struggles between these two worlds take place not only *between* nations but also *within* them (306). The "contact zones" thus created are often characterized by inequality and conflicts between dominant and subaltern groups (Pratt 6-7). Within a diasporic context that included conquest, annexation and colonization in the past and transnational migration in the present, contemporary Chicana writers[1] face the challenge of going beyond the

[1] The choice of the term Chicana implies political consciousness. For a detailed discussion of the issue, please consult Paula Moya's article.

varied barriers encountered by those who inhabit social spaces conditioned by power relations.

While the minority status exposes these women to multi-layered oppressions, their role as writers functions as a differentiating element that fosters the potential for agency, autonomy and synthesis. The literary production of Chicana writers brings into the foreground issues addressed by critics theorizing about "the use, abuse, participation, and role of women" (Spivak 250) in contemporary diasporas. While Gayatri Spivak cautions against the dangers of speaking for the *Other*, she does not dismiss that possibility and ponders about "gendered outsiders" that may acquire voice and agency (250-52). Trinh Minh-ha also examines the role of insiders and outsiders in order to describe the position from which a woman who mediates between two cultures speaks: "the moment the insider steps out from the inside, she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. … Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider" (415). Thus, the *loci* from where contemporary Chicana writers speak, a crucial element in their creation of a literature of resistance, inflect the challenge of making their voices heard.

Critic Maria Antónia Oliver-Rotger highlights the relevance of art and literature, located "in the interstices of the public and the private," in the creation of a counter discourse. As she explains, "Since American society is not an open public ethos where one may participate independently of race and class, but a 'private' space where citizenship is restricted, it is in these 'ragged edges' of society that resistance struggles to the present configuration of a 'privatized 'public sphere emerge" (130-31). In "*El Desorden*, Nationalism, and Chicana/o Aesthetics," Laura Pérez argues that Chicana feminists destabilize, through their artistic imagination, "dominant social and cultural, spatial and ideological topographies of the 'proper' in the United States" and make room for Aztlán – their invisible ancestral nation – among the many nations that make up the "imagined community" known as the United States (19). Although Perez's text deals with practices adopted primarily by visual artists and poets, her observations apply to the literary production of many contemporary Chicana writers. The deconstruction of cultural icons, for instance, is one of the strategies

of resistance utilized Helena María Viramontes and Sandra Cisneros in order to expose what Edward Said refers to as "coercive or sometimes mainly ideological domination from above" (qtd. in Guha and Spivak vi).

As Stuart Hall observes, "national cultures are composed not only of cultural institutions but of symbols and representations" (292). In a society that thrives on consumerism, commercial products and symbols become ingrained in the imaginary of its members. A written text is, undoubtedly, as Homi Bhabha proposes, one of the most important "signs taken for wonder – an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline" (102). Nevertheless, in the second half of the twentieth-century, the written text – as an instrument used by the colonizer to control the imagination and aspirations of colonized people – was complemented, enhanced, even replaced by yet another powerful instrument of control: images.

According to Roland Marchand, "by the 1920's in The United States, advertising had become a prolific producer of visual images with normative overtones, a contributor to the society's shared daydreams" (235). After the Second World War, the effort to stimulate the economy through consumerism led advertising agencies to associate aesthetic, ethic and even moral values to the brand names advertised. In "The Culture of Advertising," Paul Rutherford comments that "the style and rhythms and messages of commercial speech are embedded in our collective and public life." Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1979), and Daniel Pope's *The Making of Modern Advertising* (1983) are just a few of the studies about the power of advertising in modern capitalist societies (103). The meanings embedded in consumption symbols – be they movie stars or commercial products – promote the representation and institutionalization of values and beliefs present in the US culture and end up by transforming these symbols into intrinsic elements of the concept of the US as a nation.[2] Thus, we find side by side with traditional icons

[2] The essay "Consumption Symbols as Carriers of Culture" (see references) presents the results of an extensive research about the impact of consumption symbols on different cultures.

representing the US, such as The Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, and, more recently The Twin Towers, the images of commercial products such as Campbell's Tomato Soup – ironically perpetuated by Andy Warhol –, Sun Maid Raisins, Quaker Oatmeal, and many others that acquire symbolic meaning and are associated to a national culture.

In the Preface to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha discusses subordination as "one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance," emphasizing the need to discuss dominant groups without according them any sort of primacy (35). While discussing the role of resistance in literature, Chicana critic Alvina Quintana suggests that writers not only include characters that resort to oppositional tactics but also represent the "hegemonic system through which societal boundaries and the conditions for resistance are created" (58). In the fiction works featured in this paper, we encounter both the representation of characters that – subjected to different types of oppression – react against the oppressive system and the representation of the controlling processes used by the dominant group.

The second part of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, a novel published by Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes in 1995, starts with the description of thirteen-year old Estrella, picking grapes which, exposed to the sun, will turn into raisins. While working under the sweltering California sun, slitting the grape clusters from the vines, piling them up into a heavy basket, kneeling down to spread the grapes evenly to dry on a newspaper sheet, and getting up to start over the same procedure in a routine repeated for days on end, Estrella dwells on the differences that set her apart from the image of the young woman in a red bonnet stamped on the raisin boxes she has seen on supermarket shelves.

> Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. … The woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrella's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins. (50)

In Viramontes's novel, the fertile valleys of California serve as background for a narrative about the miserable condition of men, women, and children – legal and illegal aliens and even citizens – who work in the fields picking vegetables and fruit and who migrate constantly in search of work. As we reflect upon the impact of the scene just described, juxtaposing the harsh reality of Estrella's life to the stylized, romanticized vision of rural landscape and work evoked by the bucolic image of the young woman on the raisin box, we observe not only the exploitation of migrant workers but also the power of images. Critic Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger speculates that Viramontes may have found inspiration for the passage in a 1982 serigraph created by Ester Hernandez. Under a skeleton dressed like the red-bonneted lady we associate with Sun-Maid raisins, the following caption underscores the parodic intent of the artist: "Sun Mad Raisins / unnaturally grown with insecticides, miticides, herbicides, fungicides" (qtd. in Oliver-Rotger 310). Although we have no information about the precise source of Viramontes's inspiration, we know that both her parents worked in the California fields. The novel is dedicated to them and to Cesar Chávez, leader of the 1962 campesino upheaval. We can also affirm that both the serigraph by Hernandez and the novel by Viramontes are part of a counter-narrative that aims at exposing the social inequalities affecting minority groups in the U.S.

Estrella knows by heart slogans featured on commercial ads such as, "Clorox makes linen more than white... It makes them sanitary, too! Swanson's TV Dinners, closest to mom's cooking. Coppertone – Fastest Tan under the sun with maximum sunburn protection" (31). Nonetheless, throughout the novel we witness the lack of buying power that would have enabled the family to take advantage of these products. In order to wash clothes, Estrella's mother must fetch and carry water besides making her own soap. In order to feed the family, she must count every cent and resort to her creativity. In a striking scene, we are presented with the deconstruction of another image deeply embedded in the US imaginary: the man on the Quaker oatmeal box. Watching her four brothers and sisters crying for food, Estrella opens a kitchen cabinet.

> Nothing in the cabinet except the thick smell of Raid and dead roaches and sprinkled salt on withered sunflower contact paper and the Box of Quaker Oats oatmeal. Estrella grabbed the chubby pink cheeks

> Quaker man, the red and white and blue cylinder package and shook it violently and its music was empty. (18)

In a desperate attempt to entertain her brothers and sisters, Estrella marches furiously through the house, drumming on the empty can of Quaker oatmeal and hoping that they will forget their hunger at least temporarily. The chubby pink cheeks of the Quaker patriarch and the red and white and blue of the cylinder package – the colors of the American flag – make the miserable condition of the family even more striking. In this particular passage, the product slogan is not included, yet because it is such a familiar brand, there is instant recall. However, the food "that warms the heart and soul" cannot fulfill its promise when there is not enough money to purchase it.[3] It is important to notice that the verbs used to describe Estrella's actions – she [**drums**] the top of his low crown hat, [**slaps**] the round puffy man's double chin, [**beats**] his wavy long hair the silky color of creamy hot oats – signal not only her despair but also her repressed anger (19, my emphasis).

There are instances, however, in which the individual is stimulated to consume certain products – often unnecessary ones – and is able to acquire them, the purchase serving to mask unachieved needs and wishes. In *Feminism on the Border*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull draws attention to situations in which the advertising machine leads people to believe that having access to well-known brands " undoes the underlying material inequities" that separate them from the dominant group (102). Thus, the purchase of a Coke or a Big Mac, for instance, carries with it the illusion of "belonging." That seems to be the case of Arlene, the protagonist of the short story "Miss Clairol" by Helena Viramontes.

A single mother who works as a seamstress in a garment sweatshop, Arlene looks at her Saturday night outings as the high point of her week. The potential for change in her life seems limited to different partners on her weekend dates, and, above all, to the color of her hair – visibly damaged by the excessive use of chemical products – which may vary from platinum

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[3] See http://www.quakeroatmeal.com/Archives/History/indexoat.cfm. That was the slogan of the product for many years. The current one, "Something to smile about," is also inappropriate in the context of the novel.

"Light Ash" blond to "Flame" redhead, and so on. At the beginning of the story, Arlene, together with her ten-year old daughter Champ, is inside a K-Mart, choosing cosmetics in preparation for yet another 'romantic' date. Arlene, who at one point accuses her daughter of living in lala land, "is completely alienated from her true reality and does not realize or comprehend the extent of her alienation" (Herrera-Sorbek 35). In search of the glamour and romance promised by the products she buys, Arlene imitates the gestures of the models she sees on TV commercials, but her shabby and unkempt house, the job in the sewing factory, and a "blind" nipple – burned during a date she prefers to forget – mark the distance which exists between her dreams and her reality. As Ella Shohat reminds us, "within postmodern culture, the media not only set agendas and frame debates but also inflect desire, memory and fantasy" (325).

The title of the short story, according to Oliver-Rotger, points to Arlene's internalization of the "'feminine beauty system' of Western patriarchal culture, a complex and contradictory ideology or set of cultural practices controlled by the collective power of society that have as primary objective making woman attractive to men so that she may 'get'them" (208).

This same "feminine beauty system" makes Barbie the most popular and most coveted doll among girls influenced by U. S. culture. The short story "Barbie-Q" by Sandra Cisneros features two Chicana girls fascinated with Barbies (*Woman Hollering* 14-16). Although they are familiar with all the different Barbie dolls and the outfits that may be purchased separately, each girl owns only one doll and one outfit – a detail that reveals the limited buying power of their families. Their dream of having other Barbies is fulfilled only when damaged merchandise becomes available in a fire sale. The distinction between the point of view of "the real author" and that of the narrator – that is part of the conceptual model developed by Susan Lanser and adopted by Alvina Quintana in her discussion of the novel *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros – (59) is useful for our discussion of this story. If on the one hand, the girls seem happy with water-soaked and sooty packages, with dolls that smell of smoke, and even with a doll with a melted foot, on the other hand the authorial perspective leads the reader to reflect on the simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion that affects ethnic minorities in the U.S.

In "Ethnicity, Ideology and Academia," Rosaura Sánchez addresses the issue of inclusion and exclusion, suggesting that U.S. cultural frontiers

sometimes extend beyond national borders while at times they act as barriers within those same borders.

> If we consider acculturation at both ideological and material levels, ethnic groups in this country can be seen to suffer both inclusion and exclusion. Ideologically, thanks to the media and to the U.S. educational system, these groups will probably all have assimilated the same myths and dominant discourses and yet, materially, be excluded from the lifestyle, goods and services that characterize the life of middle and upper classes in the U.S. (295)

In *The House on Mango Street* (1984), there is a reference to the power of the media in the *vignette* "No speak English." *Mamacita*, who knows only three phrases in English and wants to return to Mexico, is desolated when her son who is learning to speak starts singing the Pepsi Cola commercial he has heard on television (78). Yet the trope chosen by Cisneros to underscore the social inequality existing between people who live on Mango Street and the US middle class is the house and all that it evokes to those who dream the American Dream. In the essay "Ghosts and Voices," Cisneros recalls the experience that inspired her to write the novel in question:

> During a seminar titled "On Memory and the Imagination" when the class was heatedly discussing Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of* Space and the metaphor of a house – a house, a house, it hit me. What did I know except third floor flats. Surely my classmates knew nothing about that. That's precisely what I chose to write; about third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible. (72-73)

Esperanza, the teenage protagonist of *The House on Mango Street*, dreams of a house just like those she sees on television programs or those where her father works as a gardener. The family keeps moving from one cramped apartment to another until they finally move to their own house. The house, however, is nothing like what Esperanza has dreamed all along.

> It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen that you have to push hard to get

> in…There are stairs in our house, but they are ordinary hallway stairs, and the house has only one washroom. Everybody has to share a bedroom – Mama and Papa, Carlos and Kiki, me and Nenny. (*House* 4)

The small size, the decay, the lack of space and privacy – all contrast with the house dreamed of by the whole family, and so often described by the mother in bedtime stories (the reference to this type of story makes us think of fairy tales, in other words, fantasy), or by the father every time he bought a lottery ticket. Critic Sonia Saldívar-Hull emphasizes that "the image of the 'house' that Esperanza and her family hope to have is a product of ideological manipulation from above." And she adds that "lottery tickets and highly publicized tales of the overnight transformation of factory workers into multimillionaires serve as additional ideological manipulation to obscure the injustices of a system built on the labor of the marginalized" (87-88).

In "The Marlboro Man," another short-story by Sandra Cisneros, two friends discuss the *true* identity of the Marlboro man, an icon of strength and masculinity. While one of them affirms that the real Marlboro man was homosexual – and her source of information is the very media responsible for the creation and popularization of the original icon –, the other affirms that he lived with a friend of hers on a fabulous ranch and that he had the habit of taking off his clothes in public when he got drunk. The two friends do not reach a conclusion about the identity of the *real* Marlboro man. As one of them points out, "There've been lots of Marlboro men. Just like there've been lots of Lassies, and lots of Shamu the Whale, and lots of Ralph the Swimming Pig. Well, what did you think, girlfriend? *All* those billboards. *All* those years!" (*Woman Hollering* 59). This witty, ironic observation underscores the constructed and arbitrary character of representations – be they of cultural icons or even a nation.

Although the characters here featured have certainly assimilated myths and cultural representations associated with the United States, they rarely fulfill the dreams they are encouraged to pursue. As Rosaura Sanchez observes, "Being affected, influenced, and exploited by a culture is one thing and sharing fully in that culture is another" (295). Just like the visual artists discussed by Laura Perez, writers Helena Viramontes and Sandra Cisneros challenge through their fiction the visual and discursive history of the United States, as represented by its hegemonic base, and lead us to

look at those who live at the margins of society. It's worth remembering what Homi Bhabha says concerning the constant tension existing between the pedagogic and the performative narratives of a nation (148). Side by side with myths and cultural representations, we find narratives produced by people in their everyday lives. The deconstruction of cultural icons functions as a counter discourse that provokes the destabilization of the vision of the U.S. as a single "imagined community" and of the representations that promote such vision.

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