

NEW LATINA NARRATIVE: THE FEMININE SPACE OF POSTMODERN ETHNICITY

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INTRODUCTION

Some 120 years after the U.S. conquest and annexation of the northern half of Mexico, the Chicano Movement dramatically brought to national attention the civil rights struggles of Mexican-Americans underway in various forms since the early twentieth century. Emerging from the sociopolitical space of the 1960s and 1970s in which Blacks, students, and anti-war groups agitated militantly for social change, Chicanos sought the political rights and cultural recognition that eluded them under the traditional model of the U.S. "melting pot." Puerto Ricans--both on the island and mainland--similarly engaged in militant struggle since the U.S. takeover of the island in 1898, and a younger generation of Cuban-Americans and other U.S. Latinos also emerged from the 1960s and 1970s as minorities who refused the symbolic meltdown with other immigrants in the metaphorical pot. Indeed, the media and political commentators heralded the 1980s as the "decade of the Hispanic," a moment in which this rapidly growing minority group would receive its long overdue rights and recognition.

Narrative played a central role in this social change from the start, for indeed, such socio-political realignments are impossible without critical redeployments of narrative. A partial list of these narrative practices would include the recuperation of oral traditions, popular religious rituals, fiestas, and canciones; the utopian recovery of lost homelands in political narratives such as the reconquest of Aztlan, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs which Chicanos superimposed on the American Southwest; political demonstrations and marches that deployed populist discourse and masses of human bodies to construct narratives around social issues; public mural art in subway stations and on the walls of freeway overpasses; the performances of Latino theatre groups in the alternative spaces of agricultural fields, urban streets, and such mainstream venues as the Mark Taper Forum, Broadway, and international stages; and the burgeoning of documentary and feature films. Several forms of print narrative were equally central, such as alternative newspapers, magazines and journals, position papers and documents, the scholarly elaboration of each Latino group's history in the U.S., and the immense flowering of Chicano/Latino literature. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, alternative presses, magazines, and newspapers published hundreds of short stories, novels, narrative poetry and drama by young Latinos. While some of these narrativists were women, the majority of the published fiction writers of this period were men.

This book focuses on the subsequent flowering in the 1980s and 1990s of Latina women's narrative, and its movement, after an initial marginalization, to the status of the desirable and profitable postmodern ethnic commodity. It was to be expected that several dozen Latina women would recuperate narrative outside the private sphere, entering the public space of published fiction in the decades following the militant movements of the 1960s and 1970s.~ While a number of Latinas had published poetry and political essays during the movement, the social and economic marginalization of these genres lead to difficulties in publication and an only minimal dissemination of this writing. The key issues of gender and sexuality around which large movements and national debates developed in the post-1960s decades required that alternate narrative focuses be taken up in the new writing by women. Despite their historical and literary importance, classic Chicano and Puerto Rican narratives such as Tomas Rivera's . . . Y no se lo trago la sierra/. . . And the Earth Did Not

Part (1971) and Pedro Juan Soto's *Spiks* (1973) viewed women's experiences from the outside,² leaving a number of political and cultural issues to be developed from the various perspectives of the new Latina narrativists. It was necessary, as Angie Chabram (1992) and others have argued, to contest the preferred male subject of Chicano/Latino nationalism.

In separating Latina fiction writers as a group for the purposes of this study, I do not wish to suggest an arbitrary or stylish ghettoization or to imply that a cohesive literary movement has developed based on one form of gendered ethnicity. Indeed, as I discuss later, the commercial and ideological redeployment of some of these narrativists as postmodern ethnic commodities is a popular version of this stylish ghettoization and is fraught with contradictions. Most of the writers have not worked together, although several lend public support to each other's work. The label "Latina" to a certain extent reifies the wide cultural range of the authors included here who are primarily of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican descent, and come from numerous locales across the U.S. As I will show, the narrative concerns of this heterogeneous group extend beyond the important interfaces between gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

It is important at the outset to reject the homogenizing view of Latinas that elides historical specificity, ethnic and racial differences, sexual preference, and varying class perspectives into a monolithic conception of the Latina narrativist. The national origin(s) of a Latina writer's parents, for example, cannot serve as an easy label for categorizing her fiction ethnically, as Ibis Gómez-Vega, a Cuban-American who grew up on the U.S. Mexican border shows in her 1991 novel *Send My Roots Rain*. She blends elements of Cuban and Mexican culture just as Sandra Cisneros and Helena Maria Viramontes integrate in their texts the culture of Chicanos and other Latinos in Chicago, Texas, and Los Angeles, and, writers such as Viramontes, Demetria Martinez, and Graciela Limon, include representations of Central American Latinos in their narratives. The fluidity of identity and the difficulty of placing writers into discrete national categories is apparent in the description on the back cover of the author of the 1993 novel *A Place Where the Sea Remembers*: "Sandra Benitez, who is of Puerto Rican and Midwestern descent, grew up in Mexico, El Salvador, and Missouri. . . . She lives in Minnesota." Where the mainstream press and hegemonic versions of multiculturalism conveniently group these writers beneath the label "Hispanic," distinct and complicated national elements of Latina ethnicity overrode these literary texts.

Latina narrativists are not only different from one another but from mainstream cultural models. One of the striking ironies of multiculturalism is the notion of inclusion through the foregrounding of difference. As Ernesto Laclau has argued, "the discourse of integration [is] founded on the articulation of an increasingly complex system of differences" (1981, 92). Writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Cristina Garcia, Julia Alvarez, Denise Chavez, and Mary Helen Ponce are valorized in the press and by publishers for their presentations of what many perceive to be the exotic Other. They are foregrounded as exotic and different from the mainstream precisely as they are being integrated into the mainstream, primarily because sameness is not as marketable in current conditions as is difference.³ Conscious of their mainstream and non-Latino audience, these writers often include ethnographic passages in their fiction, explaining cultural practices for the benefit of various groups of "outsiders."

Indeed, a structure of reappropriation similar to that of Orientalism characterizes much of the mainstream incorporation of Latina writers. Some of the narrativists discussed here become, along with their texts, successful "minority commodities," versions of the Latino Other that mainstream publishing companies authorize, market, and even to some degree foment. These texts become "an accepted grid for filtering through [the minority] in Western consciousness," as Edward Said argues is characteristic of the discourse of

Orientalism (6). Although these Latina writers are ostensibly speaking for themselves, their discourse is framed, preceded by, and already shaped to a certain degree by the dominant discursive optic of multiculturalism. In some cases, the Latina writer succeeds in entering the mainstream by engaging in a modified Orientalism herself with respect to the minority culture she describes, relying on the agreed upon codes by which publishers have marketed successful minority commodities in the past. Nonetheless, as Chapter One argues, a discursive battle ensues between the dominant frame of multiculturalism and a number of ruptural elements in the literary texts that serve as disturbances in the larger text of multiculturalism. The Dominican-American Julia Alvarez, for example, uses formal and intradiegetic transgression to reveal identity to be an unstable category, undergirded by gender, ethnic, and class "trouble," to adapt Judith Butler's term. The Puerto Rican Carmen de Monteflores expands the practice of bilingualism into what some North African writers have termed "plurilingualism" j4 she combines the multiple perspectives of postmodernist narrative with the destabilizing voices of an interrupted American English, Castilian Spanish, and Puerto Rican Figaro Spanish. While these linguistic codes may signify modes of self-representation for certain Latino/a readers, they are sometimes the disturbing mark of the Other for non-Latinos.

The diversity of contemporary Latina narrative is an outgrowth of the heterogeneity of the U.S. Latino population. Wide differences persist in preferred language, customs, cultural practices, economic levels, political attitudes, religious beliefs, sexual preference, national, ethnic and racial backgrounds, buying habits, and media consumption. Linguistic diversity, for example, includes not only the many varieties of spoken Spanish of the different regions and countries of Latin America but the rich verbal adaptations that occur within the U.S. The long history of immigration along with the continued influx of Latin American immigrants into the U.S.s has resulted in a wide range of linguistic practices among Latinos--from those who, after several generations here now speak no Spanish, to those who speak no English, with numerous intermediary positions of varying bilingualism. Nonetheless, despite the claims of the Spanish-language media to advertisers, many Latinos in the U.S. do not habitually consume mass cultural products in Spanish--movies, television programs, newspapers, magazines, romance novels, and photonovels. Ana Celia Zentella notes that Spanish is being lost at a tremendous rate among U.S. Latinos and although there are 17 million bilinguals in the U.S., there are very few "ambilinguals" equally adept in both languages.' While the Spanish-language media in the U.S. prosper, and large publishing houses are now releasing Spanish-language editions of the work of writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Cristina Garcia, and Mary Helen Ponce, the primary audience sought by the writers in this study is English-dominant.

Although written primarily in English, many of the narratives analyzed here evidence linguistic diversity. While none of the texts is ambilingual, only one or two exhibit native, English-dominant bilingual discourse patterns.⁸ Instead, occasional bilingual gestures punctuate much of the writing, constituting one mode of selfpresentation of ethnicity in the postmodern age of celebration of difference. As occurs in everyday speech situations, writers choose forms of address that coincide with the dominant language of the intended audience. The occasional Spanish markers that punctuate these narratives are sometimes immediately translated for those readers unfamiliar with Spanish, or, especially when they are taboo words or "crutching" words where the English term is nonexistent or unknown, are left untranslated.

There occurs as well a creative experimentation with what Frances Aparicio terms tropicalized English, "a transformation and rewriting of Anglo signifiers from the Latino cultural vantage point" (796). Ana Castillo, for example, deliberately uses the Spanish syntax of the double negative and calques of Spanish idiomatic expressions in the third-person

narration of *So Far from God*. Using Aparicio's model, it might be argued that such techniques invite bilingual readers to recognize the Spanish sub-texts beneath the English signifiers. Thus, monolingual English readers are partially incompetent decoders of the text. Readers unfamiliar with Spanish will not understand Sandra Cisneros' linguistic humor in calques such as "Auntie Light-skin," and "Uncle Fat-face" in the story "Mericans" (1991, 17). In effect, as Aparicio argues in her study of other writers, such a tropicalization of English privileges the bilingual reader but allows both non-Spanish-speaking and bilingual audiences to be reached.⁹ I would add to Aparicio's argument that several of the bilingual experiments by the non-native bilingual speakers among these writers might be productively read as innovative linguistic experiments that jar even native bilingual speakers, rather than as "ungrammatical bilingualism." Thus, when Sandra Cisneros uses unconventional code switching such as "la muy powerful y miraculous literary protectors" (1991: x, italics in original), we might understand it as playful experimentation rather than a bilingual mistake.

While the narratives included in this study are diverse, they represent only part of a burgeoning area of new writing. I have focused on a selection of Chicana, Puerto Rican, Cuban-American, and Dominican-American narrativists who grew up in the United States. Beyond the two dozen writers I study here, another dozen are not included, and new writers and new works continue to appear each year. Also beyond the scope of this study are several important narratives written in Spanish such as Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry's *Paletitas de guayaba* (1991), Margarita Cota-Cardenas' *Puppet* (1985), and the stories by Rosaura Sanchez and others in *Requisa Treinta y Dos* (1979). I have also not included the work of popular Latin American writers translated and widely read in the U.S. such as the Mexican Laura Esquivel and the Chilean Isabel Allende, or "writers-in-exile" (Rivero, 197), or mass-marketed U.S. Latina fiction such as Soledad Santiago's *Streets of Fire* (1996).

Both large and small publishers have helped to carve out a space in the public sphere for writing by Latina women. Although I focus in Chapter One on the examples of four writers who have achieved commercial success in the mainstream, many Latina narrativists have been launched by Arte Publico Press of Houston and the Bilingual Press of Tempe. The notion of the feminine space of postmodern ethnicity refers to the particular thematic and formal concerns of Latina writers published both by mainstream and regional presses in an age in which the code words "diversity" and "multiculturalism" both enhance and reify the lives of minorities in the U.S. That is, the Latina writing published by both mainstream and regional presses embodies multiculturalism "from below" in which ethnic groups assert their presence outside of the metaphorical melting pot, and multiculturalism "from above" in which the mainstream exhibits an interest in diversity as a means of containing the ruptural elements of various social movements. The special issues addressed by the Latina writers considered here might be referred to as a "feminine space" that emerges within the social constraints of both aspects of postmodern ethnicity--hegemonic and populist multiculturalism." Simultaneously, these narrative concerns constitute a liminal space on the eroded border between ethnicity and gender in which these ostensibly discrete categories are intertwined.

I argue in Chapter One, for example, that despite the attempts of mainstream publishers to market Latina writers as ideal "minority commodities," ruptural gender issues create a troubling feminine space in the texts themselves that coexists with the idealist multiculturalist frame. Writers both employ and move beyond notions of ostensibly genderless ethnicity generated from above and below, infusing both varieties of ethnicity with contestatory gender issues.

Subsequent chapters study important elements of multiculturalism from below that narrativists textually elaborate. Writers such as Graciela Limon, Demetria Martinez, Mickey Fernandez, and Nicholasa Mohr engage in the politics of signification, as I argue in Chapter

Two, by Recentring master texts such as the Bible and romance novels, reconfiguring received views of the Other, resignifying everyday life objects, and discursively reorganizing people and cultural symbols to revise historical memory. Writers also grapple with issues of individualism and collectivity as they engage with questions of identity; in autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives, as Chapter Three argues, Lucha Corpi, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Mary Helen Ponce, and Julia Alvarez develop a variety of strategies that only sometimes successfully integrate the personal and the political, linking fictions of the self to larger historical events.

Religion, another contested site for new Latina narrativists, is the focus of Chapter Four. Rather than merely serving as markers of ethnic identity for consumers of multiculturalism from above, orthodox, popular, and syncretic religious images are narratively deployed as a means of reclaiming religion for social justice and a new moral vision. Lucha Corpi and Demetria Martinez use modified confessional narratives to show the link between religion and politics. The syncretic religious practices of the Caribbean abound in the works of Julia Alvarez, Cristina Garcia, and Judith Ortiz Cofer who embed both official and non-official religion in their narratives from the perspective of insiders who are at the same time outsiders. And emphasizing voice and vision, Chicanas such as Mary Helen Ponce, Denise Chavez, and Sandra Cisneros aesthetically recuperate the orthodox and non-orthodox religious practices of ordinary U.S. Latinos.

While numerous Latina narrativists deploy religious themes and imagery, some focus as well on transgressive motifs and ethnic subcultural expression as confrontational tactics directed from below to dominant sectors both within and outside their ethnic group. Chapter Five analyzes examples of textual transgression that both explain and contest male subculture, break sexual taboos, and broach other interdicted topics. Mary Helen Ponce, for example, uses parody and the carnivalesque in a critical narrative about Pachuco and Pachuca subculture, its modes of disrupting mainstream culture, and the failure of the strategies of these subgroups in the 1940s to symbolically recuperate community. Writers such as Alma Luz Villanueva, Ana Castillo, Nicholasa Mohr, and Cristina Garcia present female sexual transgression in both individualist and wider social terms. Pat Mora and Sandra Cisneros transgress dominant norms by relating religion to sexuality, while other Latina authors focus on lesbian sexuality and abortion. By both positive and negative portrayals of subcultural transgression, Latina writers interject elements of multiculturalism "from below" into the mainstream discourse.

Beginning with issues of identity politics, Chapter Six focuses on the narrative harmony and dissonance that arises in various writers' treatments of questions of gender, ethnicity, politics, and the aesthetic. Writers such as Helena Maria Viamontes, Carmen de Monteflores, Cherrie Moraga, Julia Alvarez, Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales harmoniously integrate these questions as elements of a continuum, while others such as Sandra Cisneros, Roberta Fernandez, Margarita Engle, and Himilce Novas sometimes foreground one or another of these issues in unidimensional terms.

The rich narrative production of U. S. Latinas in the 1980s and 1990s defies the limiting moniker "New Latina Narrative" by continually disrupting the convenient borders imposed by such a term. While I have attempted in this study to delineate some of the principal preoccupations of Latina narrativists in the final decades of the twentieth century, my approach based on the competing tensions of multiculturalism from above and below is only one point of entry into this heterogeneous group of narratives. As Latina writers continue to create works that spill out of the critical categories that academic criticism proposes, we can expect a continued aesthetic vibrancy and cultural leadership that will achieve its well deserved place in the American canon.

NOTES

1 Exceptions to this time frame are writers such as Nicholasa Mohr, Isabella Rios (Diane Lopez), and Berta Ornelas who published fiction in the 1970s.

2 See, for example Soto's story "Absence" in *Spiks*, 1970, trans. Victoria Ortiz, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 49-57.

3 This does not prevent, as I discuss in Chapter One, the marketing of one minority writer with the cultural accoutrements of another. Random House used art by the same Chicana artist whose work appears on the cover of Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991) on the cover of a book by a male writer from the Philippines, F. Sionil Jose. See *Three Filipino Women* (New York: Random House, 1993). Difference must conform to certain uniform features--here, those that have successfully marketed a writer of another ethnicity.

4 See Samia Mehrez, "The Subversive Poetics of Radical Bilingualism: Postcolonial Francophone North African Literature" in *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. Dominick La Capra (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, 255-77).

5 The 1990 U.S. Census showed that "Hispanic people" increased 53% over the 1980 figures, to 22.4 million. About half of that increase was due to immigration, but other factors in the higher count included high birth rates, citizenship granted to Latino residents, and the counting of illegal residents. These figures do not include the 9.8 million people who classified themselves as "other race." most of whom according to the Census Bureau are Latino; because "their cultures have established different racial categories since so many are of mixed Spanish, Indian, and black descent," they check the "Other" category when faced with the U.S. categories. Nonetheless, in a significant occlusion of the racial difference within the Latino community, the Census Bureau persists in classifying most of these nearly 9 million people "white," apparently against their wishes. See Felicity Barringer, "Census Shows Profound Change in Racial Makekup of the Nation," *New York Times*, March 11, 1991, 1 ff.

6 Michael Lev, "Tracking the Hispanic TV Audience" (*New York Times*, Dec. 13, 1989, 17) claims "90 per cent of U.S. Latinos/Latin Americans speak Spanish" (cited in Flores and Yudice, 58).

7 *Bilinguals in the Barrios: Crossing Linguistic, Racial, and Cultural Frontiers*, lecture delivered at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Feb. 10, 1995.

8 Applying Chomsky's notion of universal grammar, specialists in bilingualism such as Almeida Jacqueline Toribio argue that native bilingual speakers employ and recognize grammatically and syntactically correct bilingual utterances. For example, an English-dominant bilingual speaker using correct code-switching might choose to switch between the following segments: "The students/had seen/a foreign film," but never between the auxiliary and participle "had" and "seen." Similarly, a native bilingual speaker might switch at following points: "Mary said/that her brother is sick," but never between the words "that" and "her" in this sentence. She notes that code-switching is prohibited between a functional element (e.g., articles, demonstratives, numbers, auxiliaries, negation, and morphological endings for tense and agreement) and its complement, and, in contrast, occurs freely between a lexical (non-functional) element and its complement, e.g. "They used to serve comida peruana [Lectures, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 12, 1994 and Feb. 14, 1995; see also John Gumperz and Almeida Jacqueline Toribio, "Codeswitching,-MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences, Robert Wilson and Frank Keil, eds.

(Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, in press)]. Pfaff and Chavez (1986) show that even in Chicano drama, a genre that most closely approximates natural discourse, literary variations in the natural speech patterns of code-switching occurred. While "balanced bilinguals" (those proficient in both languages) engage in intra-sentential code-switching without violating the rules of grammar of either language, various locutions in Chicano drama diverged from natural patterns of code-switching. Sometimes this aesthetic code-switching had a symbolic function, the authors argue.

9 See also Aparicio's "La Vida es un Spanglish Disparatero: Bilingualism and Nuyorican Poetry" and Cordelia Candelaria, "Code-Switching as Metaphor in Chicano Poetry," in *European Perspectives on Hispanic Literature in the United States*, Ed. Genvieve Fabre (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1988), 147-160 and 91-97.

10 It is my hope that a number of Latina narrativists whose work is not discussed here such as Kathleen Alcalá, Beatriz de la Garza, Terri de la Peña, Patricia Preciado Martin, Carole Fernandez, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Beverly Silva, Laura del Fuego, Elena Castedo, Achy Obejas, Estella Portillo Trambley, Gina Valdes, Irene Beltran Hernandez, Isabella Rios, Berta Ornelas, Sheila Ortiz-Taylor, Cecile Pineda, Tina Juarez and Ibis Gomez-Vega will be the focus of studies by other scholars. For important studies of some of these writers see Herrera-Sobek (1985), Horno-Delgado (1989), Ramon Saldivar (1990), Rebolledo (1995) Quintana (1996), Eysturoy (1996), Francisco Lomeli, "Isabella Rios and the Chicano Psychic Novel," in *Minority Voices: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature and the Arts* 4:1 (1980), 49-61 and Juan Bruce-Novoa, "Sheila Ortiz Taylor's Faultline: A Third Woman's Utopia," in Herrera-Sobek and Viramontes (1995), 225-243.

11 While small presses such as Arte Publico and the Bilingual Press embody much of what might be termed populist rather than hegemonic multiculturalism, they too experience the dialectical pressures of multiculturalism from above and below. One press, for example, asked a Latina writer to use less Spanish in her manuscript, and then changed the last line of the text to an ungrammatical English sentence without the writer's consent. Small presses need to make cases to government agencies for state and national grants, and more and more frequently are negotiating with mainstream publishers to sell paperback rights after publishing hardcover editions of books. Besides participating in populist multiculturalism by publishing with one of these small presses, writers who do so are also in dialogue--both critical and complicit--with the themes and constraints of hegemonic multiculturalism.