

Isabella Ríos and *Victuum*: Speculating a Chicana Identity

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Let us, then, attempt explanation, not with the fantasy of the novelist, but with an intuition supported by the facts of history and science.

(José Vasconcelos)

No basta adaptarnos a una sociedad que cambia en la superficie y permanece idéntica en la raíz. No basta imitar los modelos que se nos proponen y que son la respuesta a otras circunstancias que las nuestras. No basta siquiera descubrir lo que somos. Hay que inventarnos.

(Rosario Castellanos)¹

The Chicana social predicament necessitates a reconsideration of both the “idealized past” and the “future perfect.”

(Alvina E. Quintana)

Abstract Resumen

Key Words: Isabella Rios, *Victuum*, patriarchal family, Chican@ science fiction novel, identity.
Palabras Clave: Isabella Rios, *Victuum*, familia patriarcal, novela de ciencia ficción Chican@, identidad.

Given my own literary aesthetic, given my own cultural and social history, I tend to not like realist fiction. Give me Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* over George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* any day of the week. I obtain enormous pleasure from reading the transformative novels of the Latin American “Boom” writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Mario Vargas Llosa, Clarice Lispector, Julio Cortázar, Cristina Perri Rosi, and Carlos Fuentes. These novels challenge the reader’s preconceptions of narrative form and content. They challenge foundational understandings of history and society and identity. And in some ways, many of the Latina/o

writers within the U.S. engage in similar projects. Indeed, critic John Christie argues that the play of narrative forms, the play between modernist and postmodernist narrative styles, ideally suits the Latina/o writer, and enables her/him to “shock readers ‘into new ways of perceiving the world’” (12).

However, despite my own enjoyment of these challenging novels, my students tend to have great difficulty in approaching and understanding these non-realist novels, so we often spend some time talking about their aesthetics and how they affect their reception of a novel, especially a “difficult” one. So, imagine my surprise at my own difficulty in getting through Isabella Ríos’s *Victuum*. Ríos does, like so many other Latina/o writers, challenge and subvert traditional narrative practices. Nevertheless, the form of the narrative practice she adopts renders the text difficult to read. And to date, of the few critics who have addressed the novel at all, they tended to focus on either the narrative elements or the gender politics of the novel. And indeed, these are both worthy of consideration and attention. However, none of the critics has sufficiently addressed the science fictional elements of the novel. Although Francisco Lomelí and others have mentioned that it contains elements of science fiction, they do not explore them at all. Given the history of *Victuum*, I would suggest that it is significant that Ríos was one of the first Latina/o novelists and one of the first women of color working in the realm of sf. In the following essay, then, I would like to situate the novel within the tradition of Latina/o literature, and within the science fiction genre and examine the ways in which her application of the conventions of science fiction enable her social and cultural commentary.

Although texts written during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries by artists of Mexican descent can be found scattered here and there,² the common wisdom runs that Chicano literature began in 1959 with the publication of Antonio Villarreal’s *Bildungsroman, Pocho*.

Following the publication of his novel, it would appear—in hindsight, anyway—that the floodgates were opened up. In 1967 Floyd Salas published *Tattoo the Wicked Cross*, which was followed by Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers* in 1969 and Richard Vasquez's *Chicano* in 1970. Later, “...y no se lo tragó la tierra”/“...And the Earth Did Not Part” by Tomás Rivera appeared in 1971, and *Bless Me, Última* by Rudolfo Anaya in 1972.³

However, early Chicano fiction, and especially early novel-writing, was male-dominated by the likes of Villarreal, Anaya, Salas, and others. The reasons why males dominated novel production are many, including the fact that novel writing was male-dominated in most Western literary traditions until the late twentieth century. In addition, prior to the 1970s, Chicanas were not encouraged to write, and if they did write, they did not have the time or a “room of their own” in which to write novels. Prior to 1975, Chicanas who wrote tended to focus on the short form, specifically poetry.⁴ Like the writing of their male counterpoints, the initial Chicana writing tended to explore similar themes, including racism, institutional discrimination, the search for identity, and the return to Aztlán (Ponce 108), though they would also “rail[] against Chicano fathers, lovers, men in general, and their ways” (Hinojosa 30).

And while we are able to identify and categorize certain common themes or characteristics of Chicana/o literature, I also take Karen Christian's point that we cannot reduce these texts to stereotypes. Reading through Werner Sollor's *The Invention of Ethnicity*, Christian argues that we hold pre-conceived notions of identity based on geography, language, religion, and so on. We also, then, base the “authenticity” of a text (or cultural production) based on its adherence to those pre-texts. And, she argues, this leads to the “ghettoization of the literature” (6). This attitude and belief then limits Latina/o artists who utilize ““nonethnic”” genres and themes. Christian cites the examples of John Rechy, Luis Urrea, Sheila Otrtiz Taylor and Cecile

Pineda who do not draw on the stereotypical Chicana/o themes and images. Although Christian does not mention Ríos specifically, I would suggest that her work, and *Victuum* in particular, also falls into this category—at least in part—since science fiction one of the genres considered “nonethnic.”

Following the lead of David Palumbo-Liu, Christian suggests that “ethnic writing shares common theoretical concerns” and should not be considered solely as the manifestation of the particularities of “sociohistorical context” (6). Palumbo-Liu “critiques the use of ethnic texts ‘as authentic, unmediated representations of ethnicity’” (6). Instead, we should, among other things, examine how and why a particular text has been adopted as an “exemplary” text, and, I would add, by extension, which texts do *not* get adopted as exemplary. That is, we should examine the text’s relationship to “dominant discourses” (6). And if we examine minority literatures as a whole, and here in Christian’s case, Latina/o literature as a whole, we may find that they raise common questions or concerns: “of authenticity and representation, innovation and experimentation, narrative and identity” (7). And to be sure, Part One of *Victuum* raises some of these questions.

According to Francisco Lomelí, the first Chicana novel was *Come Down from the Mound* by Berta Ornelas in 1975, quickly followed by Isabella Ríos’s *Victuum* in 1976. However, as he points out, although *Victuum* appeared in 1976, the copyright on the title page is actually 1974, making her novel the first Chicana novel (“Isabella Ríos” 49). However, in the late-1980s and early-1990s, Latina writers exploded onto the publishing scene, with the publication of Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1985), Denise Chávez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1987), Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun* (1989), Julia’s Álvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), and

Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1994).⁵ Of course, the publishing "boom" of Latina/o literature in the U.S. was also fueled by the popularity of certain Latino writers, as well, in particular *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* by Oscar Hijuelos (1989). Nevertheless, the novels by Latinas found enormous success and, according to Rolando Hinojosa, "this market remains the most viable for the literature" (30). Similarly, Ramón Saldívar calls the emergence of Chicana writers "the most vibrant new development in Chicano [sic] literature" (171).

However, because *Victuum* was self-produced (Eysturoy 142), because it had no promotional campaign or support from its publisher, because it appeared at a time when no other Chicanas were writing novels, and, perhaps, because it employs non-genre devices and themes, the novel had a limited impact upon its release. Indeed, Mary Helen Ponce says of the novel, "Esta novella es poco conocida y un tanto confusa" (113).⁶ Similarly, Manuel Martín Rodríguez asserts that it had "no visible impact" upon publication (69). In addition to the limited readership, it has also received limited critical attention. As the bibliography below attests, very few critics have ever turned their pen to the novel. However, I would suggest that the novel holds a significant place in the history of Chicana and Latina literature, in part because of its location in the chronological development of the Latina novel, and in part because of its participation in the genre of science fiction. Rather than commenting solely on historical events, rather than commenting solely on current political and social conditions, *Victuum* also looks ahead to a future condition. As the critic Alvina Quintana suggests in the epigraph, Latino writers and critics have tended to look back with nostalgia for a utopian past, while Angla feminists have tended to look forward to utopian future.⁷ Latinas, however, remain grounded in, and concerned with, the present.

Given how long ago *Victuum* was published, given that it was not published (nor ever re-

published) by a major press (even in terms of significant Latina/o presses), and given that very few copies of the novel were ever printed, it is likely that very few people have ever read *Victuum*. According to the author, she was unable to find a publishing house willing to accept her novel. The reasons for this reluctance could be several. For one, it is a difficult novel to read, and they may well have felt that it was unlikely to gain a wide readership. For example, Ramón Saldívar calls *Victuum* “one of the strangest pieces of writing ever done by a Mexican American author, male or female” (176). For another, in 1974 no other Chicana had published a novel, and they may well have been reluctant to pave the way. Since the 1990s, however, apart from the publishers that specialize in Latina/o literature, many major publishing companies have subsidies that focus on Latinas/os.⁸

Victuum is the first-person tale of Valentina Ballesternos, and chronicles her life from the time she is a fetus until she is an adult, mother of nine children, and approximately 55 years old.⁹ The relationship of the characters’ names and the author’s name and pen name is worth noting here. The author, Diana López, utilized the pseudonym Isabella Ríos for this novel (and continues to use it for her later collection of poetry, as well).¹⁰ Within the fictive world of the novel, the protagonist’s mother’s maiden name is also Isabella Ríos. So, it would seem, the author assumes the family name of one of her characters. However, in an interview with Francisco Lomeli, López also claims that all the events of the novel are, in fact, true, and that they occurred to a family member. And the front cover of the novel suggests this conflation of fact and fiction by calling the book, “A Classical Biographical Novel.” The main character, Valentina, then would be a relative to the author. Further confounding the separation of fact and fiction, according to the copyright page of the novel, the sheet music that is printed within the novel, two songs entitled “Isabel” and “Elvera,” were written and copyrighted by Adolf

Ballesteros (not Ballesternos, as is Valentina's last name). Finally, there are some twenty-five drawings that illustrate the novel, and the title page states: "Original drawings illustrated by protagonist." So, were these drawings actually the product of the family member upon whom the novel is allegedly based, or is it a rhetorical ruse? Were they created by Ríos/López and attributed to her main character, who is allegedly a relative? As María Antònia Oliver suggests, then, the narrative "I" is complex, and "the writer is at once compiler, translator, mediator, biographer and autobiographer" (285).¹¹

The first-person narrative begins with the thoughts of the fetus while *in utero*, a fetus that exhibits a consciousness of the birthing process. The narrator tells us that she was born with a "*velo*" [veil] over her face, which her mother tells her signifies that she will have a special talent, that she'll "know the spiritual world" (4). Despite these early invocations of the spiritual world, the early portions of the novel are filled with the mundane details of a young girl's life: playing with the family dog, making "tea," taking naps, making mud pies, fearing the alligator under the bed, and so on. Critic Francisco Lomelí calls these details "superfluous descriptions and innumerable humdrum occurrences" ("Chicana" 42), though, arguably, they are the very point of a re-defined aesthetic. Saldívar calls this narrative technique an "almost total rejection of traditional narrative procedure" (176). By including these myriad "mundane" details, and by narrating the story almost entirely in dialog, with virtually "no expository sections" (Saldívar 176), Ríos "eliminates the role of the narrator—the traditional voice of authority—and brings the reader in direct contact with Valentina and her community (Eysturoy 37), which functions as a counter to the absolute masculine and paternal authority of the traditional novel form and of her own family. As Valentina ages, and as the family grows—in all she has six sisters and one brother—we see Valentina in the context of the family, and in the gendered process of

socialization. Valentina learns well the lessons of gender, as demonstrated to her by her mother and father, and by her sisters and brother. For example, they all sit around the dinner table when their father returns from a business trip and listen to his tales of his exploits in the world (17), reinforcing the realms of the public and the private. In another scene, a *comadre* drops by and comments effusively on all of Papa's talents, awards, and pupils. Clearly, for Valentina, the world of work outside the home, and the production of culture (music, in particular, but also newspapers and liquor) is the realm of males, in the persons of her father and her brother. Through these lessons, Valentina is shaped into a good and proper woman, into a woman who will be acceptable and useful to a man (Eysturoy 42). As Papa tells Valentina, parents must be very strict with young girls because they should be "virgin goddesses" that a man can "worship" and that they must "guard their intimate dark room" (146).

Through the examples of her father and brother, she learns quickly that men work out in the world, that men produce works of culture, that men engage in politics. Valentina hears it often, and implicitly believes, that her father is superior to her mother. "In *Victuum*, the domestic domain is a constant ratification of women's dependence, self-sacrifice and inferiority" (Oliver 287). Concomitantly, she learns that women work in the home, that women nurture and care for children, that women must be pure, that women are vulnerable when they leave the home, that women are vulnerable while *in* the home. In some ways, the home is represented as a "safe haven," as a place of refuge. For one, Valentina sees the troubles that await the men when they leave the home. For another, she sees the whores in the neighborhood and their vulnerability in the cantinas and streets and therefore recognizes her own relative safety inside the home. In still another example, she herself experiences this vulnerability when a pimp from Los Angeles tries to lure her away (198). However, as Eysturoy illustrates, sometimes the home itself is the site of

danger, as Valentina witnesses the domestic violence that both her mother and her aunts endure. For example, Valentina overhears her aunts telling of the time Papa beats Mama (64), Papa beats Valentina and calls her “useless” (86), her father whips her with a quince tree branch (99). She also learns of violence in her aunts’ homes. For these reasons, Valentina is told to find a man who will earn enough money to take her “far away” from this culture and these dangers.

Valentina does not just learn gender rôles and biases, but she also learns of racial biases. Valentina faces discrimination from the Anglo community on a daily basis, including from her teachers who call her names and refuse to allow her to speak Spanish. A boy in her class doesn’t like her drawing because he doesn’t like “dirty Mexicans” (67); she’s forced to stand out in a field for speaking Spanish at school (154); when she turns in an assignment late, the teacher remarks that it’s common for “your people” (171); and when she reports a physical assault to the police, they accuse her, because she’s Mexican, of sleeping with too many men—and thereby bringing it on herself.

Therefore, in order to combat these biases, her mother and the other women around her “impart the family history to Valentina in order to bolster her self-esteem and instill in her a pride in her cultural heritage” (Eysturoy 47). Indeed, she learns of a proud familial and cultural past, and she learns of the process by which her family and her people lost their land and their status following the Treaty of 1848.¹² The juxtaposition of their proud past and their present poverty produces a jarring social commentary. However, her parents also socialize Valentina, in certain ways, toward the dominant. Because the women of the family are constantly compared with and/or called “dirty Mexicans,” the novel “constantly asserts the respectability, white complexion, lady-like qualities and beauty of the Ballesteros-Ríos [sic] women” (Oliver 288). The father is very strict in his education of the girls in order to produce respectable ladies.

However, while the women try to conform and be the “right kind” of women, they are always at risk, because of the intersection of race and class with gender, of being seen as the “wrong kind” of women. “The stigmatized figure of the dark, indigenous woman produced by colonial discourse hovers over the lives of Valentina and her sisters as a reminder of what they may become in the eyes of others if they do not assert the ‘proper’ womanhood” (Oliver 288).

When her older brother moves away and her father dies, Valentina sees the vulnerability of her mother, who is, at times, at the mercy of her tenants and business rivals, and she uses Valentina to keep the family solvent. Although her father had insisted, while he was alive, upon an education for his daughters, her mother finally agrees to allow Valentina to drop out of school in order to work the physically-demanding walnut harvest to keep the family afloat. Although Valentina eventually earns a beautician’s license and builds a loyal clientele, her fiancé Frank tells her that she will not be able to work once they marry, and she agrees. After Valentina and Frank marry, she no longer works outside the home, despite the fact that she had wanted to escape the life of her mother, to find someone to take her away from the “barbary area.” In this sense, Valentina replicates her own mother’s life. And although Frank and Valentina had said they would have six children, she eventually gives birth to nine.

Part One of *Victuum* reads, in some ways, like many of the early examples of Chicana/o literature. Ríos highlights the plight of women within Chicano culture and families; she represents the cultural biases against Chicanos in the West; she narrates the disenfranchisement of Chicanos following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; as a counternarrative, she provides a rich familial and cultural history. In the course of discussing the gender politics of the family, she also contextualizes the familial saga within national and international politics. According to Annie Eysturoy, “The protagonist [in a *Bildungsroman*] has to measure his or her emerging self

against the values and spirit of a particular social context, representative of an age and a culture” (6). Further, the development of the individual in the novel reflects this *Zeitgeist*. And the traditional *Bildungsroman* “steers [the protagonist] toward an acquiescence to existing social values and norms” (9). If the goal of the *Bildungsroman* is to represent the socialization of the protagonist into a fully-integrated citizen, then the male *Bildungsroman* shows the male successfully internalizing masculine values and pursuits. However, if a female is to be socialized into femininity, domesticity, and maternity, how, then, does a female *Bildungsroman* construct a narrative of someone who may well reject such rôles?

From a traditional perspective, then, Part One of *Victuum* makes for a standard narrative. A young girl grows up in a gendered family, and she learns her domestic rôle. She meets a young man and falls in love, and is devastated when he cheats on her. She then meets another young man and they marry and have children together. Such an ending would have been satisfactory for many novels. However, Ríos refuses to accept such an ending. One might argue that, given the time in which the novel was set, no other ending was possible (Oliver 290). However, Ríos, dissatisfied with such an ending, writes *beyond* the ending (in Rachel Blau du Plessis’s terms), as Oliver notes (290), to imagine something else for Isabella, in particular, and for society, in general.

Apart from the shift in content and the inclusion of “nonethnic” genres and themes (Christian), *Victuum* differs from other Chicano novels of the time in its form. While many of the early Chicano novels utilized a traditional, linear, realist form, *Victuum* is highly fragmented, both in content and style. Since the events of the novel are told (almost) entirely through the eyes of Valentina, we are limited in our access to certain characters and many events. And although some critics have asserted that Ríos includes every mundane detail of every day of the child’s

life, in fact, Valentina leaves many gaps, some quite large, without comment or explanation. This fragmentation represents the process through which Valentina attempts to make sense of the world around her. From the broken bits of conversations overheard, listened in on, and picked up while drifting in and out of sleep, this child learns of her family, history, and politics. But as with any child, the information is not presented or learned in any logical, linear, coherent fashion. Instead, she must stitch it together from scraps of information. This fragmentation is reinforced at the sentence level, as nearly every page holds a dozen or more ellipses.¹³

In *Latino Fiction and the Modernist Imagination*, John Christie argues that the play of narrative forms, the play between modernist and postmodernist narrative styles, suits the Latina/o writer, and enables him/her to “shock readers ‘into new ways of perceiving the world’” (12). Therefore, if modernism attempts to disrupt reader’s preconceptions and practices, and if the alternative perspectives and practices are/were more significant to already marginalized peoples—i.e. those in positions of privilege and power had few reasons to shock readers into new modes of perception—then, some have argued, women were especially cognizant of the need for such an alternative perspectives and practices. Women writers, according to Ellen Friedman “‘look forward, often beyond culture, beyond patriarchy, into the unknown, the outlawed’” (Christie 17). Christie suggests that the same might be said about Latina/o writers, that rebelliousness of thought often parallels stylistic innovation. Christie suggests that this holds true for Latino and Latina writers: that the former tend to hold a nostalgia for the past, and the latter tend to imagine the possibilities of the future.

John Christie reads through Juan Bruce-Novoa and his idea of “retrospace”: his idea that the space of the Chicano is the space between the U.S. and Mexico, between the U.S. and Latin America.¹⁴ According to Bruce-Novoa, the tensions in this space are productive. Anzaldúa

writes of writing from ““crackled spaces”” and writes of Nepantla (“one torn between two ways”). According to Christie, “modern Latino writers willingly inhabit and write about a border state, a liminal territory signaled by any number of catchy phrases from ‘Life on the Hyphen’ to ‘Cultural Schizophrenia’” (4). Certainly the young Valentina finds herself in such a “retrospace”: she is caught between male and female, in between the dangers of the home and the dangers of the street, in between Mexican and Unitedstatian. Such an ontological position leads Valentina to imagine a new space, a new ontology. And while Latina/o writers have imagined this space in a number of ways, through a number of metaphors, relatively few of them have employed the metaphors of science fiction.

In *Cosmos latinos*, Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán suggest that “SF is generally seen to be the purview of countries that are world leaders in scientific research and development, and Latin American and Mediterranean countries are often perceived as being mostly consumers, if not victims, of technology” (1). Their assertion rests, I would contend, upon a fairly limited conception of science fiction, one centered around the high-tech versions of the genre, a conception fueled largely by mainstream representations of SF such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *The Terminator*, *Babylon 5*, and so on. Science fiction, however, is hardly limited to such forms. Bell and Molina-Gavilán also suggest that, while Anglophone SF has an enormous and undeniable impact on SF within Latin America, the next most significant influence comes from within, from the tradition of literature and science fiction within Latin America. They have a long and rich history of writers, a dedicated body of fans, and a core of publications. All these help shape SF in Latin America (2-3). A corollary can be made, I think, for Chicana/o SF: the influence of Anglophone literature and culture is undeniable—and the resistance to that influence is also clear. However, whatever science fiction that does emerge from US Latinas/os and

Chicanas/os is also shaped by the traditions and conventions of US Latino and Chicano literature.

In *Show and Tell*, Karen Christian writes that “the narratives that construct the nation are characterized by tension between the historical, nationalist myths of origin and the contemporary, everyday performances of the people’s daily lives” (15). “Ethnicity is thus located in the contested territory where past, present, and future converge” (15). In this sense, then, science fiction would be the metaphor *par excellence* for Latina/o literature, or ethnic literature.

Although Francisco Lomelí suggests that, while *Victuum* is *sui generis*, he also says that it partakes of the conventions of, among other forms, science fiction (“Isabella” 50).¹⁵ And indeed, I finally found a copy for purchase on the science fiction shelves of a Portland, Oregon bookseller.¹⁶ And despite the fact that one of the more cynical definitions of science fiction is that whatever is marketed and sold as science fiction is, in fact science fiction, I think a more rigorous definition is in order. As Robert Scholes points out in his *Structural Fabulation*, the function of art (at least since the Romantic period) is to create a sense of “defamiliarization or estrangement” so that the viewer/reader can “see the world freshly” (46). Others, like Darko Suvin, argue that science fiction is the genre for which this “defamiliarization or estrangement” is particularly constitutive. According to Suvin, that which makes science fiction science fiction is the introduction of a “novum,” some new element introduced into the narrative field that produces the defamiliarization. The novum can be introduced into the field of the actants, the topography (which includes geography and technology), the social order, or natural laws. While any one work may contain more than one novum, one of them will function as the dominant, and thereby determine the type of narrative. While Part One of *Victuum* exhibits none of the defamiliarization techniques of science fiction—i.e., the actants, social order, topography, and

natural laws are all quite familiar, Part Two introduces nova into all four of the constitutive elements of fiction.

While Part One ends with Valentina getting married, Part Two picks up several years later, when she already has several children. Although the veil that she was born with promised that she would be connected with the spiritual world, that connection had largely lain dormant until Part Two, wherein she begins to have contact with spirits, including her mother, who warns her, for example, that her baby is about to fall off the bed. She also has precognitive dreams. One such dream forewarns Valentina of her sister's death. She also discovers that she can "communicate" with others, including her husband, merely by thinking "real hard" (277). Concerned about these abilities, she obtains some pamphlets from a cult, though they seem sacrilegious to her, and she throws them away. Valentina then receives her first "visitor," Ulyseus (which seems to be a combination of Odysseus and Ulysses). He takes her on a long, metaphysical journey through time, in order to show her "knowledge of man's ability to survive. Human beings house the most powerful element on this earth...the human brain" (285). Furthermore, he tells her that he is her protector.

Following the visit by Ulyseus, she visits with many others, including Julio del Gano (a family friend), Pope Eusebius, Pope John the Twenty-Third, Medusa, Aedauis, Penelope, William Wordsworth, Andrew Jackson, John F. Kennedy, and others. As each visitor appears to her, she sees or visits different places and different moments in time. She visits a pre-historic earth, during a time when the plants and animals were gigantic; she sees visits a future city of 2070 that incorporates rounded lines, pleasing colors, plant life, and comfort. Valentina finds the entire city "indescribably beautiful" (302). She is also visited by the inventor of the Morgan Motor (presumably H. F. S. Morgan), who is appalled by the way engineers build obsolescence

into their designs. Instead, he provides her with a design for efficient and safe, futuristic automobile that employs a rotary engine (315-7). Isaiah also appears to Valentina, and he takes her to a time when the continents of Africa and Australia were still connected. At that time, humans lived in harmony with the land and animals; men and women lived in equality. However, the splendor and harmony being to decay when the beings turn away from the Supreme Being. Noah then reinforces the same point by showing her Babylon (323). The experiences all feel quite real to Valentina, and they are, at times, overwhelming for her. But she is reminded that “all that you have envisioned are only dreams” (319).

The alien *Victuum* appears in a “dome-shaped craft,” though she initially takes him for a child (319). He is temporarily stranded on Earth and is awaiting rescue. After Valentina sees the images presented to her by Isaiah and Noah, she yearns for enlightenment. *Victuum* then appears to her, not in the flesh this time but through telecommunication or “projected thought” (325). When she asks him to, he “appears” in her mind. He is a representative of the “universal unit,” a specie from another universe. The alien *Victuum* takes Valentina on one last journey, one that “will enhance [her] search for wisdom” (325). He explains to her that the Supreme Being (and, indeed, everything) is comprised of sound, the basic unit of which is called *minimux*. The basic units of sound are sexed (male and female) and they combine to form “linkage patterns” (327). The links are forced together, becoming more massive and condensing into matter. Therefore, everything is comprised of circular masses of linkages of sound, and each has a different energy that determines its form. According to *Victuum*, “To know the existence of sound is to recognize the scientific knowledge of the human brain. For all creation is living sound. The creation of the human being may not be separated from the creation of its planet and the creation of its universe. Each formation consists of its own multiple *minimux*,

mathematically in constant change and constant motion” (335).¹⁷

The advanced brain has the ability to communicate directly through projection, which can occur over distance without time (336). The corollary is “astro-traveling,” which explains how Valentina has “traveled” on all of her journeys through time and space. *Victuum* explains that the mind is composed of universal sound and is, therefore, capable of universal control. It can control the decay of tangible matter, which means that it can “prevent death indefinitely” (337). According to him, “the human being’s brain capacity is infinite. The brain may perform extra-sensory perception; thereby know all languages; it may enact hypnotism, healing, elevation of self, other individuals, or objects through control of magnetic gravitational force; it may accomplish disappearance and reappearance; reincarnation, astro-traveling and the encountering of visions. All these faculties may be developed through deep meditation and concentration” (338).

Despite all the potential of human beings, *Victuum* fears for the future of the species. According to his doomsday scenario, the fighting in Israel will divide nations, an atheistic leader in Africa will rise up and unite the continent, which will combine with China and Russia and they will discover a force ever more destructive than the atom bomb. All is not lost, however. Several key discoveries of materials will allow for the creation of future cities that will be marvels of housing units, appliances, lighting, artwork, theater, transportation, illness and medicine, and crime detection.

In the final chapter of the novel, *Victuum* tells Valentina that another star will be orbiting into an influential position, one that will be “emanating extra-sensory perception” and “projecting sound of femininity” (345). Those who are particularly advanced, particularly attuned will detect this influence and be changed. They will combine and form a new Yellow

Race, the result of “the mating of the Caucasian [sic] and Negroid races” (345). In his final words to Valentina, Victuum tells her that “the necessity to combine spiritual and scientific progress is the realization of the human being” (345).

Annie Eysturoy suggests that Part One of the novel functions as an external quest for social identity and that Part Two functions as an internal quest for personal identity. It is true that Valentina’s spiritual abilities lay dormant—with a few momentary exceptions—in Part One and are awakened or actualized following her mother’s death. This transformation could be read as a movement into her own identity. And it is also true that in Part One Valentina is almost entirely within the structure of the family and/or the community, while Valentina finds herself largely on her own in Part Two. Her family has moved on or died off; her relatives have died off; she and her husband have moved several times; and Valentina is trapped within the home, raising eight children. However, while the psychic quest may be internal, it is also a vision of a profoundly different social structure and a profoundly different scientific knowledge. In this sense, Valentina does attempt to envision a space outside the patriarchal constraints we see imposed upon her throughout her childhood and adulthood in the persons of her father, her husband, and her community. But she does not only seek a personal space, nor a personal alternative, but rather a fundamentally different universal order, one which will integrate all people into Vasconcelos’ *raza cósmica*.¹⁸

Throughout the novel, via form and content, Ríos has undermined traditional, masculine models: narrative voice, authority, social inequities, etc. She has simultaneously valorized certain feminine concepts or practices, including the domestic space, the lives of girls and women, and non-empirical modes of knowing. As Lomelí also suggests, Valentina does not acquire

knowledge through empirical means (though she does go to school and learn things and she does study with her father and her voice teacher), though what she learns at school and at home is of no use to her. Instead, her true education occurs when “she acquires knowledge through less empirical means, for example, dreams, visions, and trances” (“Isabella” 50). Valentina’s journeys through time and space have shown her the destructive outcomes of masculine social structures. It requires an alien, someone from without the ideological space of humanity, a true Other, to propose another way to see and another way to be. He suggests to her that a star that projects “feminitude” will transform, at the very least, those who are able to perceive it. One might object that it is a male who guides Valentina to these realizations, though the sex imposed upon *Victuum* is, at least in part, a fiction imposed by Valentina. What sex the universal units have is not certain, though he does tell that the basic units of sound are divided into two sexes, male and female. At an earlier pointing the narrative, Valentina was unable to easily place one of her visitors into a neat gender category (301). With the alien *Victuum*, she perceives “him” as male, though that may well be a product of her own cultural expectations.

The few critics who have written about the novel have speculated about the significance of the title character’s name. For example, Saldívar suggests that the name *Victuum* suggests “victim,” which has been Valentina’s ontological state, particularly in Part One. Eysturoy, on the other hand, argues that *victum* is the “accusative case of *victus*, which is the supine tense of *vincere*, to conquer.” As a “verbal noun, *victus* becomes equivalent to [. . .] *victor*, one who defeats or vanquishes an adversary, a winner; respectively, in the accusative case, *victum* can be translated as ‘to the winner’” (53-4). Perhaps. The concept of “winner,” however, seems rooted in the masculine, individualistic tradition that the novel challenges. *Victuum* does tell Valentina that some individuals will progress, will develop their mental capacities to the level of the

universal unit. As Vasconcelos posits in *La raza cósmica*, over time differences will disappear and a “fifth universal race” will appear (9).¹⁹ This new “synthetic race that shall gather all the treasures of History in order to give expression to universal desire shall be created” (18). Vasconcelos argues that we will transform ourselves, that we will leave behind a “material or warlike” and “intellectual or political” past and move toward a “spiritual or aesthetic” future. In significant ways, the city described by *Victuum* bears a resemblance to Vasconcelos’s Universopolis. While Vasconcelos consciously wants to reject the “fantasy of the novelist” and embrace instead the “facts of history and science” (8), Ríos adopts the fictional form. And in *Victuum*, the universal unit and the newly emerging synthetic humans represent a triumph.

Ríos has adopted the generic tropes of the science fiction novel in order to illuminate and speculate the possibilities of a different epistemological and ontological space. Growing up and living in Oxnard, California, Ríos and her family experienced the institutional and individual racism of living in a country that so easily abrogates its own treaties. She simultaneously experienced the dangers of being female in a patriarchal culture and family. The introduction of the nova into the narrative field allows Ríos to speculate about other social structures, other epistemologies, other *sciences*. While the introduction of the alien, *Victuum*, does allow us to question our interactions with and acceptance of difference, I do not think this element is the dominant element of the novel. While the introduction of the alternative model of “science” allows us to question our models and metaphors for understanding the world around us, this is not the dominant, either. The introduction of another social model is, arguably, the most significant element of Part Two.

It is interesting that so many Chicana writers, in attempting to envision and articulate alternative social structures, so often turn to an indigenous past: to the pre-patriarchal goddesses,

to the historical figure of Doña Marina. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La frontera* and Ana Castillo in *Massacre of the Dreamers* look to pre-patriarchal society for alternative social structures. And if a critic or an artist is attempting to imagine an alternative to their current socio-political standing, if they are looking for a time when they were held in esteem, when they were worshipped, then the turn to the past makes sense. At the same time, as I mentioned in the introduction, it is arguable that so few Chican@ and Latin@ writers have turned to science as a theoretical or artistic space of speculation and vision because they feel as though science has not been used in their own best interest. And, indeed, the history within the US of the ways in which governments and corporations have utilized science and technology against Chican@s are legion. And yet, Isabella Ríos turns, not to a pre-Conquest past, but to the set of metaphors known as science fiction. In this sense, it could be argued that Ríos foreshadows Donna Haraway's cyborg consciousness: "I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (106).

Victuum is a difficult read. Ríos challenges so many of our cultural and aesthetic assumptions that we're not quite sure what to make of it. She defies expectations of narrative structure and style. She defies expectations of Chican@ literature. But through this novel, she opens up a new space for Chican@ writers and a new space for Chicana identity.

Notes

¹ ["It is not enough for us to adapt to a society that changes on the surface and yet remains unchanged at its root. It is not enough for us to imitate the models that are given to us and that are the result of situations different from ours. It is not even enough for us to describe ourselves. We must invent ourselves."]

² See the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, which is part of Arte Público Press, for example. The goal of the Project is to recover the literary heritage of Hispanics in the U.S., dating from 1808 to 1960.

³ According to Rolando Hinojosa, the "defining moment for contemporary Mexican American literature came in 1967. A group of young men and women at the University of California at Berkeley established Quinto Sol Publications and its journal, *El Grito*" (28). The publisher offered a prize for the best work each year. They were won by Tomás Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, and Rolando Hinojosa. All three of these writers had a college education. It was common that Chicano presses were located at universities: Quinto Sol (Berkeley), Arte Público (Houston), Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe (Arizona State). As the university-based presses continued to produce works, and these works were largely consumed by university audiences, the students began to press more and more for institutional and curricular changes (29).

⁴ See, for example, Mary Helen Ponce. Among the early poets, she includes Ángela de Hoyos, Bernice Zamora, Alma Luz Villanueva, Inés Hernández Tovar, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Carmen Tafolla, Margarita Coda-Cárdenas, and Estela Portillo Trambley.

⁵ For a more comprehensive bibliography, see my website at: <<http://ms.cc.sunysb.edu/~rcalvink/latinaolit.html>>.

⁶ ["This novel is little known and somewhat confusing."] And indeed, neither Amazon.com nor abebooks.com lists the book.

⁷ Consider, for example, the many feminist utopias and dystopias, including *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915), *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1969), *Les Guérillères* by Monique Wittig (1969), *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ (1975), *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976), *Don't Bite the Sun* by Tanith Lee (1976), *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985), *The Shore of Women* by Pamela Sargent (1986), and *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sherri S. Tepper (1988).

⁸ For example, HarperCollins has launched a line called Harper Libros; Vintage has created Vintage Español, and Grove Press has also begun to publish for the Spanish reading public (Carvajal).

⁹ In "Chicanas' Contemporary Constructions of Autobiographical Texts," María Henríquez Betancour suggests that a new and unique form of the Chicana autobiographical novel emerged in the 1980s, specifically that in which the narrative is told by a first-person child. "In this sense, the immediate environment is part of the child's world. That is to say, the main point of reference is the barrio which is normally the most commonly named place in Chicanas' writings. It includes characters inside and outside the family, recurrent patriarchal attitudes to life, culture and women as well as everyday habits like cooking, playing in the street or going to school" (173). Clearly, Ríos is already engaged in a similar project in 1974.

¹⁰ *A Dance with the Eucalyptus* (1995).

¹¹ As Antonio C. Márquez notes, "The blurring of the distinction between fiction and autobiography has contributed to the expansion of Chicana/o literature by creating a form that quite appropriately reflects the problematic nature of Chicano life and culture" (212).

¹² The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, ceded nearly half the Mexican nation over to the U.S. The area ceded under the Treaty would become Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Oregon. The tens of thousand of Mexicans living in that area became U.S. citizens over night. While their rights, land, and language were protected by the Treaty, many were quickly dispossessed of all three.

¹³ A random opening of the book provides the following example:

"A mere ten...for such sheer delight...nonsense...I give so little...while you give so much! I must go...but my friend...I don't want, that you should worry...always remember you are my friend and I will take care of you, all of you...so help God...I promise you if anything should happen...God forbid...why, remember I will be there to take care of all of you...I have money...and you've given me such happiness...with music...with the best friendship...has given...all of you...you are my family!...Now I must go...I'll see you soon, friend...hurry and get well, you must compose...A maestro cannot rest! Right?" (144)

¹⁴ Luis Leal argues much the same in "Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective."

¹⁵ Lomelí, and others, have suggested that *Victuum* bears a certain resemblance to another early Chicano novel, *Blessing from Above* by Arthur Tenorio. Like *Victuum*, *Blessing* appears to have been self-published. According to the title page, the novel was published by the West Las Vegas Schools' Press in 1971. Both novels *do* contain an

alien, and a “male” one at that. *Blessing* centers around the alien “Nifty” who is “found” in the bush in Africa by two missionaries, taken in and raised and educated by the Wellsons. When they are posted to a new mission, they take their “son” to a friend in Jocunda, the capital city of the fictional country Morunda. Morunda is struggling with agricultural and economic development, though once Nifty arrives and begins working for a government agency, each of its crises are “solved” by Nifty, though he never takes credit. Eventually, Morunda becomes a global model for development, and the aliens come down to Earth to make their presence known. They decide, in the end, to withdraw and continue to monitor Earth since we are not yet ready to join the larger community. So, in both cases, the scientifically- and politically-advanced aliens attempt to interact with humans. While in *Blessing*, the alien Nifty assumes a physical form—like an incarnation or avatar from the god-like aliens—in *Victuum*, the interaction remains at an abstract level.

¹⁶ According to George Hay, “Science fiction is what you find on the shelves in the library marked science fiction.”

¹⁷ In a Borgesina move, *Victuum* describes for Valentina the system of writing used by the universal unit. After writing his name as two small dots, he explains, ““Each dot is measured by its radius. The radial measurement of each dot represents a concept or word. The measurement of distance between positioned dots represents numerous concepts of words. Therefore, the topic has the largest radius: *Victuum*. The smaller dot to the top left is my title: Prince. Other varying dots in their exact measured positions surround in circular formation and relate to the topic”” (335).

¹⁸ And, indeed, Lomelí asserts that the storyline exemplifies a search for a cosmic self that goes beyond the cultural context of works such as *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (“Chicana” 40).

¹⁹ Of course, Vasconcelos’s formulations have received considerable criticism over the years. He calls the Native Americans “primitives” who have been “civilized” by Christianity (5). He also says the Chinese, under the guidance of Confucious, “multiply like mice” (19). He remarks on the “remainder of the sickly Muslim sensuality” (22). Furthermore, the eventuality of—or even the desirability of—a cosmic race is questionable.

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