

Ethnic, Feminist, Universal?: Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*

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Abstract

Helena María Viramontes's Under the Feet of Jesus is an ethnic and feminist bildungsroman that depicts an adolescent Mexican-American girl surviving underclass economic status as a migrant agricultural worker while simultaneously trying to break free of proscriptive gender roles. With its preoccupation with the specific issues of ethnicity and gender what claims can this text make as universal literature? This paper will address both the ethnic-feminist character of the novel and the question of the universality of Chicana Literature.

Keywords: Ethnic Literature, Universal Literature, Feminism, Gender, Chicana, Mexican-American.

The Chicana Text, the Feminist Text

Feminist texts take several forms but they all contribute to carving out a feminine literary space. "Gynocritics" is the term Elaine Showalter proposes for a feminist criticism concerned with "woman as reader" and "woman as writer" (in Adams, 1992: 1225-6). For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar the "woman as writer" replaces and fills the gap of women's "lost literary matrilineage" (in Adams, 1992: 1238).

But both of these monumental treatises on Feminist Literature leave out the issues of minority feminists who were left out of the early feminist theories of literature in the same manner that, as Valerie Bryson, intones "they [women of color] have often been written out of history" (1999: 59). Equally interested in the *ethnic* situatedness of the author, Mary Louise Pratt places Viramontes alongside a sisterhood of literary mothers, such as Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherríe Moraga, who have "undertaken to create not only rich and immensely variegated accounts of women's experience, but alternative visions of Chicano culture that set aside the polarizations that gave rise to the code of national brotherhood and the curse of La Malinche" (1993: 871). Chicano Literature has long been used to refer to literature by both sexes about or by ethnically-Mexican Americans. But today many women authors and readers make a clear distinction between Chicano Literature and Chicana Literature, the

latter either authored by ethnically-Mexican women or focusing on feminist themes specific to their ethnicity. *Under the Feet of Jesus* fits both criteria.

Nevertheless, feminist critics of all ethnicities can praise the text for its feminocentric narrative. The novel portrays the (re)claiming of female space and the triumph of maternal power. To emphasize the resilience and strength of women all of the central male characters, though not demonized, are absent, emasculated, effete, or too sick to be anything more than a liability or undependable. Estrella's father has abandoned the family, at which point she becomes a surrogate mother to her siblings and "the twins started calling her mama" (Viramontes, 1996: 13). Alejo becomes deathly ill, unable to even stand on his own. His cousin Gumecindo selfishly leaves Alejo with Estrella's family so that he can get back to Texas. Perfecto is a geriatric "phantom of a man" (Viramontes, 1996: 117) who is also contemplating leaving his adopted family in search of a nostalgic fantasy of home.

The female characters must carve out their own space in a male-dominated world that has failed them. The very bungalow that they are living in throughout most of the novel initially appears to be a place where "only men had stayed" (Viramontes, 1996: 8)—lacking what it takes to be a home. The void left in the paternal space, previously occupied by Estrella's father, is at least partially filled by Perfecto but during and after the climactic clinic scene it is obvious, whether he leaves or not, that men cannot be counted on to consistently maintain this space. We can assume that Petra is not pregnant by immaculate conception, Perfecto has been instrumental in this, but he is not dependable. It is left to the women to fill the spaces vacated by men.

In contrast to the weak and nonexistent patriarchal ties, the matriarchal continuity is unbroken, a fact that is self-evident in this narrative where men come and go while the women maintain stability in the family. The strength and reliability of matriarchal ties is symbolized by the doily under the feet of Jesus that "had been crocheted by Petra's grandmother and given to her as a gift" (Viramontes, 1996: 165). Petra contemplates the thoughts of her grandmother as she crocheted the doily, under which lay the family's documents, proof of American citizenship—though they remain second-class citizens. Of the two items, the doily is more significant—at least in the narrative—than the family documents. The doily is a maternal family heirloom that has been passed down through "las mujeres de la familia [the women of the family]" (Viramontes, 1996: 165)—the symbol of the maternal continuity that maintains the family.

Other than the doily/document references the only other title reference in the text appears when Estrella is on the roof of the barn and "The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus" (Viramontes, 1996: 175). The image maps onto Petra the prophesied power to end the patriarchal curse of Genesis, of which the serpent is symbol. Under the feet of Jesus lies the symbol of maternal strength, a comforting, protecting source of immense power—power enough to crush enemies underfoot yet used more constructively to "summon home all those who strayed" (Viramontes, 1996: 176).

Born in a Barn

The key symbol of contested male/female space is the barn. Perfecto, tries to keep Estrella from entering this space. “[Y]ou have no business in the barn” (Viramontes, 1996: 14-15), he tells her. The barn becomes a feminine space in the novel; allegorically it represents the female body. Perfecto’s desire to control access to the barn and his intention to exploit it economically are a reflection of machismo and the patriarchal desire to control the female body. Estrella’s mother is warned of the gendered power dynamics of machismo: “To run away from your husband would be a mistake. He would stalk her and her children, not because he wanted them back, they proposed, but because it was a slap in the face, and he would swear over the seventh beer that he would find her and kill them all” (Viramontes, 1996: 13).

Perfecto’s desire—like that described in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848): “The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production....to be exploited” (in Tucker, 1978: 488)—is to exploit the barn space with Estrella’s complicity: “Can you help tear down the barn? Perfecto asked. He was not a man who minced words” (Viramontes, 1996: 73). “I thought I had no business in the barn, Estrella replied. She walked over to its shade. I thought you said it was dangerous” (Viramontes, 1996: 74). The penumbra cast by the barn brings out her androgynous qualities: “It’s not fair, Estrella said. Except for the dress she’d pulled over her work clothes, she resembled a young man, standing in the barn’s shadow.” Estrella will traverse this space and claim it as female space. She interpellates Perfecto’s desire to tear down the barn: “Why does the barn have to go down?” To which he replies, “Someone died there.” (Perfecto and Mercedes’s—his first wife—first child was stillborn, [Viramontes 1996: 80].) Estrella stands firm: “No. I can’t do it” (Viramontes, 1996: 76).

Perfecto mentions the barn job (tearing it down will generate income) once more when Estrella comes to him to plead that they take Alejo to the clinic, but she does not reply. As they are taking Alejo from the clinic to the hospital Estrella has a change of heart, “We’ll tear down the barn starting tomorrow, right Perfecto?” (Viramontes, 1996: 153); but she has agreed to it on her own terms and for her own reasons, not because of Perfecto’s coercion.

The barn is a spiritual place: “the barn, a cathedral of a building” (Viramontes, 1996: 9). Moreover, it is a feminine space. Estrella will soon begin menstruation, her womb will be fertile and her motherly, nurturing role will be extended. The barn, too, bleeds—“droplets of blood slowly trailed” (Viramontes, 1996: 22-3)—either menstruating or miscarrying when the mysterious fetus-like (because he is not fully formed) harelip boy falls and scrapes himself. The barn is both symbol of the female body and symbol of the social construction of gender. Estrella’s tearing down of the barn will not so much demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice her symbolic female body for the survival of the family as her overstepping the bounds of gendered discourse.

The final barn scene is a symbolic birth, an affirmation of maternal strength. From the beginning of the scene the imagery begins to accumulate: “The inside was dark and dank” (Viramontes, 1996: 174). The dangling chain,

leading to the trapdoor, becomes an umbilical cord. She moved “toward the trapdoor. Estrella tried pushing, palms up, but the door only moaned.” As she pushes her way through the door, “The light broke through [*dar luz a*, to “give light to,” is the Spanish phrase for giving birth] and the cool evening air pierced the stifling heat of the loft....She heaved herself up into the panorama of the skies as if she were climbing out of a box” (Viramontes, 1996: 175). At which point, “The roof tilted downward and she felt gravity pulling,” much as a newborn, previously suspended in amniotic fluid, would feel the full weight of gravity for the first time.

Maternal love supercedes erotic love because it is more loyal (Viramontes, 1996: 118) and it is aware of responsibility to community and not just self (Viramontes, 1996: 17). It is this motherly love that motivates Petra to care for Alejo in opposition to Perfecto’s doubts: “If we don’t take care of each other, who would take care of us? Petra asked. We have to look out for our own” (Viramontes, 1996: 96). And, later, she chides Perfecto, “tell me I’m crazy. But don’t tell me that. Don’t tell me I can’t [help Alejo]” (Viramontes, 1996: 98). The narrator later tells us that, “Petra took care of Alejo, not because of who he was, but because she was a mother too” (Viramontes, 1996: 124). Perfecto insists that, “He’s not our responsibility” (Viramontes, 1996: 142) and though Petra seems to acquiesce in word at the clinic, she never shirks responsibility in deed.

It is important not to gloss over the line, “Okay, she said to her other self.” (Viramontes, 1996: 172), in the barn/birth scene. The protagonist’s second self is a theme of the novel. The bifurcation of self is a tool for stepping outside of the social discourses and roles that constrain her. The earlier, climactic clinic scene depicts a moment of consciousness as Estrella makes full use of Perfecto’s tools, tools that Perfecto has not been able to fully utilize.

Estrella recalls what Alejo has told her about the origins of gasoline and she makes the connection between the family’s labor and an economic privilege that the nurse takes for granted:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway....Their bones. Why couldn’t the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her (Viramontes, 1996: 148).

With crowbar in hand Estrella demands their money back from the nurse who diagnoses Alejo as being in need of hospitalization but has taken (as payment for her services the) money the family needs for gasoline to get him there. Estrella has to break a few things before the nurse finally returns the money and at that moment, “She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money” (Viramontes, 1996: 150). The scene depicts not only a moment of consciousness but of double consciousness.

The birth of double consciousness, similar to that described by W.E.B. DuBois, is a necessary coping device for those existing as minorities under the shadow of a dominant culture. Estrella's second, empowered self has the maternal power not only to save herself but also to nourish and rescue others. The presence of the twin characters, Cookie and Perla, both foreshadows and resonates the theme of the double self.

The text's initial explanation of Estrella's behavior indicates that the second self is brought into existence by the cognitive dissonance of oppression: "They make you that way....You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you" (Viramontes, 1996: 151). In Fanon's view the "decolonization [of the psyche] is always a violent phenomenon" (Viramontes, 1996: 35). But Estrella's violent act—exacted only on things and images (the nurse's family pictures)—does not advocate violence against people. The ability to threaten violence—the demonstration of force or power—is what liberates, not violence itself. Violence is one way to re-till psychic space but to irrigate the field with blood is far more damaging to the self than it is beneficial.

The final scene of the novel gives a different reading to the existence of the other self. The other self can be thought of as potential identities—which allow Estrella to slip the yoke of ethnic, gendered, and racial discourses which position her abjectly in the social matrix.

In this sense—liberation from gender roles, while also affirming the positive values of matriarchy—we can answer the novel's opening question, "Had they been heading for the barn all along?" (Viramontes, 1996: 3), with a vigorous nod in the affirmative. Petra is with child as the novel closes and Estrella, whose name means "star" in Spanish, is on the top of the barn with the strength to "summon home" the ethnic community (Viramontes, 1996: 176).

The Ethnically-Mexican Home

On the road to greater social and gender consciousness Estrella must question the narratives of neocolonial consumer packaging, unattainable racialized (Anglo) images of beauty, and the injustice of a phenotypically-marked class system where her mother has to remind her: "Don't let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they pull you into the green vans [used to capture undocumented workers] you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them" (Viramontes, 1996: 63).

But legal citizenship is not enough. Being able to claim the United States of America as their legal home doesn't prevent the racial, economic, and linguistic discrimination that poor Mexican Americans confront on a daily basis. Citizenship doesn't guarantee that you will have a house to live in—a socioeconomic reality that makes the problem of identifying "home" a central trope of the novel.

Home is where Perfecto longs to return. Unfortunately, his notion of home is a nostalgic past, impossible to attain (Viramontes, 1996: 82-3). Home is where Alejo needs to be taken so that he can be healed. A "stay in one place"

(Viramontes, 1996: 154) home is what the child, Ricky, longs for. All of the characters want and need to go home.

The home that is desired in the above instances is similar to Foucault's notion of heterotopias: "places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable" (1998: 178). Such a localizable home can be the domicile founded by arresting the "wandering in a strange world that had outlawed their [Mexican Americans] culture and distorted their history (Baca, 1992: 25).

But for the migrant workers home is less localizable in geographic place—their nomadic existence precludes it. Theirs is a more protean space such as in James Clifford's notion of "traveling identities" or "Culture as travel" (1992: 103) where the question is "Not so much 'where are you from?' but 'where are you between?'" (The intercultural identity question.)" (1992: 109). In a perpetual diasporic state fragmented by "Exits and Entrances" (Viramontes, 1996: 89) and pockmarked by "destinations, of arrivals and departures, of home and not home" (Viramontes, 1996: 55) they live in a world where one place can never serve more than ephemerally as a home site. Under these conditions home cannot be external to the self. Home must be inside—located in the body and the psyche. Turtle-like, migrant workers carry home with them at all times. In being denied a permanent space (as in cultural acceptance or heterogeneous integration) and place (as in land), many Mexican Americans have learned to carry home inside.

Insofar as home remains less geographically localizable and more cognitively defined, the migrant workers—despite the vagaries of nationalism, which needs to assign home to one side or the other of a political border—are emblematic, though an exaggeration, of the priority of ethnic identity over geographic place. Like the majority of Mexican Americans who settle in one place, their citizenship represents a physical place, while they exist primarily in an ethnic space—one that is postnational, beyond the imagined communities that Benedict Anderson exposes as being essentialized in the form of nations with borders: "nation: it is an imagined political community....It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). Mexican Americans and Mexicans in the United States and nearest its border are particularly aware of how, "culturally, Mexican immigration reveals the artificiality of national and political boundaries (Marciel and Herrera-Sobek, 1998: 4).

The U.S.-Mexican border has been systematically molded into an imaginary line that not only traces the Rio Grande/Bravo or abuts Tijuana but is also phenotypically drawn on the bodies of Mexican Americans. America is a nation that has historically considered itself a nation of, almost exclusively, Anglos. The flip side of this is that non-Anglos are regarded as sub-citizens or non-citizens. Arjun Appadurai reminds us that, "Insofar as actually existing nation-states rest on some implicit idea of ethnic coherence as the basis of state sovereignty, they are bound to minoritize, degrade, penalize, murder, or expel

those seen to be ethnically minor” (1996: 56). But, despite the official national borders, ethnic diversity is the rule and not the exception in America. Appadurai adds, “It may well be that the greatest peculiarity of the modern nation-state was the idea that territorial boundaries could indefinitely sustain the fiction of national ethnic singularity” (1996: 58).

It is precisely such liminal border zones, this in-between literary “state,” where Chicana literature carves itself out. Emma Pérez has said of history, “I believe that the time lag between colonial and postcolonial can be conceptualized as the decolonial imaginary...this is precisely where Chicana history finds itself today” (1999: 6). Pérez argues that: “Ultimately, the point is to move beyond colonialist history by implementing the decolonial imaginary with a third space feminist critique to arrive finally at postcoloniality, where postnational identities may surface” (1999: 125).

When the reader witnesses one of the characters “nodding his head as if he had known that Texas was part of the United States all along” we are reminded that the imagined nature of nation, though grounded in geography, can sometimes be trumped by racial, cultural, ideological (such as religious identities), ethnic, and linguistic space.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus* home is spiritual and incorporeal; it exists symbolically in the realm of matriarchy, whether or not it is extended to biological motherhood. Home is not “a player [who] ran the bases for the point. A score. Destination: home plate” (Viramontes, 1996: 60). Estrella realizes that home is right here, in Aztlán [the mythical Aztec homeland], or anywhere in the United States that Mexican Americans lay their heads—that the borders to be contested and crossed are structured in the psyche and social geography more than on any map. Perfecto is captured thinking “of his own children, grown now with children of their own, and wondered where they were, which side of the border they settled in, wondered how he had managed to stray so far away and for so long” (Viramontes, 1996: 102). He is worried that he may have forgotten his way home (Viramontes, 1996: 79) but, in fact, he is already home—he just doesn’t realize it.

Universal Literature

Can an unmistakably ethnic and feminist Chicana Literature text also lay claim to universality? Laura Mercado has said of Viramontes’s previous work: “She wrote about my neighborhood, but in a way so sophisticated that I was shocked that someone from such a similar background to mine had words that were so universal” (1994: 183). What makes *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Les Misérables* universal and *Under the Feet of Jesus* exclusively ethnic? *The Grapes of Wrath* is told in a regionally specific, marginalized dialect and *Les Misérables* privileges bicultural readers, as is immediately evidenced by the fact that the title is always presented untranslated to Anglophone readers—the type who love French historical settings. All three novels are concerned with the universal human condition, of social injustice and oppression; all three are threaded with biblical (universal to the West) themes and allusions; all three focus on one family to make the particular and regional, universal.

The failure of Chicana Literature to achieve status as “universal” literature is not attributable to an arguable whiteness that by virtue of ethnic or racial hegemony retains a monopoly on canonicity. In fact ethnic and feminist literature is currently privileged in the major American literary journals disproportionate to the demographics of authors whose work is rejected. This is in part due to the demographics of a sophisticated readership who want to read about that which is novel and unfamiliar to them—so that ethnic literature always has an edge—and in part the effect of the selective power of editors who award surplus literary merit to “multicultural” authorship and themes. This is not to say that they devalue other works of literature but that they may be prone to overvaluing multicultural texts in the same way that pastoral themes and settings were once more in vogue than urban ones and that free verse today is privileged over poetry that is jingly and constrained by meter.

One reason that Chicana literature has yet to win a Nobel Prize is lag. It takes time (and a little luck amongst the vagaries of canon selection) for today’s writing from the margins to become tomorrow’s classic. A second reason is that of genre classification. When a piece of literature is rooted in ethnic and marginal themes the current marketing and disciplinary trend is to label it as Ethnic Literature. But this can cognitively, if not categorically, exclude all literature under this rubric from consideration as “universal literature” or literature that treats universal themes.

Some Ethnic texts are heavily invested in the differences between a particular ethnic group and everyone else, further alienating all texts associated with that text by classification. Identity politics can paint ethnic texts into a corner, though that need not be the case as the universal appeal of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* demonstrates. *Beloved* is a text that though rooted in the historical and identity specifics of a particular racial and ethnic group, also taps universal themes and is concerned with the human condition in general. Toni Morrison was later awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Like African Americans, Mexican Americans continue to exist as an underclass in the United States. Ramírez and Therrien’s report, “The Hispanic Population in the United States: March 2000,” shows that non-Hispanic Whites are four times as likely to have a bachelor’s degree (28 and 7 percent, respectively) as Mexican Americans and only about half of Mexican Americans will attain at least a high school education. Only 23 percent of Hispanics (all Latinos, including Cubans and Puerto Ricans) have annual earnings of \$35,000 or more, compared with over twice that proportion, 49 percent, for Whites while Hispanics are nearly twice as likely to be laborers or operators (22 percent to the 12 percent for Whites). At the other end of the scale one must factor in the overrepresentation of Mexican Americans in poverty (23 percent are below the poverty line versus 8 percent for Anglos) and in prisons—Blacks and Hispanics make up over three-fourths of the New York state prison population but less than 29 percent of the general population.

Regardless of whatever myriad and intertwined factors create these epiphenomena, the statistics paint a clear picture of Mexican Americans as a racial and ethnic group that is also a disadvantaged socioeconomic class. Of course, one cannot assume that writers emerging from this group will be

representative of the class demographics. In fact they are most likely to be skewed toward the more educated and privileged end of the curve. Nevertheless, by virtue of linguistic, racial, and ethnic affiliation—as well as commonality of life experiences—Mexican American writers have historically been more interested in their experiences as an ethnic underclass than as members of a more global community of humankind—though appeals to liberal humanism, or basic human rights, are made to condemn racist and other discriminatory structures.

This preoccupation with American social and linguistic contexts need not completely eliminate Ethnic texts from appealing to a wider readership. But many of these texts depend on the linguistic subversion of the English language, through the use of untranslated Spanish, hybrid words, and code-switching, for their power. The subversive aspect is the refusal to translate or provide a glossary for monolingual readers—those who speak only English. Authors wishing to appeal to readers outside of the United States will have to be willing to forsake this device and supply a glossary for such words. Texts that are floated almost exclusively by the linguistic subversion of English with Spanish and Spanglish will sink in a more global venue.

Conclusion

With the added dimension of minority feminist issues Chicana literature still tends to be more heavily vested in identity politics than in appealing to a larger, more universal, audience. There are, of course, notable exceptions that manage to balance the two and bring out the universal in the specifics of Chicana experience, such as Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Another text, one that is not Chicana Literature, but is ethnic, feminist and universal, as well as lyrical and gratifyingly literary, is Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: a Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*. All three texts are contemporary literature, published in the 1990's.

In his appeal to post-positivist realism as a more sophisticated theory of social identity Michael R. Hames-García reminds us that, "Literature by racial and ethnic minorities can offer something to members of other cultural groups. These insights are not simply 'relative' to a particular social location but rather can be binding on those of other social groups" (2000: 102).

Chicana texts such as *Under the Feet of Jesus* offer a lot to a global readership—it is just a matter of time, good translation, and distribution.

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