

**CONSTRUCTING AND PROJECTING SELF-IMAGE.
THE RELEVANCE OF ETHNICITY AND GENDER
IN CONTEMPORARY CHICANA FICTION¹**

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Abstract. *The study starts from the premise that the fascination exerted by Chicana fiction comes, quite counterintuitively so, from a psychoanalyzable need of identification with alterity. In order to establish what the reader is in fact supposed to identify with in the case of Chicana fiction, an examination of the elements which constitute that very specificity which makes the formation of identity possible must be carried out. Once having established that what lies at the innermost core of Chicana fiction is the ethnicity and gender binary, the former's place in the literary tradition is explained, in light of the deeply rooted political and ideological struggle that fuels these writings and the combative and resilient women who stand behind the text. The present study argues that it is only by deconstructing patriarchal worldviews and the oppressive framework pushed down on these representatives of 'marginality' by the so-called 'center', thus building a renewed perception of self in the process, that Chicanas may build a valid sense of identity for themselves.*

Keywords: *self-image, ethnicity, gender, Chicana identity, alterity.*

*A Brief Explanation
of Chicana Fiction's Improbable Popularity*

Without question, the fascination that the field of Chicana/o Studies in general and Chicana / o fiction in particular has exerted in recent years on critics, academics, and readers alike, as well as its ever-growing notoriety among the more unsuspecting public – namely those aficionados who are less familiar with the sociocultural background of this literary phenomenon, yet seem completely

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taken with it nonetheless – has quite a large number of valid explanations. Yet perhaps the simplest of all remains the basic psychological mechanism of *identification*: the mysterious, yet undeniably strong pull towards that which is considered “alien”, strange, and exotic. In short, one might argue that the key element which draws the general public towards a kind of fiction which tackles intensely specific, thematically restrictive existential experiences is in fact the very enthrallment of alterity.

But before analyzing the process of *identification* and the manner in which readers of different ethnicities, coming from markedly dissimilar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, can relate to the experiences of Mexican-American women of the barrio, for instance, one must make a few necessary comments on the notion of *identity* itself and the crucial role it plays in defining the essence of Chicana fiction. As such, one must first and foremost establish the elements which, put together following a unique recipe of belonging and distinctiveness, constitute that *specificity* which makes the formation of *identity* possible. This recipe is of course complex and multifaceted, yet two are the essential, sine qua non components which make the end result hold and prevent it from disintegrating. These two components, ostensible as they may be seem by glancing at the word *Chicana* for the first time, are as important to correctly and fully grasping the literary phenomenon they define as they are obvious. Indeed, what constitutes the identity foundation of Chicana fiction is the *ethnicity* and *gender* binary – quite unsurprisingly, Mexican-American-ness and femininity are what stands at the core of an up-and-coming breed of literature written by women of bidirectional ethnic heritage.

Ever since its inception, Chicana/o fiction was marginalized by the promoters of the so-called ‘high’ culture, being often dismissed as *less than*, dispensable to the literary tradition, irrelevant to the large public – a public defined with the white, male, wealthy, and heterosexual model-reader in mind. As such, it was treated as an exotic, niche breed of literature at best and as non-literature at worst. Regardless of motive, the result of this ‘center / margins’ type of dichotomy has been, without exception, the exclusion of Chicana fiction from the literary canon altogether, in an attempt to delegitimize and discredit a kind of literature deeply rooted in a political and ideological struggle. Thus, by denying Chicana fiction its place in the literary tradition and by deeming it aesthetically valueless, the patriarchal, center-oriented critical establishment hoped to render its extra-literary agenda silent and ultimately nip its aspirations in the bud. As seminal Chicana/o critic Francisco Lomeli² puts it:

In essence, some considered it a bastard child since its contemporary manifestations were closely linked to barrio lifestyle, oral tradition and protest pamphleteerism along with conservable mythifications and, heaven forbid, a social conscience. Naysayers tended to emphasize its decentralized optics of possible subversion and an insistent heterodoxy in terms of thematics and world view. In fact, some even questioned if it was literature at all.

² In his latest article, “Chican@ Literary Imagination: A Trajectory and Evolution of Canon Building from the Margins”.

*Deciphering the Ideology behind La Lucha:
Why Is Chicana Identity So Problematic?*

There is contradiction and opposition at the very core of Chicana identity, stemming not just from the Chicana's complicated relationship with the world (namely the retrograde status quo, with academia serving as its most powerful bastion), but (perhaps especially) with herself. Escaping categorization and voluntarily rejecting any type of restrictive classification and / or labelling, Chicana literature started defining itself by means of difference rather than similarity. As such, the Chicana group came into existence as a means of drawing attention to a niche within a niche, breaking away from the ideals and guidelines of the Chicano Movement by identifying itself as a reaction to a lacking system. Even inside their own ethnic cultural group, Chicanas felt underrepresented and, once again, 'alien'. To a certain extent, the very movement that was fighting to bring down patriarchalism as a worldview (i.e. idealizing the center and demonizing periphery as substandard) had managed to transform its female members into a historical footnote by ignoring them altogether. Since they felt betrayed by the Chicano Movement as a male-driven quest which did not deal with the status of women in its midst, Chicanas managed to forge their own identity as a reaction to this underrepresentation.

Chicanas write in opposition to the symbolic representations of the Chicano movement that did not include them. Chicanas write in opposition to a hegemonic feminist discourse that places gender as a variable separate from that of race and class. Chicanas write in opposition to academics, whether mainstream or postmodern, who have never fully recognized them as subjects, as active agents.³

However, defining themselves as women of hyphenated, thus hybrid identity (a mixture of Mexican descent and environmental exposure to the American society – be it called Mexican-America, Chicana, mestiza or by any other name, depending on a number of variables and nuances) was not the end of the road for the Chicanas, but rather the beginning of a deeply refined and highly complicated quest for identity. Resisting categorization, the one element that the Chicana identity group does exhibit as a common denominator is heterogeneity in all its forms and at various levels. Highly diverse in their individual self-definitions, ideological affiliation to one school of thought or another, socioeconomic class and personal ethnic histories, the members of the Chicana group never fail to make a strong political point. Thus, Chicana fiction, diverse and heterogeneous as it may be, is always sure to send a message that goes beyond mere aesthetic entertainment.

It can even be argued that the 'art for art's sake' dictum might seem almost blasphemous when it comes to Chicana writers. Their writing is, without exception, packed with messianic intentions and underlying historical trauma. Their hybrid identity bleeds through the text and becomes the very soul of Chicana narrative.

³ Teresa Córdova, "Roots and Resistance: The Emergent Writings of Twenty Years of Chicana Feminist Struggle", in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Sociology*. Ed. Félix Padilla, Arte Público Press and Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, Houston, 1994: 175-202.

Nothing is ever uncomplicated when it comes to this particular breed of literature – not because it is intensely and vulgarly politicized / ideologized, but precisely because it is not. It is what lacks from the actual text, what remains unspoken and merely hinted at, that haunts the reader's conscience the longest. Once the seed of doubt (hidden in the very fabric of the text) hits the bountiful soil of an inquisitive mind (the reader's), meaningful questions arise. A sensitive reader cannot help but wonder how the formation of such tormented self-perception has been influenced by the socioeconomic context, by the transnational perspective, by gender disparities, by cultural marginalization, by lacking a sense of belonging. It is fairly easy to conclude that all these elements are the very recipe that led to the forging of so unique a conglomerate that is contemporary Chicana identity.

Having thus established that the Chicana consciousness is something extremely manifold and difficult to define, it becomes more and more obvious why a great majority of Chicana/o critics deem traditional, mainly European (and thus Eurocentric), center-oriented critical approaches unfit to use as valid theoretical tools in analyzing Chicana literature. Therefore, what many such critics emphasize is the necessity of rethinking theory in order to better accommodate this altogether new and perplexing type of literature that the Chicana / o identity group has produced. As Chicana feminist Norma Alarcón⁴ argues:

La perspectiva crítica sólo surge claramente cuando no existe una tradición que recoja nuestra propia actitud y cuando uno se da cuenta de que se enfrenta a una tradición extraña a la que nunca ha pertenecido o a la que ya no acepta sin cuestionar.

Las principales actitudes literarias chicanas, tanto de hombres como de mujeres, se reúnen en torno a la búsqueda de la autodeterminación, la autodefinición, junto con un proceso de autoinvención en los intersticios de varias culturas.

The themes and topics that populate the Chicana literary universe are as diverse as they are compelling and provocative. Characters and situations are never unilateral, artificial, pretentious or untrue to the authors' own personal backgrounds and identity struggles. Without resorting to magical realism as a defining genre, Chicana novels are often occupied by a type of hidden, impossible-to-pinpoint magical substrate. A somewhat mysterious identity group, the Chicanas/os have always been a source of fascination and puzzlement for outsiders, for those who did not share their hybrid spirit and intricate genealogy. Symbolic inhabitants of Aztlán, their mythical and mystical (half real, half imaginary) Aztec homeland, the Chicanas/os belong to the physical world only partially, inasmuch as their borderless ancestry allows them to. Part Mexican-American, part heirs to a mysterious native land that they only inhabit fictionally and at an oniric level, the Chicanas/os manage to both fascinate and perplex outsiders.

Whether this acknowledgement of otherness manifests itself positively (as fascination and idealization) or negatively (as repulsion or fear), the inadequateness of the approach remains: the Chicana / o is either exoticized or demonized; either

⁴ Norma Alarcón, "La literatura chicana: un reto sexual y racial del proletariado", in *Mujer y literatura mexicana y chicana. Culturas en contacto*. Eds. Aralia López González et al. México: El Colegio de México, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1990: 207-212.

way, objective and knowledgeable assessment eludes the outsider completely. This is where Chicana/o fiction comes in: by way of narrative discourse, it aims at clearing up some essential aspects regarding Chicana/o identity. Writing and reading prove cathartic acts for both author and reader, as the fictional world often becomes the window into a reality far more accurate and poignant than any sociological or anthropological account.

*The Role of Myth in Forging A Sense of Belonging:
Between Aztlán and Coatlicue State*

Returning to the mythical space of Aztlán, it is part curious, part understandable and psychoanalytically explainable that the lead figure of Chicana feminism, writer Gloria Anzaldúa, rejects this spatial representation of redemption and belonging as a predominantly male construct, a safe haven that excludes women by omission. For the Chicanas, the revolt against colonization does not stop at an ethnic and cultural level; their struggle continues to brew inside the very Chicana/o identity group that they belong to, both racially and culturally. Anzaldúa proposes replacing this space, built according to male notions of nationalism, with the ‘Coatlicue State’ – an empowering, highly feminized concept of geography. According to Norma Khlan⁵, this ‘Coatlicue State’ can be read as the very point of origin of a renewed identity:

An empowering myth, it re-turns to the origins, inscribing a fe-male remembering of the community intent on retrieving a cultural sense of self erased through colonization. [...] From this plurilingual, multicultural space built by the layering of histories of conquest, imperialism, and diaspora, a “new mestiza consciousness” is born, one that contests the patriarchal hierarchies deeply entrenched in the imagined community.

In order to escape marginalization, namely the direct effects of the politics of xenophobia and homophobia that have long characterized the Eurocentric male-centered canon, what Chicanas need most in a shift in perspective – not just as far as criticism is concerned, but especially in terms of self-perception. The colonization of the mind, first theorized by Frantz Fanon in his most influential work *Black Skin, White Masks*⁶, is the one obstacle that prevents Chicana identity from truly taking literary and conceptual form. The line between literature and reality is blurred, which is why a number of Chicana writers, from Sandra Cisneros to Stella Pope Duarte, use autobiographical fiction as a means of exorcising personal demons and reasserting their own hybrid identities. Regardless of literary form or structure, the message that transcends the text is often one and the same: discovering and reclaiming oneself is only possible once awareness enters the picture – ethnic awareness, gender awareness, self-awareness.

⁵ Norma Khlan, “Literary (Re)Mappings: Autobiographical (Dis)Placements by Chicana Writers”, in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*. Eds Gabriela F. Arredondo et al. Durham, Duke University Press, N.C., 2003: 114-146.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1952. [Published in English as *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).]

Therefore, it is by no means surprising that many Chicana novels depict coming-of-age stories, being narratively organized in the form of a Bildungsroman, with *The House on Mango Street* (1985) by Sandra Cisneros, *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986) by Denise Chávez, and *So Far from God* (1993) by Ana Castillo among the most famous. Having been part of a widely traditional, patriarchal culture for so long, Chicanas feel invisible and traumatized, victims of unspeakable abuses deemed ‘normal’ only because it had been ritualistically repeated until entering the mainstream of everyday practices. By daring to finally utter and therefore expose all that had been left unsaid throughout the lifelong experience of being a Chicana, this particular type of Bildungsroman becomes – as Annie O. Eysturoy argues in her book *Daughters of Self-Creation*⁷ – a “subversive act” in itself.

Unable to accept ethnic belonging as the only definitive reason for discrimination, the Chicanas form a subgroup within their own larger Chicana/o identity conglomerate, throwing gender in the mix as an indispensable element for a valid definition of their very essence. Remembering Gayatri Spivak’s famous text “Can the Subaltern Speak?”⁸, one cannot help but wonder at what point the “new mestiza consciousness”⁹ theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa actually emerged and which exactly was the decisive force that triggered it, causing it to take shape and enter the realm of the written text as a powerful literary manifesto. It becomes quite obvious that the Chicanas felt oppressed within the very group that was supposed to represent them and hold their best interests at heart. They were the subaltern (by adding the second layer of difference through gender) in a group already comprised of subalterns (in terms of ethnicity and racial / cultural dissimilarities), thus a subsection *twice* traumatized by the burden of invisibility and voicelessness: firstly by being Chicanas and secondly by being women.

*Fear and Bias: Further Elements
of Difference That Affect The Chicanas’ Sense of Self*

Sometimes additional elements are also part of the marginalization recipe: many of these women are part of the lower classes (so the sociopolitical aspects cannot be ignored) and/or belong to a sexual minority, as well, since Gloria Anzaldúa’s lesbianism has always been considered (by herself, declaratively, and by central Chicana/o critics) a key element of her writing and an important component of her identity. Being situated at the bottom of the abuse ladder, so to speak, or at the end of the trophic chain in terms of power can often result in despair and defeat. Not so for the Chicanas, who end up using the power of the oppressive environment and reluctant canon as a backfiring weapon. Embracing

⁷ Annie O. Eysturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1996.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, CA: Spinster/Aunt Lute, San Francisco, 1987.

difference, putting everything in writing, taking over the text, giving a voice to the voiceless through fiction becomes the very object of Chicana redemption. In short, it all becomes a tool of empowerment in the long run. An entirely new and interesting form of group identity is thus forged, going through all the stages that Ellen McCracken deems as essential in the “gendered construction of ethnic identity”¹⁰:

Group identity is forged both through internal shared experience and oppositionality to the Other. In its positive moments, it is affirmational, contestatory, and begins to achieve social reform. In its negative stages, however, it is exclusionary, individualist, and essentialist. [...] Many of these narratives strive for a dual oppositionality and often constitute a doubly subordinated culture.

Even the fact that the Chicana is supposed to define herself in opposition to her male counterpart is demeaning and highly restrictive in itself. Chicana writers that propose the discussion of female identity and individual women’s destinies in their works are painfully aware of the fact that women’s own image of self has been altered as a result of majority rule. Instead of being embraced and cherished, difference is often portrayed as a tumor that must be excised and never allowed to grow back again.

In Sandra Cisneros’ *The House of Mango Street*, poverty as yet another form of marginalization (this time social) becomes a central element to Chicanas’ oppression and voicelessness. It is the lack of money that makes Chicanas dependent on men, therefore reasserting male dominance and the women’s status as inferior, second-rate citizens. Actual violence (physical and sexual) is merely the way in which psychological dependence penetrates tangible reality.

Among the most raw and dramatic accounts is that of Esperanza’s rape, since it speaks volumes of the role that the Chicana is allowed in the confined society that men have designed for her: “He wouldn’t let me go. He said, I love you, I love you, Spanish girl.” (94). The Chicana is thus reduced to playing the part of the exoticized sexual object, without thoughts or feelings of her own – a soulless doll of Latin descent, meant to fleetingly fulfill male urges and then be discarded without a word. Interestingly enough, though, even if brute force is exercised by male actors, it appears that the moral authors of abuse are many times women in the community – friends, sisters, mothers –, who tell little girls idealized stories of love and what sexuality is really about: “They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong.” (94), obscuring the dangers and violence that male-centric society has in store for them.

By observing all the female characters on Mango Street in search of a personal role model, Cisneros’ Esperanza in fact manages to hold up a mirror and put together a disturbing portrait of the Chicana as a victim, the way she is revealed in relation to men and to a money-oriented society that has her marginalized, disenfranchised, and condemned to male dependence. The house, a protective space of refuge, which is supposed to reflect the very identity of the inhabitant

¹⁰ Ellen McCracken, *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1999.

and offer shelter in the face of adversity, replenishing one's energies, is a place of torment and imprisonment for fictional Chicanas – much as it is restrictive and condemning in the case of real-life Mexican-American women. By breaking the cycle of dependence and hence self-victimization, Esperanza offers hope (much like her name had suggested from the very beginning) to the entire Chicana group. When she understands that breaking free means accepting, embracing, and cherishing one's inherent difference as a source of empowerment, Esperanza offers the key to comprehending Chicana identity altogether. Not belonging with the mainstream, swimming against the current, gathering the courage to stand out from the submissive crowd are all ultimately steps towards the ultimate quest of finding oneself: "I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong" (101).

Torn between ancestral female models such as the Virgin of Guadalupe and the La Malinche / La Llorona mix, Chicanas are not offered the 'luxury' of having a personality of their own choosing, one which represents them correctly and which is true to their inner nature. Slaves to their own destiny, fictional Chicana characters are often echoes of real-life women whose destinies are in dire need of a literary voice. The virgin / whore dichotomy is often cited as quintessential to female identity even today, to the despair of Chicanas who wish to escape such a simplistic and reductionist perspective. What is even more disturbing is not the external imposition of such views on the women in the community, but embracing and even using this outdated pattern of assessment when it comes to self-perception and self-definition. To many Chicanas – representatives of the 'margins', who are yet to break free from the oppressive framework pushed down on them for centuries by the so-called 'center' –, building a renewed perception of self (one independent of patriarchal prejudices and stereotypes) is essential to forging a new, truly valid identity.

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