

## DYNAMICS BETWEEN 'OLD' AND 'NEW' ETHNICITIES AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN SANDRA CISNEROS' *CAMELO*

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### Abstract

The paper takes Candra Cisneros' epic semi-biographical novel *Caramelo* as a literary insight into dynamics between generations within a single ethnic (Chicano) community, and compares it against classics of the genre in its shifting definition of one's ethnic identity; here the postmodern approach of entwining fiction and fact and awarding them equal legitimacy mirrors the possibility of embracing multiple identities, as exemplified by the novel's protagonist.

There are two ways of looking at the issues that arise from differences between 'old' and 'new' ethnicities, depending on the relationship between the two groups: there is the often uneasy but never uninteresting, or irrelevant, interaction between various ethnic groups defined by the hierarchy set according to the chronological order in which the communities were established, and then there is a subtler variant thereof, existing within generations of the same ethnic group.<sup>1</sup> As every aspect of a community's life changes with the passing of time, the three to five generations of any ethnic group begin to form more distinct layers; observation of resulting differences in customs, problems and attitude offers one a greater understanding of the changing world as a whole - mainstream, integrating, and fringe communities alike - as the ethnic mindset often registers the shifts in general trends with greater sensitivity, especially in regards to the shift from the rural to the urban lifestyle. I propose to illustrate how the differences between 'the old' and 'the new' *within* ethnicities document and contribute to our understanding of the changing, modern world, using the most appropriate documentary medium - ethnic literature, of which, within the literature of the United States, the Chicano/Chicana corpus is the most varied, exhaustive, and telling.

*Caramelo* (or *puro cuento*) is the latest novel by the acclaimed writer Sandra Cisneros, best known for the 1984 *House on Mango Street*. *Caramelo* was published in 2002, eighteen years after Cisneros' breaking hit, and although it does retain some motives central to the *House on Mango Street*, this work of nine years in the making<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Monika Kaup, "The Architecture of Ethnicity in Chicano Literature", *American Literature*, 69.2(1997): 361-97.

<sup>2</sup> Cisneros' interview in *Identity Theory* (Robert Birnbaum, 4 December 2004.)

is truly epic in that it actually strives to depict the totality of the Mexican American experience in its myriad forms and variations resulting from a century of documented immigration and community establishment. As reviews aptly put it, millions of Mexican Americans live in the United States, but their stories vary and depend on how they got there. Numerous works are written from the perspective of either the second- or the third- generation Chicano or that of the newly arrived immigrant, but sweeping novels that combine the two quite different psyches are rare. Most Chicano novels focus on extended families since they are essential units of the Chicano community,<sup>3</sup> but whereas in most books the focus remains on a single generation, *Caramelo* gives equal attention to three generations of the Reyes family. In this it has something of a precedent in Arturo Islas' 1990 *Migrant Souls*, a richly layered history of the family Angel, but while its protagonist Josie through her youth and adulthood remains a family member as knowledgeable and influential as any other, Lala, the narrator of *Caramelo*, has a more powerful role despite her young age. What sets *Caramelo* apart from similarly themed books, however, is a curious insistence on the fickle nature of its narrative which enables Cisneros to realise the book's epic scope.

From the opening line - *tell me a story, even if it's a lie* (borrowed, as the author acknowledges, from an anthropological study of border dwellers)<sup>4</sup> - over constant reminders throughout the narrative that the memories and history we're reading may well be imperfectly remembered, borrowed from others, partially reconstructed and partially made up, to the concluding list of people whose life and family stories Cisneros wove into that of the Reyes,<sup>5</sup> it is clear that her choice of a common name for the family is meant to evoke more than a few remarks made in the book regarding their numbers and omnipresence or fictional royal ancestry. The Reyes are *all* migrant families of Mexican origin, as their ups and downs, happy and unhappy marriages, reverence and irreverence, successful and unsuccessful assimilations - in Mexican as well as American communities - reflect the truth that there is more to the Chicano/Chicana than what literature burdened with political aims would have one believe. The Reyes are everywhere and yet not typical, for there can be little to deem 'typical' in an ethnic community of over five generations and twenty million people.

Certainly, such an ambition - to represent a world and note endless variations of stories resulting from human interaction - provoked criticism that the book lacks focus that drove *House on Mango Street*,<sup>6</sup> but this may easily be explained through frequent references to tele- and fotonovelas such as *La Familia Burrón* which carry on for years with their often improbable convoluted plots. The telenovela format was even more intensely used in Ana Castillo's breathless 1993 novel *So Far From God* and the Mexicans' ve for such stories is mentioned almost without exception: Alejandro Murguía talks of his neighbourhood's *telenovela* mentality' which his alter ego of *This War Called Love* (2002) unsuccessfully tries to replace with cinematographic

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Vallejos, "Ritual Process and the Family in the Chicano Novel", *MELUS*, 10.4(1983):5-16; Teresa MacKenna, *Migrant Song: Politics and Process in Contemporary Chicano Literature*, UTP, 1997: 8-26

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border With Esperanza's Story*, Beacon Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Cisneros' interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Heidi Benson, 25 October, 2002.)

<sup>6</sup> Melanie Haupt, *Caramelo's* review in the *Austin Chronicle*, 4 October 2002.

achievements of the seventies' *Movimiento*.<sup>7</sup> Despite that, telenovelas are often replaced by romantic or adventurous films as preferred sources of storytelling, even identity. Where identity is concerned, escapism is understandable: unable to identify with either the American or Mexican communities and way of life - for Mexico, as *Caramelo* also shows, is just as burdened with racial and class issues as are the States, not to mention political and economic instability - some participants of the Chicano revolution looked towards the mythical past of Aztlan as a source of pride, essential to group - if not all human - survival. While some modern authors, especially the feminists such as Gloria Anzaldua or Estella Portillo Trambley used the spirits and symbols inherited from pre-Columbian and folk beliefs successfully in order to go against patriarchal and chauvinistic prejudices strongly present in their culture,<sup>8</sup> ultimate futility of addressing the mystical to deal with real life is frequently shown in works of fiction, notably for example in seduction and subsequent disillusion in Cisneros' 1991 *One Holy Night*. Telenovelas and films on the other hand - the myths of modern age which are permanently locked with real life in that they originate from it, exaggerate it, influence it, to take from it again - serve a constructive purpose in *Caramelo* in adding another layer of importance to the book's insistence on *cuentos*, pure stories, regardless of how much truth they carry.

Another, technical and possibly the most relevant layer, comes from the post-modernist desire to erase borders between fictional and actual life. What Cisneros does in *Caramelo* is make the research all novelists undertake to create credible or familiar backdrops to their characters' lives an integral part of her novel through a constant and exhaustive use of footnotes chronicling and detailing Mexico's history and celebrities - politicians, entertainers, or both. There has been much criticism regarding this move, mostly in that it ruins the book's already hazy focus, but I believe that the inclusion of footnotes, chronologies, and other intrusions of objective reality into the intensely subjective space of fiction writing make a very subtle yet very powerful point: by making background research as obvious on the page as the text of the narrative yet giving it a subordinate role of footnote, Cisneros makes it plain that *personal experience takes precedence over documented fact*. Indeed, historical and anthropological research shows that material objects documenting the past are subject to deliberate oblivion and more importantly falsification, and if this is the attitude towards minorities why not turn to anecdote as a channel for writing history. This practice threatens to result in nothing but destruction, but history and life can be changed because they are *human* dimensions of past and present, showing that categories such as time and space can belong to humans and be defined by them, instead of defining them.

While most Chicano/Chicana authors go as far as to deconstruct identities forced upon them by the border, *la frontera*, to rebuild a transcendental new one,<sup>9</sup> the story of Cisneros' Lala shows that one can change, replace, or discard identities as one wishes, or carry many at once. The border was, after all - like all entities seemingly greater than *fe* - created by humans, and can be undone by them. In the words of Arturo Islas, "The [family Angel] had not sailed across the ocean or ridden in wagons and trains

<sup>7</sup> Alejandro Murguía, *This War Called Love: Nine Stories*, City Lights Books, (2002): 99.

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Huerta, "Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth", CUP (2005): 140-141.

<sup>9</sup> Rosaura Sanchez, *Postmodernism and Chicano Literature*, Aztlan, 18(1987): 1-14.

across half a continent in search of a new life. They were migrant, not immigrant, souls. They surely and naturally went from one bloody side of the river to the other and into a land that just a few decades earlier had been Mexico.”<sup>10</sup> Islas’ characters admittedly define themselves as Children of the Border, but do so highly irreverently. To Lala the border is a place where sensations - colours, smells, and sounds, notably language - signify the change of cultures, but as the crossing is an annual ritual, its frequency diminishes the role of the border as a divider, let alone an ‘open wound’, a ‘scar’, ‘sore’, or ‘garbage dump’, as it has been called by various writers.<sup>11</sup> It serves to introduce us the issue of greatest importance in this novel, and that is family relations, or the lack thereof.

Cisneros’ themes, reflected by what Lala notices and deems important, are inter-generational family dynamics as well as those between women and men, and entwined issues of race, language and class. While the family Angel of *Migrant Souls* is divided on the issue of religion, a common motif in Chicano literature, the Reyes are perfectly unburdened by it, Catholicism and folk superstition alike: “In our house votive candles never flicker from bedroom bureaus night and day. No chubby statue of the baby Jesus dressed as the Santo Nino de Atocha... no dusty rosary swags across the wall above our beds... Nobody murmurs a novena, and no dinner demands we say grace. We don’t have ‘the fear’ swept from us with the broom. Nobody cures us of the evil eye with an egg.”<sup>12</sup> The only religious icon in their house was installed by Lala’s father Inocencio at the demand of grandmother Soledad despite protests from Lala’s mother Zoila. “Father is a true devotee of mothers, both mortal and divine,” Lala says, “though it could be argued that Mother is a mother too, but no one but Mother would argue her seniority over the other two.”<sup>13</sup> Inocencio’s worship of Soledad, often at the expense of his own wife, is only one of the conflicts sparking up in this family so full of competing authorities that they hardly need religious ones.

*Caramelo* exposes conflicts both between and within generations with particular care towards the role of women, a Cisneros forte. Whereas in Chicano classics religious attitudes influence the characters’ behaviour,<sup>14</sup> men and women of the Reyes family act according to values set not by that particular monolithic institution but by tensions between the traditional institution of the Mexican family and the changing cultures that surround it. This is also where the dichotomies of truth vs lies, story vs history, talk vs silence as investigated by Cisneros show their darker side. The stories that Lala narrates are of no less than five generations, incorporating six marriages, two of which forced by circumstances (pregnancy), two failed engagements, one of which secret, one secret common marriage, countless infidelities. Interestingly enough, most of the racial issues responsible for the failure or secrecy of unresolved relationships underline the oft-ignored prejudices against the *Indios* by Mexicans of real or fictional Spanish heritage, less so between Mexican Americans and *Anglos*, although they are barely present to analyse;

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<sup>10</sup> Arturo Islas, *Migrant Souls*, Avon Book, (1991): 164-65.

<sup>11</sup> Candida Hepworth, in *Beginning Ethnic American Literatures*, Manchester UP (2001): 20-211.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo*, Knopf (2002): 47.

<sup>13</sup> Cisneros, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Alberto Lopez Pulido, “Chicano religions through Chicano literature: Reinscribing Chicano religions as a hermeneutics of movement”, *Religion and Literature*, 35.2-3:67-81.

the names of non-Chicano additions to the Reyes family betray ethnic origin - Slavic and Far Eastern, respectively. The issue of language is likewise impossible to divorce from the question of class and personal dignity, equality of which makes or breaks *Caramelo* relationships. With stock motifs such as oppression by the Catholic Church or North American xenophobia omitted, also since the characters are not driven across the border for economic reasons and there are only minor instances of culture shock on Lala's part as she grows up and learns of the world outside her extended family, inter- and intra-generational dynamics of the family, *la familia*, are stripped to their basic units - parents and children - and entwined with those of gender.

Speaking of gender, men of *Caramelo* do not strike one as particularly strong, let alone threatening characters, as Cisneros makes painstaking note of obligatory chivalrous upbringing that forms them "feo, fuerte y formal", but the women are no apparent pillars of feminist empowerment either. The idea of family seems to have two rules - 'respect your elders' and 'do the right thing' - and everything else has to bend to accommodate them, causing repeated suffering, mostly on the part of women as they are through the biological fact of childbearing forced to stay inside families regardless of their quality, while the pressure on men seems to be mostly sociological: "No somos perros", "we are not dogs" is repeated to every generation of Reyes men as they prepare to abandon girls they got into trouble. The girls, now wives and mothers, are in turn bitter, especially as their husbands continue to pursue exotic women, all resulting in "stories that are not told".<sup>15</sup> Silence is the dangerous lie which Lala exorcises despite promises to stay silent, not ask questions (but to write is to ask questions, Cisneros notes), or tell stories the way their protagonists wish to be told, most notably grandmother Soledad.

The story of Soledad is the most prominent one in the book, overshadowing even that of Lala, and her life story is the story of her love for Narciso, the "first man who pays her a compliment" but who marries her out of obligation while his true passion lies in a wild independent woman unimpressed by his background. This Soledad knows but in the turn-of-the-century Mexico City she has no one else to turn to or bind with until her first son - Lala's father - is born and whom she becomes obsessively protective about. Her relationship with Narciso is based on silence, the dangerous lie, which Lala refuses to give in to as she narrates Narciso's persistent immaturity. The story of Soledad and Narciso mirrors in this loaded silence those of their parents, down to the need to remind one that men are not dogs. Soledad is damaged and goes on to perpetuate or foster damage in her children's nuptial lives, going as far as to ignore the fateful line when it comes to Inocencio's adolescent mistake and advising him to keep contact with his illegitimate family long after he has established a lawful and numerous one. Her pain caused by tolerance for erring men finds an outlet in torturing other women of her family - making Inocencio's wife Zoila suffer the way she did by telling her of his other family (noted by Zoila as "she didn't make it up this time!"),<sup>16</sup> or telling her own daughter that she hates her because she, unlike Soledad, "always did what she wanted with her life".<sup>17</sup> This exchange is later mirrored between Zoila and her daughter, Lala, but there a fundamental change between the ways in which Soledad and Zoila

<sup>15</sup> Cisneros, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Cisneros, 159.

<sup>17</sup> Cisneros, 377.

deal with their unfaithful husbands: Zoila - who I would believe was not insensitive to achievements of the *Movimiento* - confronts Inocencio in public (with success: "It was you I chose, over my own mother!" he says, "No Mexican man would choose his wife over his own mother!"),<sup>18</sup> and tells the story openly to Lala, while Inocencio pretends it never happened and even dares threaten Lala with the same old line about dogs when she merely suggests living outside a traditionally structured family of her own. Zoila also gets something of a revenge to Soledad but they manage to reconcile in their own way before the grandmother passes away; but this is not where Soledad's story resolves.

*Caramelo*'s final chapters are devoted to Lala as her own person, not just Inocencio's daughter or Soledad and Narciso's granddaughter. Lala is not what one would traditionally expect of a girl: tall, tomboyish, and an absolute disaster in the kitchen, she, like Esperanza of the *House on Mango Street* discovers her sense of self in story-telling.<sup>19</sup> She is also a modern adolescent full of ideas and impressions gathered from friends, no longer influenced by or confined to family alone, as Soledad and to a great degree Zoila had been, and has outgrown Esperanza's desire for a house; Lala needs more: "Already the house feels too small", she says, "like Alice after she ate the 'Eat Me' cookie".<sup>20</sup> That she is no longer drawing references from Mexican and Mexican-American culture alone is telling, as the observation is followed by a fight with her father who insists she follow the same route women before her had done: marriage or nothing; with the family or against it. "How will you live without your father and brothers to protect you?" he asks,<sup>21</sup> comparing her stubbornness to that of her mother's, but Inocencio's sister is also implied.

But Lala is wise, and she can learn from all, past and present. Her failed escape with the first boy who came along but whose Catholic upbringing gave him cold feet and ultimately drove him into yet another marriage by circumstance makes her believe that her father may have a point, but after hearing of his own cowardice, and later yet after a spiritual, possibly imaginary but certainly essential confrontation with her grandmother, Lala is transformed. She strikes a deal with her grandmother's spirit who promises to expel the rigid, possessive mindset from the family if her story is told, and Lala does so uncompromisingly. In doing so she becomes the heir and owner of her ancestors' slowly acquired experience and weaves it, like the novel's titular shawl, into a single story with all its ups and downs, truths and lies; and like the shawl's many uses, she can choose what knowledge to employ or what identity to assume, because, as her best friend Viva succinctly puts it, "You're the author of the telenovela of your life."<sup>22</sup>

As for the family - which is everything, as Lala is often told - it only works if it is open. *Caramelo* is optimistic; not only do the Reyes grow into a multiethnic family, but Inocencio also learns how to accept: "Then his old friend does the funky raza handshake with Father, like Chicano power, and... the same Father who calls Chicanos exagerados,

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<sup>18</sup> Cisneros, 312.

<sup>19</sup> Sally M. Giles, "Sandra Cisneros as Chicana Storyteller: Fictional Family (hi)stories in *Caramelo*", Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, August 2005, 45-48

<sup>20</sup> Cisneros, 390.

<sup>21</sup> Cisneros, 324.

<sup>22</sup> Cisneros, 331.

vulgarones, zoot-suiting... forgot-they-were-Mexican Mexicans, surprises us all. Father shakes the funky handshake back.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cisneros, 412.