
MADSEN, Deborah Lea


DOI : 10.1093/cwwrit/vpv009

Motherhood, maternity, and intergenerational relations have formed a popular vector for critics of ethnic women's writing for some time now, as Cristina Herrera acknowledges in the introduction to her study. Such an approach facilitates interpretations of such issues as ethnic feminine identity formation, prescriptive patriarchal stereotypes, and the family as a productive matrix of ethnic sociocultural roles. *Contemporary Chicana Literature: (Re)Writing the Maternal Script* integrates several of Herrera's previously published essays into an extensive account of contemporary Chicana literary engagements with these issues, highlighting in important ways the revisionist work achieved by these texts. Focusing on the cluster of character relations defined by maternity – grandmother, mother, daughter – Herrera shows the sustained critique of patriarchal Chicano “life scripts” as a dominant concern in contemporary Chicana literature. The first substantive chapter addresses the three central stereotypes of the Chicana mother (La Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Llorona) that support a cultural mythology of the mother as passive victim. Mother-daughter relations based on this mythology, Herrera cogently argues, are thematized as “a source of tension, frustration, and angst” (7) that have the potential to become a relationship of empowerment that nurtures agency when the life script of maternity is rewritten outside the polarities of good versus bad mothers, virgins versus whores.

Herrera's work is interpretive rather than theoretical; that is its strength as well as its limitation. In her acknowledgements she notes the motivational advice of one of her mentors to “push the analysis further,” and this advice could itself have been pushed further. The autobiographical vignette that opens the book sets the tone for the critical work that follows and structures a framework of approach that addresses “the mother-daughter relationship as a theme [that] stems from Chicana authors' lived experiences” (11). Herrera's work could, then, be more fully grounded in the literariness of the texts under discussion, in questions that raise the representational techniques deployed in texts that revise patriarchal narratives of feminine identities, and in a more theoretically-oriented investigation of how concepts such as “daughter,” “mother” and “the maternal” are constructed. While Herrera rightly observes that “[m]any existing mother-daughter theories have been formulated from the perspective of Anglo, middle-class women and do not adequately explain issues significant to Chicana women” (12-13), in her readings the concepts foundational to her interpretations tend to be treated as theoretically unproblematic. This tendency influences her rationale for the selection of her textual corpus; she explains, “The novels I have chosen are important because they demonstrate rich variation in the portrayal of mothers and the dynamics of the maternal relationship. The texts highlight that there is no universal way to theorize Chicana mother-daughter relationships” (30). Rather than an alternative approach to theorizing these relationships, Herrera focuses instead on the ways in which literary characters define key concepts such as motherhood and daughterhood. Consequently, an effort to theorize the fundamental concepts underpinning maternal relations beyond their thematization in selected fictional texts, and an account of the principles by which these literary thematizations and their socio-cultural impacts beyond the text are assumed in Herrera's arguments, would greatly enrich her textual interpretations and empower the “real world” implications of her conclusions.

Having said this, the strengths of Herrera's work are undeniable. She offers insightful and nuanced interpretations of selected canonical Chicana writers – through Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel* (1994), Ana Castillo's *The Guardians* (2007) and Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* (2002) – as well as the less known and relatively understudied novels, Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings* (2003) and Melinda Palacio's *Ocotillo Dreams* (2011). The specifics of Chicana mother-daughter
relationships are thoughtfully contextualized in her introduction in relation to other ethnic women's literatures (specifically African-American and Asian American writing) and Herrera goes on to offer a series of sensitive textual readings that highlight the interlocking structure of discriminatory discourses of classism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Indeed, her discussion of queer Chicana motherhood and patriarchal heterosexism, through the work of Cherrie Moraga and focused on Carla Trujillo's novel *What Night Brings*, offers a very productive model for critically embedding queer representations of sexual and gender formation in the context of allied “straight” texts. Here, and throughout her study, Cristina Herrera puts into question in important ways the matrix of discursive oppression that has historically shaped Chicana identities while illuminating the potentials for empowerment that lie in creative re-writings of this script.

DEBORAH L. MADSEN
University of Geneva