

REBOZOS RECONSIDERED: A DEAD END FOR CHICANO LITERATURE?

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There is a long literary distance between the rebozo (folkloric Mexican shawl) that is worn by Dorotea, the psychotic, vaguely victimized character in Juan Rulfo's masterpiece *Pedro Páramo* (1956) and the rebozo at the center of Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*. Dorotea carries an imaginary child in her rebozo, the inscrutable offspring of her dementia. She helps Pedro Páramo's son, Miguel, rape *all* the girls in Comala (this is the non-colorful form of Latin American magical realism that does not make it across the border). Dorotea is a haunting, disturbing character, and she appears in only a few scenes in a very short novel. The rebozo in *Caramelo*, in contrast, is a symbol of the story itself, representing the act of remembrance and the passing on of family history. There is no grotesque hallucination in the folds of the rebozo, no psychological turmoil, and one cannot help thinking that perhaps if there had been something else than artificial nostalgia somewhere in all the old-fashioned prettiness of its prose, the story «woven» from Cisneros's archetypal rebozo would have been able to hold rigorous literary standards.

Cisneros is the celebrated author of several books of poetry, a novella, *The House on Mango Street*, and a collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. In her poetry and in *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros displayed a playful command of narrative, empowering ideas and poetic language. *The House on Mango Street* is an accomplished, although uneven, adolescent story. *Mango Street* alone has sold more than two million copies, and Cisneros should be credited with empowering a generation of Latina girls who grew up in the 1990's, and who read the book in high school. In *Woman Hollering Creek*, Cisneros tackled «difficult» subjects such as adultery, internalized racism and AIDS. In the short story «Never

Marry a Mexican» Cisneros throws sexual politics upside down, and the assault on the moral and political foundations of heterosexual romance is daring.

Caramelo was launched in early September 2002, with the requisite marketing blitz. Cisneros began appearing on the cover of Latino-based magazines in costumes meant to complement *Caramelo's* celebration of the Mexican and the beautiful. Countless newspaper articles and magazine stories began devoting as much time –if not more– to non-literary matters: her special rebozos, her looks and her unconventional life, her purple-painted house etc., –the publicity photos adding fuel to the non-literary fire: Sandra in another colorful rebozo, this time with a tatoo or an umbrella as accessories; Sandra with another rebozo, this time wearing cowboy boots emblazoned with the Virgen de Guadalupe; Sandra decked out in Frida Kahlo wear in an Eisensteinian landscape of desert cacti. In a Warholian age in which art and commerce can so easily switch places, it is necessary to ask, «what is the product that Ms. Cisneros is selling?» In an article in *Book Magazine*, writer Dagoberto Gilb is quoted as saying: «Talking about Sandra Cisneros these days is like talking about Frida Kahlo.» That's a bit exaggerated, but there is some truth to that. Gilb, however, is not speaking of Frida Kahlo the woman and the extraordinary artist, but Frida the icon made safe for commercial consumption, emptied of the radical force of her art.

Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend* and Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*, both published around the same time as *Caramelo*, were held up to much more rigorous literary standards. Donna Tartt was taken to task for treading familiar literary territory and for revisiting her roots (her Southern Gothic roots), the same qualities that for the most part charmed reviewers of *Caramelo*. «Threads of a Colorful Family» ran the title of Ron Charles' glowing review of *Caramelo* in the *Christian Science Monitor* and Carol Memmott's equally glowing appraisal in *USA Today* was titled «*Caramelo* weaves a colorful tale.» Zadie Smith was chastised for not meeting her high literary ambitions, and because her novel was not as good as her first (shame on her!). But these double standards reek of patronizing political correctness. After all, Donna Tartt is the AntiKitsch, she wears stark designer clothes (no nostalgic Southern Belle fashions for her) and she doesn't smile for the camera. She is a serious writer. And Zadie Smith, even though she's racially-mixed, is British, and you know they are just more sophisticated over there. Underneath all the praise lavished on *Caramelo* there is an obvious paternalistic diplomacy, the idea that Latino writers should not be judged by the same standards as everybody else because Latina/o writers need to be tokenized. After all, it is much more politically expedient to praise a book like *Caramelo* because it confirms the worst stereotypes: that Latinos are simple, kitschy, colorful and picturesque, fundamentally unthreatening.

The main character in *Caramelo*, from whose point of view the story is told is named Lala, and her main purpose is to be unconvincingly «normal» and likable. She is, in fact, too unremarkable to follow through 433 pages. She does not make exciting company through countless hours in the house of fiction. Katherine Anne Porter, a writer who shared Cisneros's interest in romantic Mexican subjects, didn't

write about rebozos but she wrote about women who wore them. But even Porter's rebozo-clad beauties were more than picturesque –they were strong creatures and far from innocent. One is bewildered by Lala, a character whose maturity is questionable even as an adult, and, whose actions are so ruled by cultural instinct that by comparison Katherine Anne Porter's, and even D.H. Lawrence's Mexican modern primitives seem tame– «I get dressed, tie the Grandmother's caramelo rebozo on my head like a gypsy, and start sucking the fringe. It has the familiar sweet taste to it, like carrots, like camote, that calms me» (388). Rebozo chewing for relaxation is an inter-generational trait, one of the many wonders passed on through the wondrous rebozo. It seems clear sucking the rebozo brings the familiar taste that calms Lala, but it seems even clearer that Cisneros is not familiar with the anthropological and social meaning of the relation between rebozo and mouth for Indian Mexican women: they have to cover their mouths with their rebozo (and to chew if they wish) to prevent them from speaking in public. The idealization of the rebozo in order to characterize Lala as true Mexican woman is far from accurate; actually it is based on a false assumption of Mexican reality. On the other side, by the time Lala starts chewing on her rebozo for its calming effect you don't know who is more frightening, Rulfo's demented Dorotea or this strange woman with animalistic qualities. In Lala, D.H. Lawrence's blood primitive has morphed with a Harlequin heroine. This is Lala after she has draped the mythical caramelo rebozo on her lover Ernesto, and they are consummating their confounding attraction: «All the parts of me coming back from someplace before I was born, and me little and safe in the warmth of that name, well loved, myself again. The syllables making me arch and stretch like a cat, roll over with my belly showing, preen. And laugh out loud» (382). There are other instances of feline female behaviour, Lala's mother Soledad is described as such: «Like a dusty house cat, she stretched often and rubbed her lower back, and when she was lost in thought, she stroked her belly unaware she was stroking her belly. The body spoke and said just enough, but not too much» (165).

Caramelo is peopled with colorful characters with colorful names: Lala, Aunt Light-Skin, the Awful grandmother, the Little Grandfather, Uncle Baby, Tikis, Uncle Fat Face, Señor Coochie—the list goes on. By the 35th «chapter» you long for someone with a non-cutesey name. In Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* we encountered the mother of the adolescent Esperanza, whose hair «smells like bread» and in *Caramelo* our critical faculties are once again asked to be suspended as we are introduced to Catita's nameless «fat daughter» «who smells of chocolate». Catita herself smells «the same as the steamy dishcloth that holds the hot corn tortillas». In a novel bursting with the most stereotypical cultural references, even the improbable characters have to smell of their culture: bread, chocolate, dishcloths for hot corn tortillas. I'll buy that one when I read a French novel in which characters smell like *paté* and *camembert* cheese. All the focus on descriptions of traditional Mexican culture ring false, and it gets tiring – it is not enough that the characters are Mexicans, everything they do and everything around them has to hit you over the head with it. Cisneros creates a hyper-Mexicanized world in which excessive descriptions conspire to make the

cartoonish characters kitschy. In Mexico «stars open white and soft like fresh *bolillo* (18) bread,» (17) churches are «the color of flan,» (146) eyes are «tender and dark as *café de olla*» and babies have «limbs like *chorizo*» (196). In *The House on Mango Street* grandpa's feet are «fat and doughy like thick tamales» and in *Caramelo* it is the grandmother's feet that are «fat little tamales» (252).

Caramelo falls short of Cisneros's earlier work to the extent that it is not a novel in a novelistic sense; it is a series of vignettes strung together to make up for the fact that there is no plot or conflict, which would not be a problem if there were ideas or philosophy in their place. But there aren't. Lala's ruminations hardly qualify as philosophy: «It was only later when she was near the end of her life that she began to doubt what she'd actually seen and what she'd embroidered over time, because after a while the embroidery seems real and the real seems embroidery» (135). Lala is afflicted with a mild case of Proustian remembrance; unfortunately, it is of the tritest strain. What *Caramelo* does have plenty of is entire chapters comprised of pointless quaint situations. The chapter titles themselves need serious critical consideration: «He Who is Destined to be a Tamale,» «Nobody but Us Chickens,» «We Are Not Dogs» «Spic Spanish.»

It's hard to figure out what the point of this inexhaustible bombardment of cultural clichés is, because the only ideas that manage to escape from it are that Mexicans are not only simple but funny, and that, yes, they are part of North American society. But if you already know the latter, and find the former suspect, *Caramelo* doesn't make interesting company. You can spend your time reading one of those thick Russian novels that anyone is hesitant to pick up, for fear of feeling guilty if one does not finish it. Probably you already know that Anna Karenina kills herself, but you would like to find out how and why. Whereas in *Caramelo* it is already known no one was going to kill themselves or anyone else –killing and suicide is hard to make quaint, and when such things are dealt with in literary fiction we know we are in for a challenging philosophical and moral ride. The border-crossing ride that we are invited to take in *Caramelo* is one in which no difficult questions are posed, and nothing is challenged. When critical interrogation is lacking, the work is more accurately defined as popular/commercial fiction, not literary fiction. Which begs the question: why was Cisneros's *Caramelo* reviewed as if it were literary fiction? Why was it placed on the *Los Angeles Times* best books of the year next to Paul Auster and Umberto Eco?

Yxta Maya Murray's *The Conquest* also made *The Los Angeles Times* best books of 2002. Murray has accumulated vast amounts of praise for gritty depictions of barrio life in such works as the 1996 *Locas*, a novel about the pathetic lives of gangster girls (cholas) in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Echo Park. This epic tale of ignorance and gang warfare is narrated by a coterie of chola voices who all sound alike, a hydra-headed report from the gutter. This is Lucia, one of the hyperbolic cholas, in one of the countless moments of tough ghetto musings: «I was a slick little *jalapeña*, pop me in your mouth, cause sex is in a Mexican woman's blood, it comes natural, and I gave it to him crazy, wild with lots of noise, for as

long as he could take it so that he'd stay put by my side.» We are familiar with the cholos in *Locas* not only because they are stereotypes, but because we saw these same stereotypes on the screen a few years before in Allison Anders's 1994 loser melodrama *Mi Vida Loca*.

Murray assumes a similar coarse barrio narrative voice in Rita Zapata, the hood-rat character that tells the story of *What It Takes to Get to Vegas*. Rita Zapata speaks in a strange ghetto lingo that's not part of any barrio lexicon, referring to herself and other women as «putana(s)» (is the correct word *puta*?), and saying things like «I pushed my arms out against his, screamed filthies.» Rita's love interest, and her gold-digging ticket to Vegas, is boxer Guillermo Billy Navarro, a figure into which all popular stereotypes about the Latino male are packed. He is macho and unfaithful, brutish, and naturally lacks intelligence. Rita Zapata is his female counterpart—she is frivolous and hungry for sex, stifled and needy, but she fights, and even kills women for the love of her macho man. This is the offensively familiar masquerading as reality, art (or the lack thereof) imitating telenovelas and racist North American stereotypes. Like *Locas*, *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* is ostensibly a raw portrayal of tough ghetto life, but if so why do we need barrio catfights depicted in this way?: «I went over to the bed and got her by the hair. I pulled her off with one tug and she screamed like a trapped cat and I kept tugging. Her fat butt blubbed around and her breasts swung like bags and her feet with their Aztec red toenails gripped the floor. I wanted to smash her head into the wall, and I would have done it except for Billy getting behind me with his wet penis nudging me and his arms locking around my shoulders.»

What it Takes to Get to Vegas continues a legacy of the Mexican as boxer, a figure of social conscience in Hollywood's «social problem» films of the 1950's, and whose watered-down image survives in the television show *Resurrection Boulevard*. And of course there is the sexy thought of Oscar de la Hoya which haunts any contemporary imagining of Mexican boxers, and that will help sell it even if nothing interesting is actually imagined. We see the devolution of characterization if we turn to Jack London's short story «The Mexican,» in which boxer Felipe Rivera dreams of revolution and is infused with London's own melancholy socialist longings. In *Locas* and *What it Takes to Get to Vegas*, Maya Murray performs a ghetto ventriloquism that sounds off all the most damaging and unpleasant stereotypes about Mexican men and women. As a hopeful antidote, one can turn to Luis Rodríguez's *The Republic of East L.A.*, which proves that stories about the inner city can be populated by dignified and complex characters whose reality need not voyeuristically give credence to *Cops* or *Bad Boys*.¹

It's been decades since Mexican writers and filmmakers abandoned the glorification of rebozos (I don't think they were ever much into tamales). Rebozos

¹ Some fine contemporary writers, such as Gary Soto, Susan Straight, Dagoberto Gilb, Luis Rodríguez, Sesshu Foster and Marisela Norte, have also written about Chicanas/os within a working class context, in a not voyeuristical or simplistic way.

are plentiful in the *comedia ranchera* cinematic genre of the 1930's-40's, a rural musical filled with happy singing Mexicans in folkloric landscapes. Two of the most mythical rebozos were worn by two of the most high-cheekboned actresses of the Golden age of Mexican cinema, Dolores Del Río in Emilio «El Indio» Fernández's *María Candelaria* (1944) and Stella Inda in Roberto Gavaldón's *El Rebozo de Soledad* (1952). These cinematic rebozos were not simple indigenous fashion statements, they were melancholy symbols of everything that was Mexican and beautiful. Although they quickly became *cursi* and touristy, the artistry of the melodrama parading them transformed them into myth. But even those mythical rebozos were not a safe haven for the affirmation of traditional culture; the tragedies of modern social life ruthlessly invade the beautiful Mexican landscape, complicating the glamour of the rebozo—María Candelaria gets stoned by her own people, accused of being a whore, and Soledad dies giving birth. By the 1980's, when Mexican artists Jesusa Rodríguez and Astrid Hadad were reviving Mexican indigenous culture, folkloric motifs had become taboo in Mexican intellectual circles because of their association with reactionary politics and the tourist industry. But Rodríguez and Hadad didn't recover rebozos and Aztec goddesses in order to romanticize them, they re-interpreted them through irony and a satiric dark humor that was subversively relevant and contemporary.

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros evokes the romantic folklore of rebozos and tamales, so that Chicano culture can be portrayed as a cross between *María Candelaria* and a TV sitcom in the form of the American family saga. What needs critical reflection is Cisneros's rendering of the immigrant experience as slapstick, the transformation of Mexican-American working class history into a *comedia ranchera*. One is led to wonder if the older generations of Mexican immigrants who work and continue to contribute to American society are honored by exotic touristy portrayals? Most likely they are puzzled by Chicano writers who insist on being nostalgic for a folklore and a traditional culture that is more made up than real, more a product of the writer's self-indulgence than the lived experience of a historical Mexican community in the United States.

In the 1940's the great Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier argued against the false enchantments of surrealism by defining what he termed *lo real maravilloso*, a vision of reality that would truly represent Latin American history and society. Carpentier stated that the «presence» and «authority» of *lo real maravilloso* was «the patrimony of all the Americas.» But while the decades that followed Carpentier's prophetic literary assessment inspired Latin American writers to create some of the most masterful and imaginative literature of the 20th century, in the United States it produced Aztec princess jugglers (Yxta Maya Murray's *The Conquest*), dead children flying onto rooftops (Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*), waving dolls (Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*), and a glut of contrived oddities that were neither marvelous nor real. What Chicano «magical realism» lacked and which much of the literature has failed to incorporate is a critical perspective, an exploration of the dark or negative matter that is the true country of literary fiction. One can recall the terrifying beauty of José Donoso's macabre magical realism in *The Obscene Bird of Night* in order to

measure the unaccountable extent to which Carpentier's ideas of *lo real maravilloso* were trivialized and misinherited in the United States.

If we were to do a census of the people that populate contemporary Chicano literature a vast majority would be children trying to figure out their identity in coming of age stories. We often have young students, Latino or otherwise, in our Mexican literature course comment that what they are reading is not what they expected. When we ask what it was that they were expecting, the answers differ but they come from the same place. They say they were expecting more things about «Aztecs» and «poor people.» Many students expect to encounter Mexican «traditions» and by that they apparently mean tamales, folklore, piñatas and things Catholic. And for some strange reason that still puzzles us, many students expect Mexican literature to be «less complicated.» Some students tell us that so much of what we were reading and the Mexican films we were watching were «weird.» They thought we would be reading about «nicer things . . . normal stuff», not what is to be found in Lourdes Arredondo's fiction and the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky and Arturo Ripstein. For nice and normal Mexican things these students would not have to go very far, they could consult *Caramelo* and find all those Mexican traditions that an American imaginary tourist comes to expect of anything «Mexican.» We focus on Cisneros's *Caramelo* because it is symptomatic of the stagnation of a certain type of Chicano literature, and because we think it represents a dead end for a literature that lacks a self-critical perspective.

There are hardly any anti-heroes in the literature written by Chicanos because characters are often burdened with being representatives of positive or familiar aspect of their culture and history. That a significant portion of modern world literature is populated with anti-heroes (characters who embody not the affirmative emblems of their culture but the uncanny ills of their society), and that Chicano literature is practically devoid of them is something worth pondering.

What is regrettable is the fact that so much of our reality (present or past) remains untouched by literature. In its place we are offered the artificial comforts of nostalgia (for the past or for the present), simple romantizations of hackneyed cultural symbols and the sugarcoating of historical experience. Ambiguity, serious moral reflection and the complexities of psychology and social life have been replaced in *Caramelo* by the innovative idea that Mexicans are amusing and naturally over the top. If this sounds like the visionary metaphysics of a TV sitcom, that's because it is. There are no heavy duty conflicts in *Caramelo* because in Cisneros's postcard universe Chicanos do no wrong, they suffer no great tragedies—they live in a perpetual light comedy. What *Caramelo* reveals most forcefully is a serious poverty of imagination and an alarming lack of moral vision. Since *Publisher's Weekly* declared *Caramelo* a «landmark» and since we know that landmarks can sometimes become blueprints, *Caramelo* could prefigure the next generation of Chicano writing. But if that is the case, then much of our contemporary reality, in all its true beauty and mystery, will remain outside the purview of the written word. The blurbs on the back cover of *Caramelo* include an odd one from Mexican writer, Elena Poniatowska, in which

she states that Cisneros is «like a bee that extracts new honey from old flowers...» and that *Caramelo* is «like Mexican candy» But by the tenth vignette one wishes the honeybee would sting someone, and one hopes beyond hope that some of that candy would be laced with literary arsenic so it would stop being so saccharine.

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