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*Literary Analysis on Alejandro
Morales: Male Feminization
and Identity Politics*

The Brick People: Brick Layering of Female Subjects in Morales' Novel

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We can respond by saying that one becomes a race or a class subject through the experience of oppression and domination in this country, through a historical relation which is material, economic, interpersonal, and thus social.

—Rosa Linda Fregoso, "The Discourse of Difference: Footnoting Inequality" (1990)

When we begin our analysis in this way, we recognize that minority creative expression generally functions as a kind of creative resistance, a challenge to the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless.

—Alvina Quintana, "Politics, Representation and the Emergence of a Chicana Aesthetic" (1996)

La historia no deja nunca de amontonar ironías sobre los cadáveres de las viejas creencias.

—Gerald Martin, "Vista Panorámica"

Without the reconciliation of ourselves to the community, we cannot invent ourselves.

—Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982)

In her article "Judou—A Hermeneutical Reading of Cross-cultural Cinema" (1991-2), Jenny Kwok Wah Lau refers to movies as texts and rightly points out our difficulties in reading an Asian movie correctly in Western society: "These different explanations of the meaning of the film expose the difficulties and errors that are often made in the cross-cultural reading of a text and call for a theory of reading that can account for the wide divergence of opinion between audiences of the East and West" (3-4). In the case of Chicano literature, not only is the reader/critic possibly reading a text cross-culturally, but also in many cases across gender and class lines. Mario T. García's reading of the novel *The Brick*

People (1988) by Alejandro Morales (b. 1944) is impressive especially in that the former delves deeply into the book's core to underline its importance as a working class novel. On the other hand, his ephemeral reading of gender, male/female relationships, and specifically women's actions in the novel, leaves much to be desired. García backhandedly follows Anglo mainstream criticism by alienating Morales' subjectified female characters within a stereotypical linear reading. Converging upon a book which has been read unilaterally and, surprisingly enough, not given much attention by the critics as a text with a feminist orientation, we begin a fresh reading of Alejandro Morales' *The Brick People*, focusing not only on the women of the novel and their possible multiple subject positions, but also on the variant family/couple relationships within non-mainstream communities. Some of these relationships are exemplified in this novel as possible in-depth interpretations from *within* which extrapolate Ervin Goffman's "front-back theory." If we must, as Emily Hicks points out, be or become "border-crossers" in order to understand regional literature in a global context, it is important to give ground to a new critical reading of canonical Chicano texts and under the foundation of the encased readings some Chicano literary works have undergone.

Chicano novelist Alejandro Morales' *The Brick People*, brings to us a flash of enlightenment about the new formation of the heterogeneous, complex, female Chicana subject by a male novelist. Small doors open each other up before our eyes to show us corners of thought enclosed within the literary Chicana subject not yet disclosed by a male author. In her article "Unveiling Athena: Women in the Chicano Novel" (1993), Erlinda Gonzales-Berry has previously pointed out Alejandro Morales' attempt to subjectify Chicana voices in an earlier novel:

In response to the growing awareness of women as full fledged human beings and to the negative criticism aimed at those writers who indulged in the propagation of virgin/mother/whore stereotypes more recent Chicano novelists show a sincere attempt to break away from those limited roles and to portray women of more authentic dimensions. Alejandro Morales' *La verdad sin voz* (1975) is one such novel. In it he very consciously sets out to create some female characters who break away from stereotyped roles. Margarita, for example is a single mother who must make her own way in life. Gone are all the traces of male dependence. Instead she is depicted as a bright young woman, a good worker, in time with her emotional and physical needs . . . (38)

Particularly interesting about this historical novel based on autobiographical facts is that Morales does not overreach but arrives smoothly at the characterization of women in the symbolic discourse, and at the relationships they have with each other and with their children. Initially, the reader is seduced by the story of the White American owners of the Simons Brickyard Factory in Montebello, California. It is not until

chapter six that mention of Nana, the female protagonist of the novel takes place. In chapter eight she is mentioned again, and it is only in chapter ten that we, through Morales' storytelling and fictionalization, become the attentive spectators of the eventful unfolding of the first years of Nana's married life with Octavio Revueltas. From then on until the last chapter, XXIII, Morales uncovers her multifaceted relationship with her mother-in-law and her children.

Goffman and Performance Theory

In analyzing this surreptitious technique of gradually introducing the female protagonist of the novel, we will refer to Erving Goffman's theory of a "front, back reality" which permits a reading of *The Brick People* from a unique benchmark:

Given a particular performance as the point of reference, we have distinguished three crucial roles on the basis of function: those who perform; those performed to; and outsiders who neither perform in the show nor observe it . . . The three crucial roles mentioned could be described on the basis of the regions to which the role-player has access: performers appear in the front and back regions; the audience appears only in the front region; and the outsiders are excluded from both regions. (144-145)

Goffman's theory became extremely popular in the sixties in sociology and anthropology circles because he staged Anglo-American culture as a culture of performers. Unfortunately, interdisciplinary approaches were not as common in the 60s as they are today at the height of the exploration of the Other. His theories were not used as cross-overs between sociological theory and literary criticism. I would like to pinpoint that back then we would have also been unable to use his work in analyzing a Chicano text by a male because until Rudy Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* in 1972, women protagonists were not markedly subjectified by male authors in Chicano literature. Goffman sees: "the real, sincere, or honest performance; and the false one that thorough fabricators assemble for us, whether meant to be taken unseriously, as in the work of stage actors, or seriously, as in the work of confidence men" (70).

From classical Western culture Goffman is only drawing on Shakespeare's idea "the world is a stage" and theorizing around it; however, from the perspective of breaking down observations and judgments about a literature unfamiliar to many, it can be expanded into a theory that "performs" a labor of philanthropy. Although quite useful, Goffman's theory only consists of front/back stage regions:

Very commonly the back region of a performance is located at one end of the place where the performance is presented, being cut off from it by a partition and guarded

passageway. By having the front and back regions adjacent in this way, a performer out in front can receive backstage assistance while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation. (113)

Although he gives the staged actor the possibility of moving from one region to the other, Goffman does not allow him to be in both regions at once nor does his theory provide much variation for the performer, whether the critic be applying it to the waiters and waitresses in a hotel or the customers/clients in a store. If we are indeed all performers, limitations must be lifted from his theory by creating a more expansive theoretical space from which to work with the characters in a novel, for example.

One could problematize Goffman's sociological theoretical framework to create four categories of the "front back reality": front-front, front-back, back-front, back-back. Metaphorically, we could see that Morales shows us initially what could have been life in southern California at the turn of the century, for mainstream Americans, that is, from a perspective of front-front spectatorship: a land welcoming to White Americans who disowned their Eastern past for one reason or another and followed the yellow brick road of entrepreneuring into riches and servants who were called Mexican workers. Then we find out about the Simons' "back reality": the family tragedies which escalate as a result of lack of communication within the family. The back-front reality is represented both in Walter Simons' trip to pre-revolutionary Mexico to learn about the *hacienda* system and in the lives of people, like Gonzalo and other workers, that we only get to see from the outside. We never get to know much of what Gonzalo's wife, Pascuala, thinks or what Amalia, his lover, expects from him and from society. The back-back reality is what makes this novel distinct from many others, particularly those that do not quite show the life of Chicanos viewed by Chicanos. In his article entitled: "History, Literature, and the Chicano Working-Class Novel: A Critical Review of Alejandro Morales' *The Brick People*" (1990), Mario T. García diligently addresses the historical facets of this novel in their socio-political context and attests that *The Brick People* is in fact working-class, as opposed to proletarian literature. The one issue García fails to address appropriately and which we will discuss thoroughly in this paper is the subjectification of female characters by Morales.

Reinscribing Chicana History

The first time we see the Chicana subject is when the factory workers recall the previous existence of Doña Eulalia Pérez, a rich Mexican landowner whom Morales resurrects historiographically. Eulalia Pérez

actually existed, and her personal writings from 1877 are stored in Berkeley's Bancroft Library. That the Mexican workers knew about her and acknowledged her power is a recounting of California history. This act of subversion of mainstream history is what Michel Foucault would call the popular or counter-memory of Chicanas(os): the existence of a rich land-owning widow in the Chicano subconscious via Alejandro Morales' storytelling and fiction. Nonetheless, Doña Eulalia Pérez is not the only rich and powerful Chicana that appears in the novel. The narrator brandishes the presence of La Señora Eliola García¹ Pardo, a woman who in 1924 comes to Malaquías, Nana's father, to offer him land:

"Good afternoon, Malaquias," señora Garcia Pardo said, offering her hand and smiling. "Malaquias, the Japanese have left. We can't count on them. The majority of my land is empty and there is no one to attend it. Some day this land will be worth much money. Well, then, for being an excellent worker and for knowing how to treat the land, you can say I have come to offer you ten acres of virgin land. Stay, Malaquias, work the land and you will become rich." By the time señora Garcia Pardo had finished delivering her offer, she had circled Malaquias' truck and perused the ranch. "I can't buy that land. I barely have enough to feed my family," Malaquias answered candidly as she went to the door of her automobile. "Five thousand dollars is nothing, Malaquías. Think about it. Try to get the money. Let me know in a week." Señora Garcia Pardo closed the door and sped off into the edge of the afternoon. Malaquias spent the next four days planning how to get the five thousand dollars, but no one could guarantee the money without enormous cost. He wanted the land, but had to admit that it was impossible to purchase it honorably. (136-7)

By bringing out this very important incident in *The Brick People*, Morales succeeds in doing two things at once. His previous item of inscribing a land owning Chicana, Doña Eulalia Pérez, into the consciousness of the reader is followed up by a double discourse—the second item in the narrative agenda—which exposes racism in California at the turn of the century and reiterates that other Chicanas also owned and managed land at the time, and perhaps had to give it up because of the racially motivated incidents that surrounded them. Racism against the Japanese in the early twenties is specifically addressed. The Japanese, who had tended the land, left as a result of the terrorism instigated against them by White Americans. Morales uncovers in this way the social situation of Asian immigrants and African-Americans in the Los Angeles area. By disclosing the case of the Japanese, the narrator projects some of the fear immigrants underwent at the time:

The sun played hide and seek with the rising gray pallor that streaked the early morning sky. In a matter of hours, from one day to another, life had radically changed. Malaquias, Lorenza, Paquita, Nana, Jesus and Andrea smelled the smoldering remains of the Matola home. As he walked through the ashes, Malaquias pondered why the forces that ejected the Japanese had not struck him.

Obviously, he would be next. The Japanese had been there for years, doing good work, and unbelievably all that remained of their existence was black ash that the wind would spread into the fields. (136)

The immigrants' possessions become the fertilizer for the land, just as Eulalia's body is reincarnated into ants.

In their paper "The Female Hero in Chicano Literature" (1985), Carmen Salazar Parr and Genevieve M. Ramírez intelligently quote Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope who rightly observe: "until the heroic experience of all people—racial minorities and the poor as well as women—has been thoroughly explored, the myth of the hero will always be incomplete and inaccurate" (47). The experience of Malaquías and Nana as well as that of the Japanese in Los Angeles in 1929 had not yet been an heroic experience, because it had not been "told." Morales' uncovering of these historical facts that include minorities and women in southern California does precisely what Pearson and Pope point out: an "heroic experience." Japanese ashes are difficult to manipulate. Until we recreate through literature and history the human beings that are represented by all the ashes Morales' characters encounter, we cannot create a hero. As a symbolic image, ashes are but one of the elements that combine with dialogue, fiction, literature, and fact to re-write history. Genaro Padilla reminds us of this in his recently published book, *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography* (1993), where he recovers nineteenth-century Chicana lives.

Ashes and Tears

The previous passages quoted from the book in which we discuss the burning of Japanese-tended farms in California is not the first time the image of ashes appears as a metaphorical motif in Morales' *The Brick People*. Appearing for the first time in another racially related incident where violence between two Chinese fraternal organizations hurts a few White people and ends in the deaths of hundreds of Chinese, they reoccur throughout the novel. In chapter I the Simons Brickyard workers—observes the narrator—find the bodies of hundreds of Chinese who were massacred by Whites:

The killing continued after Sheriff Burns returned with help. He organized a law-and-order group and attempted to dissuade bands of looters, rapists and murderers. In each case, only after the criminals had done their evil deed did they disband. When morning broke, the streets were abandoned except for the hundreds of dead Chinese . . . The City of Los Angeles had shown little concern for the Chinese even at the most brutal moments during the massacre. (23)

Joseph Simons, the owner of the brick factory, orders the bodies to be burned so the land can continue to be used for brick production: "The

cadavers had to be eradicated, reduced to gray ashes By late afternoon Joseph Simons got his wish. The only physical evidence left of the dead were five mounds of ash, blown away that evening by a strong warm wind that came from the east and flew to the sea” (24). This passage is touching not only because it documents the injustice but it shows the only people that mourn this genocide are the Mexican women, wives of the Simons Mexican factory workers: “As the mounds grew so did the flowers that the women were bringing to surround the heaps of bone and leathered flesh. From a distance, sobbing women with playful children gathered to pray the rosary. They mourned for the unknown dead, for the loss that had never been recognized” (24). In this passage by the narrator, women create and heal as men destroy and suffer in silence; both burn their work to combine it with the ashes of the Chinese cadavers, theosophically being reborn through the ashes:

As men placed logs and fuel on the heaps of cadavers, the women brought more flowers and doilies, quilts, mantillas, aprons and tablecloths. When finished the crematoriums appeared to be multi-chromatic mountains of flowers An explosive hissing sound competed with the chorus of women praying the rosary. (24)

While it is easy for Westerners to applaudingly justify paying 120 dollars to speak and cry with a counselor or psychotherapist, usually White and male, to “take care of themselves” and their families, the tears of the Mexican women in *The Brick People* are easily overlooked by the critics. Easily, devalued tears, prayers, and embroidery become perhaps less important to the general reader than banners, words, digging or building. On the other hand, a good example of Chicana/o literature that clearly values the many things women are called upon to implement within their diversified experiences is Viola Correa’s poem “La Nueva Chicana” (1970s) in which the Poetic I subjectifies the militant Chicana:

¡Hey!
See that lady protesting against injustice,
es mi mamá
That girl in the brown beret,
The one teaching the children
she’s my hermana
Over there fasting with the migrants
es mi tía
The lady with the forgiving eyes
listen to her shout. (7)

This poem clearly exemplifies a sensitivity that gives credit to the unavoidable acts of resistance not materially tactile like “fasting” and “forgiving.” It also highlights the void in Mario T. García’s analysis of women in *The Brick People*. We will delve into its reductionism as we

continue to analyze this valuable novel through some of its motifs.

A third episode that involves ashes is not, as Malaquías predicted, the burning or terrorism against his own home or himself, but against his daughter Nana many years later. The narrator cleverly ties this to a thought Nana's son, Javier, has as he arrives at the fire in which his parents' home is burning: "As his steps turned into a fast run, he saw the progress of physical matter, the scientific advances, the blinding flash over Hiroshima" (277). The White Americans in fact allowed, according to the narrator, the Revueltas home to burn: "Nana, concerned with her children, was left alone again in the night, . . . Her dreams of the future had melted into the ashes of what was once her home" (288). The person who lights all the fires that produce ashes, destructively transculturating without his control into rebirth, is Walter Simons: "Walter—observes the narrator—lit the man's cigarette and then his own and walked away, leaving footprints and ashes on his father's grave" (73). Most fires in the novel are ordered, lit, or caused by a Simon's family member. It is directly or indirectly a Simons that prevents the firemen from putting out the fire that takes Nana and Octavio's home: "Why did they come to the edge of the barranca? Someone stopped them at the last moment, someone from Montebello and someone from Simons . . ." (272). The ash metaphor ends with the closing of the novel, where a bundle of wood will be converted into a home. The implied new structure represents the rebirth of all previously burned matter, homes, and people: "Arturo had untied—says the narrator—the bundle of wood and separated it by lengths. He stood proudly before his father, silently telling him that the wood was ready for cutting and that they should begin building their new home" (318).

Males and Difficult Chicana Voice

In the following quote Ramón Saldívar eloquently discloses the difficult task male critics have in interpreting women's literature:

As crucial as an understanding of these theoretical presuppositions is for the interpretation of Chicano texts in general, a self-conscious analysis of our own interpretive methods becomes even more important for the male critic as he tries to read texts by women authors. (173)

The same applies to the male author who writes with the voice of a female subject. Morales undertakes the very difficult task of voicing women's subject positions through their actions and their participation in family life and community. As we have stated previously, women are not the only voiceful minority that appears in *The Brick People*, although they do represent the only subjectified reality—the ones with a voice. Chinese and Japanese people as well as African-Americans are talked about and

their oppressive reality is historically fairy-taled, however, they do not become subjects as do Chicano women. Mexican women are the ever-loving healers of this community, during the pre-and post-Depression periods, a very difficult time for most working class people in the United States.

Ramón Saldívar and other critics have engaged in a discourse that enunciates the difficulties that writers may encounter in trying to build on a reality that has not yet perhaps been exposed to its fullest: "Chicano narrative is not content with merely reproducing the world but also to reveal the ideological structures by which we continue to create the world" (Saldívar 9). It is with this Saldívar cultural preamble in mind that one can attempt to read the many levels of meaning inscribed in Morales' novel. Eulalia Pérez not only represents the rich female who subverts the predestined path that the workers' wives of Simon's Brick Factory must undertake, she also births thoughts about recyclable matter deep within the reader. Her body represents, even as she dies, a rebirth by establishing a space for Chicanos in California. This provides a metaphorical enclosure of the land initially available to them. It is by allowing Doña Eulalia's transformation into ants that one both spreads her into smaller particles and reincarnates her into an earth form that will prevail. Declares the narrator:

The man in the pit looked at his feet and saw hundreds of indescribably large brown insects. The insects began to crawl onto his pant legs. Many people were paralyzed. Others ran screaming that the Doña had turned into millions of insects. Horror choked the people as they watched the insects overtake them, spread out and cover El Rincón de San Pascual. (13)

Since he has contributed tremendously to the contemporary development of the Chicano Social Sciences, Mario T. García ironically critiques Morales' treatment of the female subject in the novel *The Brick People*:

Morales at the same time regrettably does not provide his female characters with an alternative search for empowerment outside the traditional and patriarchal structures in which they live. They resent the sexist treatment they receive at the hands of their husbands—the double standard—but they do not rebel to overthrow such confining and oppressive relations. (198)

On the other hand, while perusing an African history book by Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin, *Africa and Africans* (1988), I arrived at a parallel perspective with Margarita B. Melville's short literary study of the Chicano family that appeared in *Understanding the Chicano Experience Through Literature* (1981), a monograph:

It occurs to me that the stability and endurance of the family in Mexican American society rests much more on the parent-child relationship than it does in the

husband-wife relationship. "Mi familia," is it primarily my husband (or wife) and my children? Or is it my mother, father, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and children, oh, yes! and my husband! (45)

How can we limit a Chicano author, who merely delves into one of his subject positions, the one closest to the mainstream cultural ideology, for the purpose of prescribing his writing about family in an Anglo mainstream politically correct manner? Or could it be that in our materialist, feminist, Marxist readings of Chicana(o) literature we have forgotten heterogeneity and diversity within our own very personal definition of family?

A Family Beyond Parameters

In revising the way Chicana family relationships have been read by the critics, it is imperative that we look at other possible expansions of how the back-back writer, in this case a Chicano who writes about Chicana women and men, may subconsciously portray relationships between family members beyond parameters explored by most readers and critics of their literature. Both Milagros and Nana, the main female protagonists of *The Brick People*, seem to have closer relationships with their children and with each other than they do with their husbands. Since that does not seem to bother the characters, one could possibly believe this to be part of their value system regarding husbands. Melville's aforementioned study explores parent-child relationships in several canonical texts and shows various combinations and values that appear in Chicano literature.

In *The Brick People* Nana criticizes her mother Lorenza because she is "unable to defend her own children from their father" (139). Nana was the target of his anger, his accusations, and his failures. Due to such attacks and heavy stress she never explained menstruation to her daughters. Nonetheless, Nana "forgives her mother for not being strong enough to defend the rights of her daughters" (209). Before Nana and Octavio eloped they attempted to get permission for marriage from Nana's father several times and both dreamt of having children: "The gleam was hope for the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren they hoped for and were seeing at that moment" (149). When Maximiliano, one of Octavio's brothers, is sick everybody cares for him, even Nana, who is his sister-in-law and lives in a separate house. After his death, his mother continues to daydream under the apricot tree in their backyard about her son: "Often, Milagros sat underneath the tree and thought about her life and her son Maximiliano" (295).

The relationship with Damian, her husband, is less important to her than the relationship to her children: "The crusty, strong, sixty-six-year-old-observes the narrator-moved toward Milagros and touched her shoulder. She froze, surprised by the rare caress. Milagros dried the last

dish and concluded that his concern was not for her, but for Octavio. Damian moved to the door and nodded at the man he had conceived and for whom he would willingly die to save from death” (301). This relationship with the children seems to be an acceptable life style for Milagros. Damian, her husband, also wishes for more closeness with his son, not with her: “Damian left, wishing that Octavio had kissed his hand” (300). Although the couples are found alone in bed or out for a walk making decisions, they are also often found individually in the company of a daughter or son: “Octavio, Nana, Micaela, Arturo, Javier, and Flor had confidence in themselves, and each in his own mysterious way was confident that the family would survive. Nana held the baby against her heart. She sat with Micaela in the back seat of Arturo’s immaculate car. Octavio quietly sat in front with his oldest son. They drove off and left Javier and Flor to ride the bicycle back to Uncle Asunción’s” (286). The mother-son relationships are complex, but they are definitely not mainstream White American: “Arturo did not like his mother working so hard for all of them” (305); “Octavio walked alongside his mother, partly angry that the work on the house had been interrupted and partly relieved that his mother had finally forced him to visit Doña Marcelina” (301).

Putting Women Last?

In his study of *The Brick People* Mario T. García does exactly what he accuses Alejandro Morales of doing: he puts women last. His analysis of women in the novel could easily be stigmatized as an afterthought. Amazingly enough, after a detailed, comprehensive study of the book he almost haphazardly writes a paragraph about the “Brick Women,” just before his two-paragraph conclusion. Within the politically correct parameter, he traditionally states in his opinion what Morales has failed to do in referring to the “Brick Women” he says: “They resent the sexist treatment they receive at the hands of their husband—the double standard—but they do not rebel to overthrow such conforming and oppressive relations” (198).

In fact, García skips over chapter thirteen of the novel where Milagros and Nana conspire, so observes the narrator, to undermine Octavio’s desire to stay in his parent’s home:

Milagros appeared carrying a large chair. She put it down and sat in it to rest. Milagros rose, holding the chair behind her and asked Nana to open the door of the house so that she might find her a permanent place. Milagros found the chair a comfortable niche next to the wood-burning stove in the kitchen. The location was perfect. She found four small indentations in the wooden floor, as if a chair had stood there before. Milagros communicated to Nana that from that chair in that place she would always be with her, and that if Nana ever needed her advice she would only have to sit in the chair, a simple oak straight-back chair which

now meant so much to Nana and Milagros. Nana placed her hand on the back of the oak rest and Milagros transfigured to herself, embraced her daughter-in-law and her woman child. Nana had now become the true center of her family. (184)

Later in the same chapter, Milagros' son Octavio comes storming in and angry because Nana had not told him that she had made the decision to move next door and have the rent money deducted from his paycheck; however, instead of being supportive of her son, Milagros tells him when he asks angrily where Nana is: "At her house, Octavio." Milagros pronounced the sentence with a secret feeling of triumph and pride for Nana. Moreover, she "pointed next door" (185). It is this kind of support between mother and daughter-in-law that we find throughout the last chapters of *The Brick People*. How can this very common, uplifting relationship between mother and daughter-in-law, which shows female solidarity in some Chicano homes and is expressed in this novel, have escaped Mario T. García? Paulo Freire would say: "the oppressed oppress." I would like to add that it is quite disturbing to watch historians arrive, from a history of resistance, with blinders. García goes on to say later in his same, and only paragraph dedicated to women: "This is not to suggest that Morales should have depicted these women as feminists" (199).

A Distinct Feminist Discourse

However, Morales does incorporate a distinctive feminist discourse within the characterization of the "Brick Women." Morales' sensitivity uncovers for the reader a very unique relationship between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. The latter almost unconditionally supports the former in her endeavors to emancipate herself from the family home and establish her own quarters. Here I call attention to the fact that we are referring to working-class women in the 1930s during the nation's Great Depression. Also, between 1910 and 1930 over one million Mexicanos and Mexicanas migrated northward (Ruiz 109). These immigrant women were at the bottom of the financial ladder. They could not risk ending a relationship because they did not like the way their husband thought. Incorporating today's values of emancipation and liberation does not lead to a favorable feminist analysis of a book portraying a reality fifty years back in history. This is not to say that these women were not feminists. All women are feminists in their own right. And if we follow our theory about a mother's relationship with her children being more important than a "good" relationship with her husband, the father becomes less important-decentralized within the family.

According to the information found in Vicki Ruiz's article "Star Struck: Acculturation, Adolescence, and the Mexican American Woman, 1920-1950" (1993), Nana's life is not unusual: "Many young Mexican women

never attended high school . . . they gave family needs priority over individual goals” (111). What is unusual both today and in the past in mainstream society is to have a mother and daughter-in-law support each other so much—the back-back reality Alejandro Morales brings to light. I am especially impressed with this because I have not seen it projected so strongly neither in literature written by Chicanas nor in studies by Chicana critics. Not only is Alejandro Morales writing from a cross-cultural perspective since his novel is published in English and the targeted population is English-speaking, but perhaps, more importantly, from a cross-gender perspective which features the voices of Chicana women at the turn of the century.

Women are in the narrator’s eyes the only characters in the novel not fooled by modern technology:

When Damian handed the photograph to Milagros, she first studied it. The family waited anxiously to hear Milagros’ reaction to the image. She handed the black-and-white back to Damian. “Do you like it, Damian?” Milagros asked calmly. “Don’t you?” Damian retorted, somewhat surprised “Well, no,” Milagros began. “It is a photograph filled with repression. The men are stiff, tense, as if they were dead, all with hats on. The serious faces are faces of fear or hate. Very few of the men are smiling. It is a photograph of sad prisoners, of tired slaves. Of men angered for being where they are at. As if they are forced to do what they do, not want to do.

She moved the photograph closer to Damian before continuing. “Look at yourself. How do you look? Don’t tell me that is the face of a happy man. I don’t like the photograph because it is the result of a machine that reduces men. It makes them tiny; it squashes them and smears them on a piece of paper. And that way we cannot embrace them.” Milagros stood up slowly and walked to the stove. (126)

Pascuala Pedroza, who has no voice according to Mario T. García, shares a similar dislike of the official photograph her husband shows her:

Gonzalo, you look tired, completely drained. It’s because you work day and night. That is not right, Gonzalo. The children miss you at home. All these men are tired of working. There are many men, Gonzalo, few smiles. They seem to be covered with dust. You can have your photography; it is an exercise of another world. (127)

These are in fact women theorizing about how technology minimizes woman and mankind. It is important, in grounding our theory about children being placed under a different value system than men, that Pascuala tells her husband, in the above quote not, “I need you at home,” but instead, “[t]he children miss you at home.” Instead of being fooled or delighted by the technology, these women both prefer reality to its reproduction. They are not alien to the fact that the photograph is exposing their exploitation.

These women do not represent the images of fallen, submissive,

powerless women (Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad*), whose only joy is to wait for their husbands at home, without enjoying their metaphysical and spiritual powers. That would be too little to expect both from them and from Alejandro Morales. The women of *The Brick People* give orders: "Put the baby in the crib and give your daughter a kiss because she is going to bed, Tati ordered" (194). They judge, they pray, they heal, they cry, they do not always forgive, and at times they refuse to have sex: "For years Milagros—observes the narrator—had not allowed Damian to touch her" (113). Most of all, the Chicanas support each other: "Both women sat comfortably in a common space and enjoyed one another in silence" (261). In the last chapter, while he is waiting for his son Arturo to bring the wood he has asked him to carry, Octavio reflects upon his childhood, his life on both sides of the border, and all his encounters with women who helped his family along the way: "Thank God for those women" (312). Strangers on both sides—shows the narrator—protect and help his family and they are all women with voices: "Nearby stood a woman with her daughters and they began to shout that he better not shoot me, and they verbally attacked him because perhaps they did not like him" (315). Women are not stereotypical in Morales' *The Brick People* and they are not afraid to shout or speak their minds.

Conclusion

Positioning myself under the many confluent theoretical voices in current Chicano criticism, I must, remembering Harold Bloom, also add: "poems . . . are neither about 'subjects' nor about themselves: They are necessarily about other poems" (Bloom 18). Alejandro Morales' novel does not stand alone; it rests on a body of Chicano literature and criticism that has evolved as a result of having women and men struggle, bilingually and biculturally, to support a Chicana feminist movement, without having lavished literary effort in vain. Feminine subjectivity by Chicano writers is still a diamond to be cut into a multi-faceted gem signifying multiple voices and variations in family and other relationships. This can only happen through a postmodern approach that calls for the participation of all disciplines to deconstruct the many discursive puzzles that sculpt Chicanas.

Notes

1. Although we follow the written accent rules in Spanish and put an accent on the "í" in the word García, and others, the novel *The Brick People* does not do the same. All the

quotes used in this paper from *The Brick People* are from the 1992 edition published by Arte Público Press.

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