

Cuerpos Cabales: Chicana Embodiment in Helena María Viramontes' Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a feminist analysis of the representation of the Chicana body in Helena María Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and in her short stories. In Viramontes' literary sketches, the Chicana body becomes a unique representation of socio-economic conditions in which breasts reflect particular realities, hands signify power struggles, and feet reveal soul, freedom, and belonging. While seemingly gratuitous, the detailed description of characters' body parts in Viramontes's work is political in nature. Through them she sculpts fleshed out Chicanas who are not presented as neither victims nor stereotypes but rather stand as the *embodiment* of a complex Chicana subjectivity.

Keywords: contemporary Chican@ literature, Latin@ literature, Mexican-Americans, Chican@s, Mexican immigrants, Helena María Viramontes, subjectivity, *embodiment*, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece un análisis feminista de la representación del cuerpo de las chicanas en la novela *Under the Feet of Jesus* y en los cuentos de Helena María

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Viramontes. En los dibujos literarios de Viramontes, el cuerpo de la chicana se convierte en un símbolo de su condición socioeconómica cuyos pechos reflejan realidades concretas, sus manos representan luchas de poder y sus pies revelan su alma, libertad y sentido de pertenencia. Aunque aparentemente fortuito, las descripciones detalladas de las partes del cuerpo de los personajes en el trabajo de Viramontes son de carácter político. A través de ellas Viramontes esculpe chicanas de carne y hueso que no son ni víctimas ni estereotipos sino que representan la encarnación de una compleja subjetividad chicana.

Palabras clave: *chican@* contemporánea, literatura *latin@*, mexico-estadounidenses, *chican@s*, inmigrantes mexicanos, Helena María Viramontes, subjetividad, *embodiment*, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

"I come from a bookless home"

-Trinh Mihn-Ha

In the 70s, critic Rita Sánchez wrote, "The Chicana writer, by the fact that she is even writing in today's society, is making a revolutionary act. Embodied in the act of writing is her voice against others' definitions of who she is and what she should be" (66). More than thirty years later her statement still rings true and this voice of challenge has never been more important. The work has only just begun in instigating the revolution of subjectivity. Chicana author Helena María Viramontes works diligently, contributing to this literary and cultural revolution of fleshing a true, multifarious Chicana subject in literature and reconstructing authentic multi-dimensional figures. In her work, she speaks through the bodies of Chicanas and Chicanos, revealing the condition of existence in *Chican@* communities. Her characters come to life layer by layer, piece by piece, as she brings forth their multiple subjectivities.

Helena María Viramontes most often appears at her readings veiled in colorful rebozos, the Mexican-Chicana cultural icon, African shawls or pashminas (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2007: 124). Speaking and reading, she tells of the unveiling process that occurs throughout her stories. Viramontes exudes in her meetings with students that "our heritage is not a liability but an asset" (Geddes). Professing this allows her and other Chicanas to write and re-write narrative, poetry, prose, essays, and theatre and to delve deep into the intricacies of the lived *Chican@* experience, exposing previously

unarticulated and unrepresented details of Chican@ embodiment and making great contributions to the project that is Chican@ literature.

Courageously, the Chicana writer, by understanding the condition of colonization under which she was born, the images of betrayal that surround her, and the forces of racism that still exist for her, has exhibited her strength by the very denial of these impositions. By her refusal to accept the myths, misinterpretations and the stereotypes of herself as presented by another, she has transcended the bounds of tradition, made a choice to determine her own life, and finally, has become the revolutionary voice. (Sánchez 30)

Viramontes is a most likely keeper of this “revolutionary voice” as someone who has emerged from this subjected community and has devoted her life to working with her community of other writers, critics and activists in attempting to break free from this philosophical subordination—that reduces the agency of Chican@s through stereotypes—with her creative voice and inspirational achievements.

In “Unveiling Athena: Women in the Chicano Novel,” Erlinda González-Berry states that Chicana characters are “cast as types- virgin/mother/whore roles; 2.) Chicana characters are hidden behind the mask of femininity, cast as the “other” of male protagonists; 3.) Chicanas cast as unveiled Athenas of characters of multiple dimensions” (35). Earlier in her discussion she proposes a definition of Athena: “Athena is always veiled. That is, I think, the basic ornamentation of the female body. And Athena is also called Palas which means ‘wound’” (33). By layering the status of the Chicana subjects, González-Berry avoids the possibility of engaging with a Chicana character who subscribes to any of the binary entities—virgin, whore, mother or woman for whom femininity is central—and instead demands in her third point to go beyond these, unveiling Athena and uncovering the truth about the wound-littered road to Chicana subjectivity. In her work on the history of feminism, Estelle B. Freedman also addresses, though in a more literal sense, the historical significance of veiling and unveiling in colonial Algeria under French occupation. She states, “A history of forced, public unveiling of [Algerian] women by the French made revealing a symbol of resistance” (104). Chicana writers only recently began the painful work of both unveiling the wound while at the same time revealing Athena in their own choice of “clothes”: hands, feet, torsos, and words.

Helena María Viramontes focuses on the intellectual as well as the physical ramifications of her characters’ descriptions; she writes from experience to reveal a diversity of subjectivities through depictions and transcriptions of lived bodies. For many years Viramontes has metaphorically and systematically veiled her female characters in realistic embodiments—hair, feet, breasts—making them women (*mujeres*) and de-

Otherring them. Through the caliber of her descriptions, Viramontes creates a kaleidoscopic vision of Chicana characteristics and has done so for the last twenty years. In her publications, *The Moths and Other Stories*, “Miss Clairol,” “Nopalitos,” “Tears on My Pillow,” “Growing,” *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Helena María Viramontes continuously focuses on representing unseen subjectivities; she has revised and re-written Chican@s characters commonly portrayed in literature, this time revealing all that was mistakenly missed the first time around. Like the pastry treat *mille feuilles*, or elephant’s ear, which crumples when you bite it, even sometimes by just barely touching it, Chicanas have not yet created the “thousand layers” necessary in the quest for an accurate portrayal of layered Chicana subjectivity. Like a woman in a *puesto* in *the mercado* (a stand in the market place), we must act in solidarity with our multiplicity and not sell only one product. Only after solidifying protagonist Chicana voices through literary representation can the veracity of the Chicana *mille feuilles* be accurately represented in literature.

Helena María Viramontes begins to present these layers by communicating to us through the problematized bodies of her characters; these are not mere references to brown nipples, breasts, hands or feet heedlessly inscribed in her fiction, as it occurs sometimes with non-Latin@s attempting to describe the Chicana body. Instead, she scatologically transcribes the working-poor Mexican/Chicana female body to all her readers. Her use of body parts, with seemingly gratuitous description and detail, is extremely political in Viramontes’s work. The complications are not shown to us in strands but in whole, fully-layered images, forbidding us to unweave their complexity. Amy K. Kaminsky’s work on Latin American writers speaks to the relevance of the body in Chicana literature. She writes, “The human body is not just a physical phenomenon in the natural world; it is one of the most heavily burdened bearers of meaning in culture, and one of its richest sources of meaning from its gendered character” (98). The body is a living representation of all struggle, sacrifice, achievement, and experience throughout one’s life. While many authors would choose flowery prose or emotional description to convey their meaning, Viramontes instead opts for more observable, living symbols to illustrate her picture. When analyzing the use of body parts in the work of writer Alberto Díaz, literary critic Mary Pat Brady considers “[t]he intrusion of body parts—“eyebrows,” and “hands,”” to be “tools crucial for physical expression, for “speaking” in a slightly different register from the voice” (179). In a similar vein, Viramontes gives her characters new voice with the ability to speak in an entirely new language, unique to each character’s particular lived existence in which, as Brady expands, “Sighs, shrugs and nods function as ‘other words’” (181). By speaking about specific bodies, Viramontes is able to begin

transforming past misrepresentations cementing them into more truthful portraits of Chicanas and Chicanos. This is particularly true in Viramontes' first novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, where the characters are dislocated from any possessions or spaces. They are their bodies.¹

1. UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS AND OTHER STORIES

From the beginning of *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), we see “A patchwork of people charred by the sun,” characters who have skin “like the bark of a juniper tree,” “sparse silver hair,” and legs “shackled by varicose veins” (57, 4, 8). The Mexican-American migrant farmworker family in the story, described as having “bare toes” and “unraveling braids” (7) is composed of Estrella, the protagonist; Petra, Estrella's mother; Perfecto, the stepfather (that is to say Estrella's mother's boyfriend); Alejo, Estrella's friend and love interest (and, by the end of the book, the informally adopted young man the family cares for); and the small children, all of whom have recently arrived into a new space, a rundown shack.² This represented new terrain for the author; unlike Viramontes' earlier short story characters who live in poverty in a house or an apartment, this family does not have a space or materials belongings that solidify to the reader who they are. Henceforth, Viramontes' physical depictions and continuous delineations of their bodies compose their identity both physical and material as well as their ownership as distinct entities. This particular novel represents both a synopsis of the accumulated knowledge about migrant fieldworkers as well as actualized representations of the female Chicana migrant body. It parallels Viramontes' agenda from her other written pieces and collection of short stories in being emblematic of aggrandizing the representation of the Chicana body.

Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano declared that, “Chicana feminism originates in the community and on the streets as political activism to end the oppression of women” (139). Working for the betterment of the entire community, Chicana writers found themselves with a most difficult task—that of working within the home and in the community. One of the few authors captivatingly and proactively encapsulating this triptych—feminism, community, and creativity—is Helena María Viramontes. Her skill at re-writing traditionally stereotyped Chican@ characters and roles with more accurate and meticulous representations is shown in her ability to stretch the role of motherhood into known territory for Chican@s, and to be rediscovered, perhaps (un)comfortably by mainstream culture as well. The subjectivity of mother is expanded by Viramontes into “child-mother” characters and often gives men and young boys the ability to mother. Viramontes “subjectifies” the mother protagonist in *Under the Feet of Jesus* in a very creative manner,

placing the mother, Petra, as one of the main agents of power.³ She is always “the mother,” as opposed to “mother” or her mother. Through the article “the”, essential in Spanish, Viramontes gives Petra much needed importance lacking in much of contemporary American literature when referring to this entity in the family unit. She problematizes a complicated subjectivity two-fold, as a Latina mother and as a mother, by placing Petra in a central juncture throughout the narrative. One of the ironies presented by the novel is that the mother is not healthy or physically strong—“Estrella noticed how purple and thick her veins were getting. Like vines choking the movement of her legs”—but she runs the house, disciplines her children, and makes all major decisions about her family’s future (61). These characteristics are particularly contradictory for mainstream American culture, for the admiration of “strong Americans” encapsulates in general the American value of strength, discipline and force as well as the possession of good health. Petra exemplifies the opposite; she is, in fact, in need of assistance by her children, from the oldest to the youngest, while preparing meals and caring for them.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Petra’s children and her community also superiorly respect her as a mother figure. We see this take place in all areas, from deciding what and how much can be afforded for food, to determining what to do with Alejo (who they welcome into their family) when his illness becomes serious. Petra at the store, a seemingly mundane task, is described in great detail by Viramontes. As Petra deliberates on each and every can and its price she is taking careful stock of what the family’s needs are and what they can afford:

She decided on four cans of Spam and stacked them into Estrella’s basket at \$1.80 each for a seven-ounce can and made a mental calculation of \$7.20, then returned the two cans and adjusted the amount, then realized the ESPECIAL that read three cans for \$5.00 which meant to buy six cans was cheaper in the long run and placed four more cans in the basket. (109)

By placing the reader in the mind of her character, Viramontes delivers us into the vivid reality of the situation. We are situated at the crux of agency and institutional/systematic powerlessness about Petra’s family and Viramontes’s re-definition of agency and motherhood. In Petra’s motherhood, she directs and orders, but also designates certain traditional mothering roles to Estrella, “the child-mother,” whom the brothers and sisters call “mother” at times. In fact this is inscribed into the reader early in the novel when the reader encounters a direct voice from one of the children calling Estrella “mother,” and thus establishing early on her multiple roles within the family. Petra’s poverty, and the similar poverty of Viramontes’s other female characters, does not confiscate her ability or agency while making decisions. It is Petra

who must bear the burden of deciding whether or not to take Alejo to the clinic—a journey that will cost money and put the family in potential danger facing la migra. Viramontes writes, “Petra took care of Alejo, not because of who he was, but because she was a mother too, and if Estrella was sick, or Ricky or Arnulfo were sick in the piscas, she would want someone to take care of them” (124). Petra exercises her agency over the family when she determines that Alejo must seek treatment. It is not that Petra is perfect or admirable, as much as that she is a realistic family- and community-oriented character. What makes her more real are a stream of descriptions about her physical and moral self: the recognition of her caesarian scars described as railroad tracks, her episodes of ill mental health in which her daughter Estrella must take on the role of the mother, and her willingness to take care of others less privileged than herself, which depict Petra as an actual living, working, struggling, surviving person-woman-mother. Viramontes’ layers enliven Petra’s true character and all her subjectivities, an entwinement of flesh, blood, and emotion, forcing us to recognize her humanity heightened by her poverty. Poverty reigns as one of the leitmotifs of the novel, caringly injected into the entire narrative.

Another extraordinary example of motherhood and poverty is illustrated in “The Cariboo Café,” one of Viramontes’s most anthologized short stories in her collection *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985). During a dramatic scene of love, protection, and fright, the mother protagonist searching for her lost son “crushes Geraldo against her, so tight, as if she wants to conceal him in her body again, return him to her belly” (78). This act relates directly to the notion of one’s body being offered in acts of devotion and desperation. The willingness to give one’s life, literally one’s body to protect another exemplifies that the body can be a source of strength and power as well as protection and wealth. The much acclaimed controversial story “Miss Clairol,” published in various anthologies independently, exemplifies the poor, inner-city mother, who may steal her hair color from a drug store, but who has a close and devoted relationship to her daughter, all while living in dire poverty.

Through Viramontes’ representation of mothering, the Mexican/Chican@ community is translated through a poetic voice that grounds an evident reality of poverty into American society in both the migrant fields and camps as well as in urban Chican@/Latin@ barrios. Viramontes highlights the ability to work as both mother and laborer by layering and complicating the subtle subjectivities of her characters. We see women working the fields while pregnant and taking their children with them into the fields—the formulation of this image is not simply glossed over by Viramontes, but it is intimately described:

Estrella was no more than four when she first accompanied the mother to the fields. She remembered crying just as the small girl was wailing now. The mother showed pregnant and wore large man's pants with the zipper down and a shirt to cover her drumtight belly. Even then, the mother seemed old to Estrella. Yet, she hauled pounds and pounds of cotton by the pull of her back, plucking with two swift hands, stuffing the cloudy bolls into her burlap sack, the row of plants between her legs. The sack slowly grew larger and heavier like the swelling child within her. (51)

By paralleling her work, struggle, and mothering, Viramontes sketches, draws, and fills in the varied and multiple characteristics and skills of a Chicana migrant mother. It is in authenticating reality that she reconstitutes the feminine. Such a scene is commonplace for most workers laboring in the fields with Estrella. Mother figures are present throughout the novel doing things commonly associated with mothers as opposed to workers: "A young boy cried, his cheeks smeared with snot and dirt, and his mother hushed him with water and sugar, then wiped his face with the corner of her work shirt. Another woman sat on the step of the pickup and nursed her baby, a diaper over her modest breast" (84).

Breasts for Viramontes are not sexualized as in most literature; these are working-class breasts. They are without the eroticized pornographic profile. Estrella's breasts are likened to "flan custard beneath her shirt whenever the truck bounced" (65)—no different than how other women's bodies are jostled by the truck. Breasts are tools in a culture of economic need. In "The Cariboo Café," one woman's breasts are described by a male observer without the morbidity with which they are commonly associated: "That Delia's got these unique titties. One is bigger than the other. Like an orange and grapefruit. I kid you not. They're like that on account of when she was real young she had some babies and they all sucked only one favorite tittie" (69). Delia's body reflects her experiences of work and struggle; her body bears the marks of having provided for life besides her own and of having responded with her body to the need of her children. Besides breasts often being centralized to femininity, they have also been marked as mechanisms of restriction throughout literature. Viramontes' consistently refutes this characterization by having the women in her stories overcome this fictitious representation. In "Growing," another short story by Viramontes, a girl rejects just these type of expectations when playing sports: "She was no longer concerned with her age, her menstruations, her breasts that bounced with every jump. All she wanted was an out at home plate. To hell with being benched" (41). Here Viramontes presents a girl who is not going to accept any dictation of who she is. She has empowered herself to be, even for just a moment, who she says, not who others are telling her to be. Hence, Viramontes

rarely defines a character exclusively by her breasts but instead presents them as yet another part in the complexity of embodiment. Again, in “Miss Clairol” we see the young woman helping her mother Arlene get ready for a date while Viramontes describes the mother as having no nipple on one of her breasts because one of her boyfriends has put out his cigarette on it (103). This is a violent and striking image that may perturb the reader deeply but which, as stated previously, formulates a canvas out of a woman’s breast that can be used as a metaphor to tell a particular and problematic reality.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, power struggles are illustrated through body parts, often symbolized by the hands. Petra’s transactions are well thought out, and she lets her daughter’s power be cradled both in and outside of her own power. Within the home, their powers run parallel. She fears her daughter’s maturity and falling in love, but she does not attempt to stall her growth: “Petra forced herself down the steps. Hadn’t she learned anything in her thirty-five years? That her two hands couldn’t hold anything back, including time?” (119). These hands are far from the hands of the young unnamed protagonist, parallel to Estrella, in the short story “The Moths,” hands that in fact confront and change destiny:

My hands began to fan out, grow like a liar’s nose until they hung by my side like low weights. Abuelita made a balm out of dried moth wings and Vicks and rubbed my hands, shaped them back to size and it was the strangest feeling. Like bones melting. Like sun shining through the darkness of your eyelids. I didn’t mind helping Abuelita after that, so Amá would push her hair back, hand me my sweater and shoes, and tell me to go to Mama Luna’s. (27)

We observe in the title *Under the Feet of Jesus* that Viramontes centralizes an unlikely part of the most recognizable Western figure, Jesus. She focuses on one of the last highlighted, most often unappreciated parts of the body: the feet. Throughout the novel we learn about the feet of all the characters, and this is not fortuitous. Again, this is a family of “bare toes” (7), a people toiling in the fields in “muddied boots and tennis shoes and sandals crunching back and forth” (85). Feet are employed symbolically throughout the novel. They are genderless; Estrella is unable to tell men from women by the look of their shoes. Describing the struggles and conditions of the migrants’ life, Viramontes speaks of “muddied shoes slipped off their feet. Ricky’s ankle red from not having worn socks, Cookie’s toenails needed clipping,” “Alejo’s big toes inverted from ill-fitting shoes” and Estrella’s feet “itching with swelling sweat and she could feel the constraint of her shoes as if her feet were bound” (163, 128, 87). A character’s strength, personality, a character’s soul, is revealed by Viramontes through the soles of her characters’ feet.

Beginning with a detailed description of the feet in Petra's precious, holy statue of Jesus, which she often kisses in prayer and for forgiveness, Viramontes writes, "The statue, draped in blue robes and crushing a green serpent with bare feet, stood on the elevated middle crate of the Holy Trinity" (165). Throughout the novel we learn of various powers of individual characters in relation to this image of Jesus crushing this serpent. The waning strength and life of Perfecto is alluded to, near the end: "Perfecto kicked at some pebbles with the toe of his shoe. The maggots appeared and he hadn't the energy to lift his boot and kill them" (162). Unlike his lover's beloved statue crushing the serpent, Perfecto cannot summon the will power to rid the world of its most lowly, powerless creature. The reader can feel the pure exhaustion and powerlessness during this passage. Estrella's strength is also conveyed using her feet and is both in contrast to that of Perfecto's and directly compared to Jesus and the serpent in Viramontes's powerful final scene.

The roof tilted downward and she felt gravity pulling but did not lose her footing. The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus, and a few pieces tumbled down and over the edge of the barn. No longer did she feel her blouse damp with sweat. No longer did she stumble blindly. She had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart. (175)

This passage is a testament of Estrella's growth throughout the novel. Viramontes again speaks through the body of her characters, specifically naming all of the parts, revealing the individual strength and power that Estrella has gained through her exploration into life; she has become wholly alive and aware of her physical embodiment.

This is not the only example of characters closeness to the divine, revealed to us by the image of their feet. A return to the store where Petra was purchasing the Spam is exemplary of Petra's strong relationship with the divine. Scouring the store for affordable and practical items Petra is distracted momentarily by something on the wall decor: "Unlike Marilyn's white pumps which were buried under the shriveled pods of Chile Negro, La Virgen was raised, it seemed to Petra, above a heavenly mound of bulbous garlic" (110). Garlic, is a vital herb for the alleviation of her varicose veins and its healing nature is now clear to Petra. Further along in the passage we find out that just as La Virgen is elevated above the garlic, Petra's search for the perfect rose-smelling garlic cloves has positioned her similarly: "Her bare toes were blue against the gray garlic, and for a moment, it looked like she stood amidst the clouds" (111). Petra seems to ascend into heaven, if for a fleeting moment, and is saved from the sweaty, stuffy, fly-infested earth to be with La Virgen and her blessed garlic high above the clouds.

Petra stores her most valuable possessions, her children's birth certificates, under the feet of her statuette of Jesus. These precious documents each display the tiny feet of Estrella, Ricky, Arnulfo, Cuca, and Perla.

Black ink feet on the birth certificates, five perfect circular toes on each foot, a topography print of her children recorded, dated, legal, for future use to establish age to enter school, when applying for working papers, for jury or military service, to prove citizenship, to obtain passports, to prove right to inheritance of property. (166)

The documents bearing the marks of these tiny feet are everything keeping her children safe, giving them a future in the United States. The children know that "if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus" (63). It is imperative that the children learn at a young age to stand their ground, just as Jesus is standing guard, protecting their documents, they must stand strong to protect themselves in the world. The children's feet are what allow them to claim their part of the United States, a luxury Petra and Perfecto do not have. These feet symbolize their freedom, their belonging, and their legality. As such, the children's realities are dramatically different from that of their mother and stepfather.

The importance of an accurate portrayal of truth and reality toward the goals and success of Chicana literature cannot be discounted. Articulating the lived experience of the Chicana@ culture and community, therefore, cannot be done without presenting the lived bodies of and in the community. Helena María Viramontes goes so far as to tell her stories and the stories of her community with their very bodies. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, she weaves together intimate descriptions of scars, bruises, over-worked hands and feet, "shackled legs", sweat and blood, making the body a living, communicating symbol of meaningful existence (9). The overtly political nature of her subject matter cannot be ignored when she so inextricably links it to her characters' reality. Characters then become people who suffer, live, love and survive, whose bodies alone can speak for themselves. These revolutionary and unconventional voices re-written and re-veiled serve to dislodge misconceptions and enriching the literary spectrum. As Yarbrow-Bejarano maintains:

The fact that Chicanas may tell stories about themselves and other Chicanas challenges the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority. In telling these stories Chicanas reject the dominant definition of what a Chicana is. In writing, they refuse the objectification imposed by gender roles and racial and economic exploitation. (141)

Yarbrow-Bejarano reminds us of the importance of inscribing subjectivity by the telling of stories from a certain "ownership." It is in seeing Estrella sleeping with her mother Petra that we see the physical closeness of Mexican/Chicana@ culture as positive. We

begin to understand that closeness, in fact, being “tied to the mother’s waist” as occurs early in the novel to some of the children, not as a punishment, but a practical act of love and protection as well as cultural conditioning (55).

By reading these stories unearthed by Viramontes’ pen we experience a different untold reality. Towards the end of the novel we see that “Estrella felt as if the mother was trying to hide her back,” into her body, when Petra asks her where she is going, while realizing that she is unable to change the minds of any of her five children. Nonetheless, before the end of the novel we have a perspective about Estrella that “subjectifies” her. She is strong: “parts doors like water,” and there is “no holding back the will of Estrella’s body”; she is spiritual: as she is standing at the “verge of faith”; she is a thinking young woman: “Estrella didn’t want him to feel like a slab of beef”; she is human, and gets tired like other young women (156, 164, 176, 140). Early on in the novel Estrella is shown tired and sore from working; she is affectionate and motherly to her brother and loving to her sisters: Estrella strokes Arulfo’s hair, his head on her lap; Estrella carries Perla on her shoulders and Cookie on her arms (53, 65, 104). Hence, because of Viramontes’ skill and ability to project the lived body, Estrella is to the reader much more than a young, faceless, poor migrant girl. She is a young woman with sexuality, will, faith, and spirit, as well as a poorly fed and physically abused body caused by the backbreaking work she has to endure and lack of health care but, nonetheless, the opposite of a victim.

Helena María Viramontes’s beautiful, explicit, and distinctly political depictions of the lived rural/migrant Mexican/Chicana experience in the characters of Petra and Estrella reveal the body as simultaneously a tool for work, a device of restraint, and a source of power and liberation, bearing the marks of a particular lived existence.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Helena María Virmaontes gives us the male and female, heterosexual, rural, multi-generational, migrant body. These members of the Chican@ community are all depicted and presented to us in a portrait of society that Viramontes makes visible. Her characters are reformulated for the reader to decipher. The experiences of struggle are fleshed out through characters both strong and weak, comprising a dynamic narrative of social and physical experience.

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NOTES

¹ The novel tells the story of a migrant family traditionally and meticulously examined in Chican@ literature. Literary pillars of Chican@ literature have established this essential precedent in telling the stories of migrant workers. Included are the historical and authentic representations authors Tomás Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, José Antonio Burciaga, Francisco X. Alarcón, Gloria Velazquez, Cherrie Moraga in her dramas, and recently poets Diana García and Gary Soto have given us of the farmworker.

² Since *Under the Feet of Jesus* has been so well studied, I will assume a general familiarity with the story line.

³ See Gutiérrez y Muhs's dissertation (2001) for a discussion on "subjectifying" as a verb.