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IV. Language, Literature, and the Theatre - Introduction

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Part IV. Language, Literature, and the Theater

Introduction

The very act of writing is political, as much as, if not more than, that which is written. For women this empowering act has been denied or neglected; for Chicanas even more so. A feminist analysis of literature often focuses on the work under scrutiny from a certain view of how it reflects patriarchal society, how the writer did or did not cast women in stereotypical roles, or how the work ties in to a feminist philosophy of literature. The essays included in this section reflect the concerns, views, and ideologies presented at the NACS conference *Voces de la Mujer* and the particular concerns of the participants who cast a critical eye at the various genres: Yolanda Broyles deals with *teatro*, Clara Lomas with poetry, Elba Sánchez with short fiction, and Alvina Quintana with the written word itself, in an assessment of language as a political tool that wields power, authority, and control.

In her analysis of the role of women in the Teatro Campesino, Yolanda Broyles sets forth a necessary and worthwhile revision of the Teatro's historical role in the development of Chicano theater. But the most valuable contribution of Broyles's work is not merely historical. Although her interviews with Socorro Valdez, Yolanda Parra, and Diane Rodríguez of the Teatro are certainly valuable, more important is the fact that she deepens our understanding of how the sexism that is often decried in the society at large exists even within a supposedly conscious and aware group, Chicano *teatristas*. Her paper posits a reevaluation or rather a valuation of the contributions women have made to the genre as a whole. Although she works mainly with the women of the Teatro Campesino, her findings should not be seen as an indictment of the Teatro Campesino, for other groups have also perpetuated sexism. As Chicano works are more closely scrutinized, the sexist nature of these will surely come to light; this, however, is not the only aim of feminist criticism. Broyles is laying a foundation for the study of Chicano theater that opens up new vistas for further study, for any thorough study of theater must

also seriously consider the contributions by the women members of the *teatros* and the portrayal of women in the plays themselves.

Clara Lomas reexamines a poetic text, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas's "A una Madre de Nuestros Tiempos," in an effort to explicate or better understand the theme. Cota-Cárdenas is in turn explaining recurrent themes in Chicana poetry: mothers, daughters, survival (themes which Tey Diana Rebolledo has explored elsewhere in relation to *abuelitas* in Chicana poetry). Lomas, unlike Broyles, is not focusing on a wide genre in order to find a particular truth or fact; she is, on the other hand, closely examining a poetic text to find a general truth.

Lomas allows her reader to come along with her on a search for identity as she leads through both structural and semantic explorations of the text which end in a redefinition of "mother" and of "Chicana." The value of Lomas's piece lies in its total absorption of the text. The analysis becomes a text worthy of study as well, for she aptly handles the critic's tools to forge a new vision not only of the text under consideration, but of the approach used by the critic herself. Such work can easily become a mere exercise, yet Lomas manages to offer both a readable and a fruitful piece which presents insights that go beyond the poem. She explains, for example, how the very first word of the poem—"perdonanos"—establishes the tone of the poem on both structural and semantic levels, as the speaker uses the imperative mood and at the same time establishes the voice as a collective and individual one, the reader's.

Lomas holds that Cota-Cárdenas's poems provide a redefinition of the socioeconomic and even cultural role of "mother" for Chicanas. She supports her thesis by applying an eclectic literary approach that permits not only a linguistic analysis but a structural, and in some ways Marxist, analysis of the poem, which also allows the use of the communications model to explain the poems' message.

Elba Sánchez underlines the need to look beyond the deceptively simple form to rich and complex contextual content of Luz Garzón's short narrative "Un Paseo." Under such scrutiny the story emerges as a description of two coexisting realities, not merely that of the undocumented and the documented Hispanics, but of the personal and universal mother/child relationships and the socioeconomic history which have led to "un paseo."

Sánchez points to the dialogue and likens the surface simplicity of the narration to Tomás Rivera's style. She finds a complex, underlying thematic content in both. She further analyzes the textual style by focusing on the dichotomous elements as found in the characters.

As she turns her attention to the protagonists, she first notes their anonymity, which allows for their function as icons or symbols. "La madre" could be "cualquier madre" but more explicitly all mothers. Garzón's character—an undocumented mother—becomes a representative mother. Upon further analysis of the characters, Sánchez frames a contrapunctual world—the world the story presents which unites and, through shift of point of view and dialogue, makes two realities one. In so doing, Sánchez underscores the significance of the event outside the story, in the sociohistorical present where "Un Paseo" is also an indictment of a society that maligns and mistreats not just undocumented but all migrant or farm laborers. "Un Paseo" shows two mothers and their sons traveling the same road, but in extremely different vehicles. Sánchez claims that the readers can see themselves in either one and thereby further appreciate the intensity of the social commentary.

The irony of the title and the naive and innocent children's voices set against the harsh cruel voices of the authorities—both U.S. and Mexican—provides clues as to the author's real message. The adults, whose jaded, defeated lives can be gleaned from the narrator's description, as well as their own words, are also "blind" to the world outside their own predicament.

Although Sánchez mentions the cultural relevance of the thematic content to the structure or form, she fails to stress other aspects of the narrative which add to or detract from the author's message. For example, she ignores the obvious conclusion which a linguistic analysis would yield. Although this is a minor point, it is one which would enhance her analysis and could be explored in terms of her thesis. The use of the word *bomba* for "balloon," for example, presents at least one instance of a possible culture-bound vocabulary. Many of us use not *bomba* but *vejiga* or *globo*.

Aside from this omission, Sánchez's work offers us a critical view of "Un Paseo," a view which renders the story not merely intelligible, for it already is that, but perhaps more easily accessible as social commentary, a complex and serious indictment of society under the guise of a simple tale of a mother and son.

Alvina Quintana takes a very different approach, yet one which ultimately seeks to achieve a similar understanding and use. She uses the hermeneutic approach to postulate some theories of how language and power are interrelated as shown in the work of Latinas. Much of her theoretical framework comes from H  l  ne Cixous and other feminist theorists. Her application of these to Mexicano/Chicano authors is invaluable.

Quintana focuses on the ideologically based oppression of the female protagonists in the stories of Mexican author Kitzia Hoffman and Argentine Sylvia Bullrich. She then turns to two Chicanas—Sylvia Gonzales and Norma Alarc  n—to present further proof of how masculine discourse has dominated writing and thereby subjugated or exploited female consciousness. Alarc  n’s prose on the Malintzin myth and Gonzales’s poem “Chicana Evolution” are seen as steps in the right direction, as women’s writing moves toward what Quintana calls a realistic and holistic approach, which “is needed for the gender-balanced ideology of the future.”

Because language is power and because women have traditionally been relegated to powerless positions, an analysis of language can provide usable models for change. Quintana claims that women’s discourse “provides the means by which to implement change in history and ideology,” and that “for Mexicanas/Chicanas this change translates into the possibility of defining ourselves in history, liberating women and men from the oppressive roles which have been handed down by masculine discourse.” Using a hermeneutic approach and methodically drawing parallels between usage and message, she challenges her readers to reread the texts under examination, and to make allowance for the inherent ideological bias in reading any masculine text.

Writing is political, and women writing constitute a political voice that insists on being heard. These essays provide insight and move us toward a rethinking of all writing, but more importantly, to the writing of Chicanas as critics. Our literature merits serious analysis, and these writers through their investigations provide the tools and polemical ground for a truly complete view of Chicano literature.