

Dissertação de Mestrado

**OF DOGS AND MEN: STRATEGIES OF CONTROL AND RESISTANCE
IN THE FICTION OF HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES**

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This dissertation focuses on two short stories – “Neighbors” and “The Cariboo Cafe” – published in the volume *The Moths*, in 1985, and the novel *Their Dogs Came With Them*, published in 2007 by Chicana author and critic Helena María Viramontes.

In order to understand certain issues with which Viramontes deals in her fiction, it is first necessary to briefly explore the history of Chicanos. Chapter one analyses this history of conquest, colonization, annexation and migration, from the Spanish invasion started in early sixteenth century to the current days of illegal immigration to the U.S. In between is the Spanish colonization, which decimated the native peoples of Mexico and gave origin to a *mestizo* race; the struggle for Independence from Spain, which finally came in 1821; the immediate interest of the U.S. in the Mexican territory, leading to war and the annexation of a great part of Mexico’s territory; the life of Chicanos as foreigners on that which was one day their land. The historical accounts provided by

Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña and Chicana critic Gloria Anzaldúa serve as the basis for the discussion of Chicanos' history, which are complemented by the ideas of U.S historians Eric Foner, George Tindall and David Shi in order to provide a less restricted perspective on the subject.

With this history of conquest and annexation, Chicanos have developed a very particular relationship with the space they occupy. As foreigners in a country which oppresses them – the U.S. –, the relationship between Chicanos and space is permeated by relationships of oppression and control by Anglos. That is why chapter two covers the relationships between space and power in the fiction of Helena María Viramontes, mainly in her portrayal of East Los Angeles in the short story “Neighbors” and in the novel *Their Dogs Came With Them*. The chapter analyses how the first narrative moment of the novel – the early 1960s – is marked by neo-colonial power exercised over Chicanos by the construction of freeways which change the landscape of their neighborhood and the lives of both those who are evicted and those who stay. In order to discuss it, the work of Marshall Berman is used to help draw a parallel between L.A. and what happened in the Bronx in New York at the same time. In the second moment of the novel – the early 1970s – control assumes the form of disciplinary power, through the actions of the Quarantine Authority set to enforce a rabies quarantine in the region. The work of Michel Foucault offers the basis for the theoretical discussion concerning the disciplinary society.

In order to resist the oppression caused over Chicanos by Anglo society, Chicana literature makes use of a series of strategies. The use of focalization in Viramontes's works, for instance,

encourages [the] reader to empathetically identify, in turn, with each of the character-focalizers and to undertake, without intervention or help from an external

narrator-focalizer, the hard work of ordering the events and synthesizing the character's disparate perspectives. (MOYA, 2002, p. 191-192).

Multiple focalization also contributes to the fragmentation of Viramontes's works, which in turn reflects the fragmentation in her characters' lives. Fragmentation is not used just for stylistic effect. It is indeed an integral part of both Chicanos lives and Viramontes's work. Chapter three is thus dedicated to the analysis of these strategies of resistance – namely, fragmentation and focalization – in the short story “The Cariboo Cafe” and in the novel *Their Dogs Came With Them*. In both works, several stories are at first developed separately but then converge in a tragic ending. The work of Paula Moya is of great importance for this part of this dissertation. In this chapter, I also discuss the influence of the theory by psychologist John Milgram, popularly called “six degrees of separation,” to popular works of art in cinema, theater, and literature, and the influence of this theory and of film language in Viramontes's narrative strategies.

Those who have had the opportunity to read the fiction of Helena María Viramontes realize the richness and complexity of her work. It is my hope that this dissertation is able to show how Viramontes's fiction aims at changing our consciousness as readers, by foregrounding the multiple oppressions affecting Chicanos living in the U.S., especially in their relation to their space, and how literature may be used as a locus of resistance against the control exercised upon Chicanos.

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