

***IT'S A SMALL WORLD: DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE IN HELENA
MARÍA VIRAMONTES'S "THE CARIBOO CAFE"***

Lidia da Cruz Cordeiro Moreira (Mestre, UERJ)

lidccm@gmail.com

RESUMO: “The Cariboo Café”, conto da escritora chicana Helena María Viramontes, é um excelente exemplo de como a teoria de Stanley Milgram, conhecida popularmente como *Seis graus de separação*, tem sido usada na ficção. No conto, três narrativas, aparentemente separadas, primeiro divergem para depois convergirem em um clímax trágico. Para alcançar esse efeito, a autora faz uso da fragmentação e da focalização múltipla como estratégias narrativas. Neste artigo, investigarei como essas estratégias contribuem tanto para retratar o sujeito chicano de maneira multifacetada quanto para levar o leitor a agir conscientemente.

Palavras-chave: Helena María Viramontes, “The Cariboo Café,” *Seis graus de separação*, fragmentação, focalização múltipla

I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation between us and everyone else on this planet. The President of the United States, a gondolier in Venice, just fill in the names. I find that extremely comforting, that we're so close, but I also find it like Chinese water torture that we're so close because you have to find the right six people to make the connection.

Six Degrees of Separation, by John Guare

In May 1967, psychologist Stanley Milgram published “The Small World Problem” in the first issue of *Psychology Today*. He described his “Small World Experiment” which aimed at solving the long-lasting small world problem: “If you randomly choose any two people in the world, how many acquaintances would be needed to link them?” (KLEINFELD, 2002, p. 74). To tackle the problem, Milgram asked a few hundred people in Omaha, Nebraska, and Wichita, Kansas, to send a package to anyone they knew personally that might be able to make the package get to a certain man in Boston, Massachusetts. By doing so, he was able to trace back how many people were between the original sender and the final receiver. By the end of the experiment, the average number of links between the first and the last person was six, which led Milgram to the conclusion that any two people in the United States are linked by no more than five other people.

Although highly discredited in the academia for lack of scientific basis for his conclusion, Milgram’s experiment, however, made its way into popular imagination. After all, who has never had that small-world feeling, such as described by Milgram himself in his article? He tells the story of a man from Peoria, Illinois, who meets a stranger from England while travelling in Tunisia and finds out they are both acquainted to another man in Detroit. The fascination caused by such coincidences in a world that is both becoming bigger and smaller every day, has led playwrights, filmmakers and writers to base some of their works on Milgram’s theory.

In fact, his theory is now widely known as “Six degrees of separation” after John Guare’s play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, published in 1990 and made into a critically acclaimed movie in 1993, directed by Fred Schepisi and starring Will Smith, Stockard Channing and Donald Sutherland. In the play and movie, the stories of a young man named

Paul and a middle-aged couple, the Kittredges, cross in New York. In 2006, ABC, the American television network, released a TV drama series of the same name as the play and movie. However, the series shares with them only the title and the fact that it takes place in New York. It is about six residents of New York and how their lives are connected to one another more and more as time passes. The series was short-lived, being cancelled in the middle of its first season. Another famous movie which also appropriates Milgram's theory to structure its plot is the Mexican *Amores Perros*, starred by Gael García Bernal and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu in 2000. Released under its Spanish title in the U.S. market, it is, however, sometimes translated as *Love's a Bitch*. It takes place in Mexico City, where three separate stories converge in a tragic accident.

Not only have theatre, cinema and TV appropriated Milgram's theory in their creations, but more recently literature has also been using it. Although it seems to be much harder to successfully achieve this effect in written language, some works of Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes are remarkable examples of the use of "Six degrees of separation."

Her most recent novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, published in 2007, is constructed in this fashion: different stories with different characters, at first, separated and unrelated, which then converge in the novel's climax. In an interview given to Daniel Olivas and published on the website *La Bloga* in April 2007, Viramontes herself refers to the structure of the novel as an "intersection structure" and acknowledges its resemblance to the structure of *Amores Perros* though she recognizes it was not intentional, since the movie was released after she had started writing the novel. (VIRAMONTES, 2007a). However, intentional or not, the influence of cinematographic technique in the novel is

undeniable. In a lecture called “Finding the Metaphorical Key *Under the Feet of Jesus*,” delivered at the 2001 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), in Washington D.C., Norma Helsper (2009, p. 6) affirms of Viramontes’s novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, that “[t]he handling of space and simultaneity often owes a debt to film, with the equivalent of wide-angle camera sweeps from one scene to another.” We may perfectly extend this affirmation to *Their Dogs Came With Them*.

In the interview mentioned previously, Viramontes also recognizes she had used this same structure in a previous short story, “The Cariboo Cafe,” published in the volume *The Moths and other stories*, in 1985. In this short story, three narratives intersect and converge in a dramatic ending. It opens with Sonya and Macky, two young children, who are illegal Mexican immigrants in the U.S. As both parents have to work “until they saved enough to move into a finer future where the toilet was one’s own and the children needn’t be frightened” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 65), after school the girl has to pick her younger brother up at a neighbor’s house and take care of him until their parents arrive in the evening. Being only five or six years old, the job proves to be too much for her, as she loses the key to their apartment in a school fight, though she considers the key to be her “guardian saint.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 65). Locked out of the apartment, she tries to go back to the neighbor’s house where she had picked her brother up, but eventually they get lost in the neighborhood. Scared of the police, since their father told them that they should avoid the police at all cost: “[t]he polie are men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 67), Sonya does not know what to do. The first part of the story ends with Sonya and Macky heading to the zero-zero place, where she thought they could be protected.

The second part of the story is narrated in first person, a resource very rarely used by Viramontes, in a tone that leads the reader to suppose the narrator is giving a deposition or an interview. It is immediately clear in the first paragraph that the narrator is the owner of the zero-zero place where the kids were heading to in the first part. He calls it the double zero cafe, since the paint is peeled off in the sign and all one can read now is the double “o.” It is evident that the zero-zero place is the Cariboo Cafe from the story’s title. The narrator claims to be an honest man, who only tries to provide the best service he can to his customers, although, at the same time, he describes them as the worst kind of scum. He also seems to feel guilty after snitching on three “illegals” that had entered the cafe to the police. The reader also finds out he is divorced and had a son, who died young and would be about thirty-six years old if alive. In the third part of the story, it becomes clear that his son died in Vietnam. The cafe owner seems to miss his son so much that he takes a liking of a junky who is a regular at his place, for the only reason that he is about the same age his son would be. In the following passage, we realize that something very serious happened at the cafe: “I tried scrubbing the stains off the floor, so that my customers won’t be reminded of what happened. But they keep walking as if my cafe ain’t fit for lepers.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 68). Later the narrator also mentions that a crazy lady and two kids started all the trouble and that he recognized the two kids on a bulletin about missing children on TV that night, but he decided not to call the police immediately, since he was not really sure. However, the next day the woman and the kids enter the cafe again and at this moment the second part ends.

The third part of “The Cariboo Cafe” starts with first-person narration and focuses on the story of a woman whose son, Geraldo, disappeared. The reader may infer that she

comes from a Latin-American country, since the Contras are mentioned. The woman goes to the police looking for her son, for she believes he was taken by them, who must have mistaken him for a Contra. She cannot believe it when the police officer tells her they only arrest spies and criminals and she answers, “Spies? Criminals? [...] He is only five and a half years old. [...] What kind of crimes could a five-year-old commit?” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 73). Without any help from the police, the woman returns home to her endless waiting, until a nephew decides to take her to his home in the U.S. One day, as she walks the streets of the North-American city where she now lives with her nephew, she spots a little boy in the crowd whom she believes is her Geraldo and she takes him with her. A few paragraphs later, we realize she also took the boy’s sister. The woman bathes the boy, changes his clothes and puts him to sleep, but she seems not to be aware of the presence of the girl in the room.

The next day, they return to the Cariboo Cafe where they had been the night before. This part is narrated in third person and a few paragraphs are focalized by the cafe owner. This time he calls the police because “[c]hildren gotta be with their parents, family gotta be together [...] It’s only right.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 77). As the police enter the cafe, the woman realizes they are going to take her son from her a second time, and she does what she can to stop them, including throwing steaming coffee into their faces. The last paragraph is again narrated by the woman, as she heads towards her tragic ending:

And I laugh at his ignorance. How stupid of him to think that I will let them take my Geraldo away just because he waves that gun like a flag. Well, to hell with you, you pieces of shit, do you hear me? Stupid, cruel pigs. To hell with you all, because you can no longer frighten me. I will fight you for my son until I have no hands left to hold a knife. I will fight you all because you’re all farted out of the Devil’s ass, and you’ll not

take us with you. I am laughing, howling at their stupidity because they should know by now that I will never let my son go. And then I hear something crunching like broken glass against my forehead and am blinded by the liquid darkness. But I hold onto his hand. That I can feel, you see, I'll never let go. Because we are going home. My son and I. (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 78-79).

In “Hungry Women: Borderlands Mythos in Two Stories by Helena María Viramontes,” Wendy Swyt mentions the fragmentation of time, space, memory, and voice in “The Cariboo Cafe”. (SWYT, 2001). Firstly, time is fragmented since the story takes place at two different moments: the present of all the characters, with the kids’ struggle to get home and their meeting the woman and the owner at the Cariboo Cafe; and the past of both the cafe owner and, mainly, of the woman. Secondly, space is fragmented too, since the present events happen mainly in the cafe and the streets surrounding it, but the past of the woman in a Latin-American country breaks this unity. Furthermore, the memory of all the characters, who either narrate the story themselves or focalize it, is also fragmented. And finally, the use of polyphony, a multiplicity of voices, is the last aspect in its fragmentation.

It is interesting, however, to note that the story begins in a quite conventional fashion and fragmentation only escalates little by little throughout it, as these different types of fragmentation influence the structure. The first part is structured in a traditional manner: the first paragraph briefly explains the kids’ background and their present situation; the second paragraph explains why the kids are locked outside their apartment; it proceeds for a few paragraphs as a description of what Sonya sees while she waits for her parents until she has the idea of returning to Mrs. Avila’s home; then, it goes on as a description of their unsuccessful journey until they reach the Cariboo Cafe. The whole first part is narrated in

the past tense, without any shift in time, place or voice. Verb tense and focalization are a constant. However, fragmentation is already present in the memory of the girl who cannot find her way back to Mrs. Avila's home, since "[t]hings never looked the same when backwards." (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 66). The setting is described as "a maze of alleys and dead ends, the long, abandoned warehouses shadowing any light." (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 67).

Fragmentation begins to deepen in the beginning of the second part. Firstly, there is a clear change in voice, as it is now narrated in the first person. We also realize the narrator is a different character, who had not been introduced before – the owner of the Cariboo Cafe. The time is still the same – the present –, although it takes the reader a few paragraphs to realize it. The use of verb tenses contributes to this feeling, since the cafe owner usually starts his stories using one tense and abruptly changes to another for no apparent reason:

I *was scraping* off some birdshit glue stuck to this plate, see, when I *hear* the bells jingle against the door. I hate those fucking bells. That was Nell's idea. Nell's my wife; my ex-wife. So people won't sneak up on you, says my ex. Anyway, I'm *standing* behind the counter staring at this short woman [...] Funny thing but I *didn't see* the two kids 'til I *got* to the booth. All of a sudden I *see* these big eyes looking over the table's edge at me. (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 69-70, my emphasis).

His changing from past to present, and back to past and present again dazes the reader. (MOORE, 1998). Moreover, it becomes clear later that he is narrating the events at a future point in time, since he mentions the terrible events started by the woman and the children, which are the story's dénouement.

Furthermore, his story is not as cohesive as the one in the first part. According to Deborah Moore (1998), "the narration of the story seems to lack a center. We no longer

have a unified story line as in the first section. Instead, it is full of half-told stories and partial descriptions.” Here, memory plays an important role. Since this second part is narrated in first person by the cafe owner, his memory is what shapes the facts narrated. But he himself is a fragmented man, with a fragmented memory. Probably as a result of his past – the loss of a son at war, the parting of his wife, the decadence of the cafe he has owned for more than twenty years – his present state of mind is quite confusing: “See, I go bananas. Like my mind fries with the potatoes and by the end of the day, I’m deader than dogshit.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 71). This reflects in the fragmentation of the second part of the short story, which becomes a “jumbled interior monologue” (MOORE, 1998), an entanglement of facts and impressions, present and past events, through which different characters, both relevant and irrelevant to his narrative, parade.

In the third part of the story, fragmentation finally reaches its peak. First of all, the reader is transported to an uncertain place, probably a country in Latin-America, where unspeakable acts are committed against children:

He’s got lice. Probably from living in the detainers. Those are the rooms where they round up the children and make them work for their food. I saw them from the window. Their eyes are cult glass, and no one looks for sympathy. They take turns, sorting out the arms from the legs, heads from the torsos. [...] But the children no longer cry. They just continue sorting as if they were salvaging cans from a heap of trash. (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 72).

The time is also not clear. This part is mostly narrated in the present tense, but later on in the story we realize that its beginning – the part which does not take place in the U.S. – is a flashback from a few years before. Suddenly, the woman is transported to present-day United States and is sitting at the Cariboo Cafe after miraculously finding her son in the

street. Later we realize that the boy is, in fact, little Macky from the first part of the story. The use of focalization and narrative voice contributes even more to the growing sense of fragmentation, when the narrative abruptly changes from first to third person: “*I bathe* him. He flutters in excitement, the water gray around him [...], his hair shiny from the dampness. He finally sleeps. So easily, *she thinks*.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 76, my emphasis). Fragmentation expands one step further when the focalizing character also changes from the woman to the girl and back to the woman again in the following paragraphs:

The hotel neon shines on his back and she [= the woman] covers him.

All the while the young girl watches her brother sleeping. She [= the girl] removes her sneaker, climbs into the bed, snuggles up to her brother, and soon her breathing is raspy, her arms under her stomach.

The couch is her [= the woman’s] bed tonight. Before switching the light off, she checks once more to make sure this is not a joke. Tomorrow she will make arrangements to go home. [...]” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 76).

This criss-crossing use of focalization is emphasized more and more as the end of the story approaches and “a cacophony of voices appears” (MOORE, 1998). The woman and the cafe owner alternate as focalizing characters until the woman finally recovers her first-person voice in the very last paragraph, already transcribed previously, in which the tormented character reaches the pinnacle of her disorientation, culminating in her death.

The sense of fragmentation produced in the reader by all these narrative strategies used by Viramontes parallels the different levels of fragmentation in the lives of her characters. Sonya and Macky are momentarily, but dangerously, separated from their family; their section of the story is, therefore, the least fragmented one. The cafe owner is permanently separated from his son and wife; however, though confused, he is still capable

of retaining his sanity and moving on with his solitary life. His section of the story is thus more fragmented than the first, but less than the third. The woman is permanently separated from her son, and also from her home and her sanity. She is no longer capable of distinguishing reality from imagination, present from past; therefore, her section of the story is the most fragmented one. It is interesting to note here that the children have names and so do some of the secondary characters, but neither the cafe owner nor the woman has a name. Their fragmentation is so deep that they are robbed of their names.

Here we can also see the important role played by family in Viramontes's narrative, especially in the characters' sense of fragmentation. According to Deborah Moore (1998), "Viramontes builds her story around the form created by the image of a tight nucleus, the family, beginning to spin and gain momentum, until it spirals and fragments outward." In other words, the expanding fragmentation of the short story finds a parallel in the expanding fragmentation of families. It starts mildly fragmented, as Sonya and Macky's family is only temporarily broken. It becomes more and more fragmented as the families of the cafe owner and the woman are permanently shattered. Deborah Moore (1998) adds that,

[w]ith this powerful image as the structure of her story, Viramontes demands that the reader take note of the pattern of increasing fragmentation of families, individual and collective, in our society. [...] Viramontes is able to disrupt reader perception, thereby causing the reader to refocus and rethink the causes of and possible solutions for the problem of expanding fragmentation in our cultures.

This excerpt points to the challenging and transforming character of Viramontes's literature. The reader is called into action after reading the story. As the discomfort caused in the reader by the zigzagging narrative parallels the uncomfortable position of those displaced fragmented characters, the reader identifies with the characters and his or her

consciousness is awakened to social injustices and called into action. The reader is challenged “to become a better, more sensitive, interpreter of the social world represented in the text.” (MOYA, 2002, p. 191).

What further contributes to the disruption of the reader is the fact that fragmentation also expands from an isolated case – the kids’ – to a multitude of cases when they reach the café – besides the owner and the woman, Paulie, the junkie; Delia, his girlfriend or wife; JoJo, the owner’s lost son; his ex-wife, Nell; and the illegals that are captured by the police in the cafe’s bathroom are all fragmented characters. This way, Viramontes engages the reader in a condition which seems to be universal in contemporary reality. Moreover, the lack of clarity concerning who those characters are and where they come from – we are not sure what country the woman is from; we have no idea what the origin of the cook is, among other things – also contributes to this feeling of universality. The reader ultimately identifies with the characters, even if he or she is thousands of miles away, since fragmentation is not dealt with as an individual’s condition, or even a community’s condition, but as a condition omnipresent in today’s society. According to Moore (1998), Viramontes “hopes to widen the scope of the narrative, bringing the reader to understanding that this reality speaks to and about an increasing audience. Viramontes achieves this with a structure of the expanding scope of fragmentation within the story.”

Furthermore, narrative fragmentation requires from the reader what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “la facultad”: “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.” (ANZALDÚA, 1999, p. 60). According to Wendy Swyt (2001), “[b]ecause temporality and point of view are deliberately fragmented, meaning is dependent on deep structures that suggest the

interconnections between events that manifest racial, gendered and political oppression.” The reader is, therefore, invited to read below the surface, to interpret the layers of oppression to which Latinos are subjected to in the U.S.

In the very beginning of the story, little Sonya already knows the weight of being a female in a Chicano displaced family: she is not older than six and already responsible for taking care of both her younger brother and their apartment, while their parents are at work. Furthermore, as she ponders about how to tell her parents how she lost their key, she does not know which offense carries the worse penalty: the loss of the key itself or the fact that she had lost it while fighting a boy who wanted to see under her dress and succeeded. Here, gendered oppression is at work together with economic oppression. Were her family not poor and displaced, Sonya would never have to face such responsibilities at so early an age. Were she not Chicana, she would not have to worry about telling her parents that a boy had seen under her dress. However, in Chicano culture, the mistrust associated with women is so overwhelming that the girl feels guilty for what had happened. She seems to have already internalized her culture’s prejudice against women at a very early age. To these layers of oppression, political oppression is also added, since while looking after her brother, the girl also has to worry about the police, which was “La migra in disguise and thus should always be avoided.” (VIRAMONTES, 1985, p. 65). As illegal immigrants, Sonya and her family cannot count on the police for help. The scope of the political oppression is expanded through the stories of the cafe owner, who lost a son to the Anglo war in Vietnam, and the woman, who also lost a son to the war in her country. Here, Viramontes turns her focus to the plight of women in several countries who lose their children to war or violence. Therefore, we may conclude that

[t]he narrative design illustrates the experience of cultural hybridity as it exposes and critiques structures of domination in Chicano/a border culture. Fragmenting temporality, place, memory and voice, Viramontes's narratives inscribe the ways that various oppressions interact in situated contexts." (SWYT, 2001).

Besides raising awareness to the social conditions of her characters and the multiple discriminations suffered by them, Viramontes also empowers unprivileged, marginalized characters traditionally silenced by canonic literature, by giving them a voice. Viramontes's brand of "democratic fiction" (VIRAMONTES, 2007b, p. 41) which does not focus on a protagonist but on several characters is certainly enhanced by her skillful use of focalization. Introduced by French critic Gérard Genette in 1972, the term has helped make certain issues clear, such as "*who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? [...] who is the narrator? – or more simply, the question who sees? and the question who speaks?*" (apud MOYA, 2002, p. 185).

Furthermore, by allowing several distinct characters to focalize their share of the story, Viramontes also avoids portraying the Latino subject as a monolithic homogeneous subject, again breaking with the conventional view on this subject. Although she does not avoid portraying the conditions in which many Latinos live in the U.S. – poverty, illegality, displacement, oppression – she avoids reducing these conditions into a stereotypical portrait. In Wendy Swyt's words (2001), "[t]he information constructed by each voice challenges, undercuts, and supplements the perspectives of the other characters, suggesting a referencing pattern that resists reduction."

In conclusion, Viramontes uses fragmentation and multiple focalization not merely on a whim. Her use of these strategies is "unique in the way it attempts to call into existence an ideal reader [...]. She employs a narrative structure [...] that is designed to reproduce in

her ideal reader a transformation of consciousness.” (MOYA, 2002, p. 185). The consciousness of the reader is set into action as he or she feels so lost in the fragmented narrative that he or she identifies with the equally lost characters. Furthermore, she allows the reader to have a multiple insight into the Chicano subject, instead of a reductionist monolithic stereotyped view. In “The Cariboo Cafe,” as well as in her novels, Viramontes manages, therefore, to make use of the nowadays well-known *Six degrees of separation* structure in order to shape her work in a way that, while it is universally recognized, it also raises awareness to the plight of the Chicano subject. In other words, she uses a generally acclaimed form to shape this specific subject matter, in a way that even readers who do not belong to this reality can identify with her narrative. Viramontes herself beautifully summarizes her use of form and matter in her essay “Nopalitos”: “Subject matter and form. They met, became lovers, often quarrelled, but nonetheless, Helena María Viramontes was born.” (VIRAMONTES, 1989, p. 37).

ABSTRACT: “The Cariboo Café,” a short story written by Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes, is an outstanding example of how Stanley Milgram’s theory, popularly known as *Six degrees of separation*, has been used in fiction. In the story, three apparently separate narratives first diverge, and then converge in a tragic climax. To achieve this effect, the author makes use of fragmentation and multiple focalization as narrative strategies. In this article, I will investigate how these strategies contribute both to portraying the Chicano subject in a multifaceted way and to calling the reader into conscious action.

Keywords: Helena María Viramontes, “The Cariboo Café,” *Six degrees of separation*, fragmentation, multiple focalization

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