



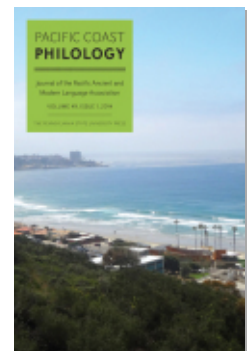
PROJECT MUSE®

*Rebozos de palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical
Reader* ed. by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs (review)

Jeehyun Lim

Pacific Coast Philology, Volume 49, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 139-142 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/542643>

of earlier realism or of eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century discussions of space and place might have been helpful here. Nor does Lyon delve deeply into the conceptual insights that the literary readings might yield. While the introduction signals an intention to use these readings to correct or complement both phenomenological and Marxist-influenced theories (Foucault and LeFebvre), the correctives that late realist treatments of place might offer remain mostly implicit and undeveloped.

Lyon's book is not a theoretical treatise on place, however, but an investigation of place as it was experienced and understood in late poetic realism. He makes a strong case that poetic realist works diagnosed and depicted the erosion of place under the conditions of late nineteenth-century urbanization, modernization, and capitalism. On the whole, the book provides excellent insight not only into the development of the phenomenon of place but also to late realism more generally. It is a strong contribution to the vein of criticism that sees in late realism a response to the realities of modernity, rather than a retreat from them.

Katra Byram
Ohio State University

Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, ed. *Rebozos de palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*

Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2013. Pp. 296, \$35

As a critical reader on Helena María Viramontes, *Rebozos de palabras* accomplishes the dual task of affirming Viramontes's contributions to U.S. literature in accordance with traditional author-centered literary criticism and of demonstrating the theoretical capacity of Chicana feminism to connect the work of literature to larger cultural and political concerns. The evolution of Viramontes's creative writing career—from her first collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), to her critically acclaimed novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and, most recently, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007)—is carefully explicated in the nine critical essays of the reader. Likewise, a careful attention to Viramontes's craft of writing is manifest in the close readings of all the essays. Barbara Brinson Curiel's contribution, which offers Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as an intertext for *Under the Feet of Jesus*, is probably most illustrative of the function of this critical reader to place Viramontes in the field of U.S. literature. By examining the themes, symbols, and motifs shared by Steinbeck's canonical text and Viramontes's newer text, Curiel

both positions Viramontes as heiress to the tradition of social realism in U.S. literature and contextualizes the exploitation of the Chicano farmworkers through the historical example of the dispossession of farmworkers during the Dust Bowl migration.

Yet this critical reader's interest is not so much in canonizing Viramontes. Whereas such readers dedicated to a single writer sometimes adopt a strictly formalist approach that views the creative world of the writer as closed off from the rest of the world, *Rebozos de palabras's* insistence on Chicana feminist literary politics sets this reader apart from those solely invested in enshrining individual writers. Sonia Saldívar-Hull's foreword first situates Viramontes in the company of other Chicana writers who, as we come to see in the essays that follow, are nested in a larger discourse of Chicana/Latina feminism surveyed in Gutiérrez y Muhs's introduction (viii, 8–10). Consequently, we get a sense of Viramontes as a writer who engages with the world from a Chicana feminist perspective. Gutiérrez y Muhs's references to "intersectionality" and "communal feminism" as key tenets of Chicana feminism allow us to understand Viramontes's fiction as based on the experiences and perspectives of a marginalized group but also as applicable to and educational for readers who are not of the same background as the writer (2, 10).

Several essays in the collection illustrate this. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's discussion of the Asian American characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* elucidates an interracial imagination in the text that has elided critical attention to this point. Raelene Wyse's discussion of the resonances between Chicano and Chilean experiences of trauma and cultural memories continue the critical examination of the trans-American scope of Viramontes's literary intervention—a notable example of which is Saldívar-Hull's reading of Viramontes in *Feminism On the Border* (2000). Lastly, the critical reader includes two, previously unpublished, interviews with Viramontes, one with Gutiérrez y Muhs and the other with José Antonion Rodríguez, in which Viramontes mention African-American women writers and the white socialist writers of the 1930s as literary influences on her writing likewise shows an investment in the horizontal lines of affinity and solidarity that literature can create. From the perspective of *Rebozos de palabras's* interest in building coalitions, Juan D. Mah y Busch's argument that "Viramontes's fictional characters [are] narrative demonstrations of character ethics" is a welcome reminder of the power of words to inform who we are and, potentially, to affect social change (150).

The reader's critical essays on *Their Dogs Came with Them* are an especially welcome addition to the growing body of criticism on the Chicana writer. For fans of Viramontes's fiction, *Their Dogs Came with Them* was a much-awaited novel. The author's candid discussion in the interviews of the obstacles she

faced in finding a suitable publisher for the novel invites readers of the novel to reflect on our expectations for literary fiction. What kinds of generic and formal experiments are we willing to embrace? And to what end? Through the story of her experiences of publishing, Viramontes also implies that such publishing concerns as sales and marketing may hinder writers of color from realizing their creative vision.

The essays by Juanita Heredia, Mary Pat Brady, and Aldo Ulisses Reséndiz Ramírez amply demonstrate the reward of engaging with the very narrative elements of *Their Dogs Came with Them* that might have made some publishers hesitate. While Ramírez's focus is on excavating the layers of Chicano cultural memory in the novel through what he calls "the Chicano codex of ancient omens" (218), and Heredia's is on showing the vulnerabilities of young Chicana women in the throes of urban development, both critics point to the novel as a remarkable literary rendering of the East Los Angeles of the 1960s as a metaphoric battleground for Chicanos. Viramontes, they suggest, brings to view this recognized "war" against Chicanos as communities were torn apart and residents displaced by urban development policies and plans whose implementers did not take into consideration the potential negative impact of their actions on poor neighborhoods and peoples. Mary Pat Brady's essay, in particular, shows spatial politics as germane to Viramontes's aesthetics in the novel by employing theories of scale in humanist geography. Her argument that *Their Dogs Came with Them* is an aesthetic and ethical call to care about the small scale, the everyday lives of the most vulnerable people, echoes Viramontes's frequent mention of the cultivation of compassion as one of the goals of her writing. If James Baldwin famously said that urban renewal in 1960s New York City was tantamount to "Negro removal," Viramontes, the above essays intimate, shows the freeway construction in 1960s Los Angeles as translating into "Chicano removal."

The reader's title, *Rebozos de palabras*, which can be translated as "mantle of words," aptly captures the spirit of the essays in the reader. The term *rebozo* is at once rooted in the material culture of Chicanas—Gutiérrez y Muhs mentions in the introduction that the *rebozo* is Viramontes's signature attire for public appearances, her "security blanket (2)—and symbolic of Viramontes's work as a "political chronicler" (Saldívar-Hull vii). In fact, the meaning of this term is amplified throughout the essays as the contributors variously offer heuristic metaphors that connect with the governing image of the *rebozo*. Yarbro-Bejarano's metaphor of the "patch quilt," which she uses to both refer to the community of migrant laborers in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and to Viramontes's narrative technique of breaking up her narrative into units while stitching them back together with images that recur, is one example (75, 69). Another is Margarita T. Barceló's metaphor of "tapestries," which

functions as Bakhtin's chronotope in its reference to the narrative's space-time while simultaneously situating Viramontes's creative work in the feminist image of women's time and space. R. Joyce Z. L. Garay's attention to voice and image in her analysis of *Under the Feet of Jesus* sums up Viramontes's power of description and her use of poetic language by showing how her use of images works to confer voice on subjects rendered voiceless. All in all, *Rebozos de palabras* both complements extant scholarship on Viramontes's first two publications and charts new territory in Viramontes scholarship with exciting readings of her most recent novel. As Gutiérrez y Muhs predicts in the introduction, the reader will indeed prove to be very helpful to scholars, teachers, and students who are interested in understanding the depth and breadth of Viramontes's literary world.

Jeehyun Lim
Denison University