Spanish Perspectives on Chicano Literature

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PART I

SPANISH PERSPECTIVES DE ACÁ
IN GENERAL, studies on mimesis tend to concentrate on exploring the relationship between text and reality, paying less attention to other elements of the literary experience, such as the reader and the context of publication, to name just two. Most studies support themselves on Platonic or Aristotelian theory, which explains the focus of their analyses. Plato understood the mimetic as a means of (imperfectly) copying a reality that, in turn, is nothing but an imperfect copy of the ideal world. Aristotle modified Plato’s theory by proposing that mimesis was in fact an imitation of a prior action or praxis.

It was only in the past few decades that scholarship on mimesis started to shift its focus from the reality/text relationship to other elements of the literary experience. Such a move can be exemplified by the work of Varsava on mimesis and postmodern fiction (1990), as well as by Schad’s study of mimesis, Dickens, and his readers (1992). For both Varsava and Schad, reception and reading play an important role in the discourse on mimesis, and they do so in ways that transcend Aristotelian catharsis and Platonic warnings against poets and their influence on readers, the two elements that dominated for centuries whatever consideration was given to reading and readers in this context.

1. The classic study on mimesis remains that of Auerbach, whose relativist historicism and implicit warning on the historicity of “reality” itself need to be taken into account by any succeeding study, this one included.
Indeed, after Plato’s much heeded warning against poets, virtually all the bibliography related to mimesis and the reader focused on what different groups of people could or should read. In that sense, discussions of mimesis and reading were almost always tied to issues of legal, religious, or moral censorship. Although the history of censorship is well beyond the limits of this essay, some of its manifestations are of special relevance for my topic (mimesis, reading, and Chicano/a literature), and thus I will begin with two pertinent examples. First, it is worth remembering the prohibition against the exportation of novels and other secular books from Europe to the New World during much of the colonial period. As Leonard explored in detail, this interdiction did not stop the arrival of such books, but it succeeded in slowing down their entrance and dissemination. Later on, the initial ban was substituted by stringent normatives against particular groups of potential readers, women and the indigenous peoples in particular, who were not allowed to read certain books even after the legal restrictions against the importation of such books were lifted. Illustrative in that regard are the troubles experienced in seventeenth-century New Mexico by Teresa de Aguilera y Roche, wife of Governor Bernardo López de Mendizábal. Inquisition records first brought to light by Eleanor B. Adams and France V. Scholes revealed that (among many other books) Aguilera owned a copy of Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* in Italian, a gift from her father so she could practice a language that she learned in her childhood. In her defense during the inquisitorial procedure, Aguilera stated:

> If the book had been evil, [my father] would not have permitted me to read it, nor would he have done so, for he was a very good Christian. And this book, according to what I heard from him and other persons, has been translated into our Castilian language, like the Petrarch, of which it is a companion volume although the style is different.  
> (Adams and Scholes 220, emphasis added)

She also pointed out

> that [*Orlando furioso*] is current and widely read in both Italy and Spain by persons who understand it, for at the beginning of each chapter there is a statement called the allegory which says that only the good is to be taken from it and not the bad; and it inculcates great morality and good doctrine; and God help the witness who had such suspicions.  
> (Adams and Scholes 220–21)

2. On restrictive policies and their effect, see Leonard, chapter 7.
The crucial element for our purposes is the sentence “by persons who understand it,” which brings to the fore not only the issue of language fluency (Italian vs. the Spanish spoken by most New Mexican colonists) but, more importantly, that of the reader’s competence, on which all ecclesiastical and lay restrictions rested. The fact that it was a woman who owned and enjoyed reading a book of poetry in 1660s New Mexico made the circumstances much more suspicious in the eyes of her accusers, and even Aguilera is forced to cite in her defense the fact that her father would not have permitted her to read the book if he had considered the book evil, thus properly illustrating the multiple levels of direct or indirect censorship affecting female readers at the time.

The second example I would like to discuss is a metaliterary episode in Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*. In it, the reader learns of the selective burning of Don Alonso Quijano’s library by the religious authority in Don Quijote’s hamlet.3 The narration of that incident is marked by a certain irony, as Cervantes seems to play with Plato’s warnings against the effects of poets and their works on the body politic. Don Quijote is said to have lost his mind because of his constant reading of chivalric novels, and his particular form of madness consists in the imitation of that earlier praxis which such novels narrate. Don Quijote, perhaps the most famous reader in literary history, confuses reality and its (extravagant) mimesis in the *novelas de caballerías* (chivalric novels) to such an extent that he transforms La Mancha and other surrounding regions in textual rather than geographical areas, seeing castles and giants where *ventas* and windmills stand. As the novel progresses, the limits between the physical world and its literary counterpart become less clearly defined, not just for Don Quijote but for the rest of the characters as well. Though some of the characters pretend to believe in the chivalric novel world only to amuse themselves at Don Quijote’s expense, others—like Sancho—inhabit a greyer area between skepticism and the willful suspension of disbelief. Paradoxically, however, as the “madness” extends, Cervantes’s readers soon realize that if Don Quijote had not read so extensively, and if he had not decided to imitate the heroes of his readings, he would have never been the splendid idealist character he becomes in the first part of Cervantes’s novel, nor the magnificent moralist he is in the second part (a trait that is further accentuated by the way in which Cervantes surrounds him with corrupt and decadent noblemen and other questionable characters). The dangerous influence of chivalric novels in Don Quijote, therefore, ends up being beneficial to the republic as a vehicle of moral criticism and reformation.

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3. Melberg suggests that in the episode of the library, Aristotelian poetics (as defended by the churchman) clashes with the also Aristotelian principle of mimesis as a reference to an earlier praxis (55).
Though clearly different, my two examples are intimately connected, because *Don Quijote* was one of the first books to circumvent importation restrictions in colonial Latin America, and one of the most widely read novels then and now.4 But the main reason I wanted to stress these two moments in the history of mimesis and censorship is that I find echoes of both episodes in early Mexican American literature (i.e., that literature written in the United States by authors of Mexican descent that predates the Chicano Movement of the 1960s), and I would like to use them as a prologue to my analysis of mimesis and readers after the Movement.

One of the most well-known Mexican American writers from the nineteenth century is María Amparo Ruiz de Burton. Interestingly, Burton was the author of a five-act comedy adaptation of *Don Quixote*, published in 1876 and never reprinted since then.5 She published two novels as well: *Who Would Have Thought It* (1872) and *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), both of which were recovered and edited in the 1990s by Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita, soon becoming central to the turn-of-the-century Chicano/a literary curriculum. These two works are, among other things, a keen protest against the disenfranchisement of the Californios and against discrimination for reasons of ethnicity, nationality, and gender. They represent one of the earliest defenses of the rights of women penned by a Mexican American. However, despite Ruiz de Burton’s progressive stance on women’s rights, and in spite of the fact that she was a well-read woman, her female characters are portrayed in ways that still reflect the traditional gender expectations on reading at the time. Keeping in mind the extraordinary significance of the fact that they are presented as readers, in the first place, I would like to interrogate nonetheless the class and gender aspects of this portrayal. As I have suggested elsewhere, Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* is marked by an elitist class bias that works to present the Alamar family as an example of Californio refined society (“Textual and Land Reclamations” 47). Young Mercedes Alamar, the heroine of *The Squatter and the Don*, reveals such an elite upbringing when we learn that she prefers reading to siesta, but the only book we “see” her read is a history of France: no novels or even poetry for her, as if the Spanish colonial ban on libros de divertimento (amusement books) were still operative in nineteenth-century U.S. California. The scene, involving Mercedes’s French governess Madam Halier, is worth quoting:

4. See Leonard, esp. chapter 18. For its relevance in a New Mexican context, see Fray Angélico Chávez, *passim*, or, in more recent times, Thomas E. Chávez’s adoption of *Don Quijote*’s literary model to structure his *Chasing History*.

5. In his “Early California Literature,” Bancroft acknowledges her comedy as follows: “Mrs Burton reveals her innate Spanish taste in the five-act comedy of *Don Quixote*” (638).
“Mercedes’s French novel must be very interesting,” Carlota said.
“It is not a novel—it is French History,” said Madam Halier. (120)

The ban against novels had long been lifted, as Carlota’s comment makes clear, but the social value associated with each of the genres involved in her exchange with Madam Halier suggests that one (history) was more appropriate for upper-class female readers than the other. “A good girl must only read good books” seems to be the implied message in that scene, an idea that we see confirmed in an almost contemporary novel with another upper-class, female California protagonist: Gertrude Atherton’s Rezánov (1906). In Atherton’s novel, the female central character is a historical figure, Conchita Argüello (who later inspired Aurelio M. Espinosa’s novella of that title). Ms. Argüello’s education is praised as follows in Rezánov: “Concha had a larger vocabulary than other Californians of her sex, for she had read many books, and if never a novel, she knew something of poetry” (100). Californians, as these examples indicate, had succeeded in prolonging (under a class and gender basis) colonial censorship up to the late nineteenth century, at least as far as the upper-class, female readership was concerned.

In consequence, as an instructive and formative book, whatever history of France Mercedes read in The Squatter and the Don must be considered an “appropriate” choice for her within the parameters of her patriarchal society, one that would keep her mind focused on reality, preventing flights of fancy like those of Don Quijote, whose own fantasies about France—incidentally—had been recreated by Ruiz de Burton in her play Don Quixote, where she has the hidalgo say:

I am he for whom dangers and great exploits are reserved. I am he who is destined to revive the order of the Round Table, that of twelve peers of France, and the worthies, and to obliterate the memory of the Platins, the Tablantes, the Olibantes, and Tirantes, “Knight of the Sun,” and the Belianises, with the whole tribe of knights-errant of old. (19–20)

Ruiz de Burton’s readers, especially those familiar with both of her works quoted here, cannot help but wonder about Mercedes’s own destiny and how it might be related to reading and genre. If Don Quijote’s incessant consumption of chivalric novels produced in him a desire to imitate that earlier praxis (to phrase it in Aristotelian terms), could we not argue that Mercedes’s reading of history is behind her quick maturation process and her progressive acceptance of the historical forces that transform her (family) life? In that sense, Ruiz de Burton’s own mixture of genres (romance for the story of Mer-
cedes and Clarence, and political history for the critique of contemporary abuses against the Californios\(^6\) is not unlike Cervantes’s strategy to ridicule the \textit{novelas de caballerías} by weaving a parody of them into his masterpiece. Like Cervantes, Ruiz de Burton exposes the limitations of the romance for narrating the experiences of the Californios (thus rejecting the incipient co-optation of the Californio experience in sentimental and picturesque literature),\(^7\) while embracing the committed discourse of denunciation and self-affirmation as a more suitable option.

In New Mexico, the Platonic warning against the dangerous effects of poetic mimesis finds a perfect example in Luciano, a character in Eusebio Chacón’s \textit{Tras la tormenta, la calma} (1892). Luciano represents Quixotic mimetism adapted to his own times and environment. Like Don Quijote, Luciano is unable to distinguish between reality and its discursive representation: “‘Todas aquellas cosas que leía le parecían á él haber pasado tal cual se pintaban, y nada creía más propio de la vida Estudiantil que todas aquellas blasfemias, indecoros, inmoralidades y faltas de honor’ (38) (“He believed that all the things he read had actually happened as they were described and came to believe that the life of the student was just about blasphemy, shamefulness, inmortality, and breeches of honor” [87]).\(^8\)

As a consequence, the young Luciano adopts literary characters as veritable models of conduct:

\begin{quote}
Era el tiempo de recordación para los exámenes fináles, y él en lugar de atender á sus deberes gastaba su tiempo en leer El \textit{Don Juan} de Byron, \textit{El Estudiante de Salamanca} y otras composiciones por el estilo, de cuyas páginas iba cobrando una muy fuerte aficción á las deshonestidades que en ellas se esparcen. De tal manera se despertó su fantasía que solo anhelaba la ocasión para probarse un temerario Don Juan, ó un Felix de Montemar. (38)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
It was closed week before final examinations, and instead of tending to his studies, Luciano spent his time reading [Lord] Byron’s \textit{Don Juan}, \textit{The Student of Salamanca}, and other such works, becoming obsessed with the dishonest behavior that runs throughout them. In this way a fantasy was born in him that caused him to dream of the occasion he might prove himself a don Juan of a Felix of Montemar. (87)\(^9\)
\end{quote}

More a fool than a madman, Luciano lives his life as if he were a literary character (which ironically he is, of course, like Don Quijote), and that pro-

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{6. Cf. the subtitle: “A Novel Descriptive of Contemporary Occurrences in California.”}
\footnote{7. See Padilla (\textit{My History}), and Gutiérrez.}
\footnote{8. \textit{Writings of Eusebio Chacón}, ed. A. Gabriel Meléndez and Francisco Lomelí 87.}
\footnote{9. See footnote 8.}
\end{footnotes}
duces the humor in this novella, when his aspirations and actions clash with those of the other characters, for whom books play virtually no role. Even though Luciano succeeds in marrying his love interest, Lola, Chacón uses this character to stress the superiority of “reality” over its literary mimesis: toward the end of the story, Luciano is publicly ridiculed and, like a second-part Don Quijote, he is brought back to the sanity of societal mores. In doing so, Chacón seems to warn against the dangers of recreational, unsupervised reading, thus raising the specter of censorship or, at least, of stricter controls for younger readers.

These and other examples of nineteenth-century Mexican American literature that we could explore reveal a large dose of traditionalism in their understanding of the relationship between reality, literature, writing, and reading. Even during the first half of the twentieth century, we find numerous examples of didactic writing in which moral lessons are foregrounded at the expense of the aesthetic pleasure of reading. This is the case of Las aventuras de Don Chipote o cuando los pericos mamen, published by Daniel Venegas in 1928, in Los Angeles, and in whose title and structure it is easy to perceive an allusion to Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quijote.

Like Cervantes’s hero, Don Chipote leaves his village in search of “adventures” in Mexico’s northern neighbor. An illiterate peasant, Don Chipote is moved not by the reading of novels or poetry, but by the stories he hears from his neighbor Pitacio: tall tales of a country in which money can be swept off the streets. Venegas, not unlike Ruiz de Burton a few decades earlier, combines a realistic (naturalistic at times) description of the experiences of Mexicans in California with moralizing digressions that help prepare the reader for the conclusion of the novel, that asserts that “los mexicanos se harán ricos en Estados Unidos: CUANDO LOS PERICOS MAMEN” (155) (“Mexicans will make it big in the United States . . . WHEN PARROTS BREAST-FEED” [160]). In this warning against the danger of believing stories that say otherwise, Venegas continues exploring the tension between representation and reality that Ruiz de Burton and Chacón had examined as well. The radical difference in his case resides in the way in which he displaces the poetic referent from the world of high culture (to which both Ruiz de Burton and Chacón subscribed) to the (predominantly oral) popular culture of the Mexican masses. In other words, even if Venegas’s title contains an allusion to a literary work, that reference belongs to the world of the author and the implied reader, but would be mostly incomprehensible for his characters, for whom cultural life centers on folkloric compositions and in the popular theatre scene that flourished at the

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time in Los Angeles.” Don Chipote’s only books are a cancionero and a book of poetry that he purchases with the intention of impressing a potential lover. As an illiterate man, he needs someone to read the books for him, and his own interaction with their contents seems to be restricted to memorizing, rather than understanding them: “No faltó quien, mediante una propina, le estuviera repasando las poesías hasta que se le metieron en el casco. Las canciones fueron cosa más difícil, pues el libro no traía las tonadas, por lo que de nada le sirvió el libro” (149) (“there was no lack of people willing to go over the lines of poetry with him, for a small fee, until he got them into his skull. The songs were more difficulty, because the book didn’t include the notes, making the book not worth a darn.” [150]).

The change of referent from the literary to the popular tradition that we see at work in Venegas’s novel is of major significance, because it foreshadows much of what will later be the correlation between reality, mimesis, and readership in the literature of the Chicano Movement, including an emphasis on the working-class experience, a preference for popular language, a preeminence of the oral tradition, and an attempt to connect with working-class audiences. In fact, Mexican and Chicano/a workers became the inspiration for most literary characters during and (to a large extent) after the Chicano Movement, and they were seen as the ideal readership for many of those works as well.12 As for mimesis, Chicano Movement literature is essentially mimetic in the sense that it reveals strong and recognizable ties/references to reality; but I would like to claim that its greatest originality resides in the way in which it transforms the reader into the central element in the literary process (including the very notion of mimesis).

In Chicano Movement literature, we perceive an undeniable effort to make the reader see him/herself in the text. Many of the works produced during the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s would have the reader feel that the main aspects of the plot are relevant not only to the characters’ lives but also to those of the reader and his/her family. To a certain extent, this is also true of other ethnic literatures, in particular during their phase of affirmation. In them, as in Chicano/a letters, the literary recreation of clearly recognizable experiences serves as a catalyst for the formation of group consciousness, while simultaneously working to correct stereotypical and distorted images of the group in mainstream literature and the media. In the process, book sales and the dissemination of the new ethnic literature usually contribute to consolidating the emergent tradition by generating a continuous demand for that

11. For an assessment of the theatrical scene in Los Angeles at the time, see Kanellos 17–70.
12. I have explored this and many of the issues below in my book Life in Search of Readers, passim. This essay expands on my original research in those areas.
newer kind of literary representation. In the case of Chicano/a literature, as I explored elsewhere, this resulted in the creation of Chicano/a presses, at first, and then in the increasing access by Chicano/a authors to mainstream publishing outlets, although at that point (or for those texts at least) the mimetic impulse had evolved into an entirely different kind of effort, often driven by a transcultural need to make the Chicano/a experience understandable to distant readers.

A good example of the Chicano Movement understanding of mimesis is found in the works of Tomás Rivera. In addition to illustrating it superbly in his novel... y no se lo tragó la tierra, Rivera wrote several essays on mimesis that are relevant for this discussion. In “Remembering, Discovery and Volition in the Literary Imaginative Process,” for example, Rivera stresses the need to recreate a reality that is well known to the readers but also (and more importantly) to do so in terms that are familiar to the readers:

I will discuss remembering first; I refer to the method of narrating which people used. That is to say, I recall what they remembered and the manner in which they told it. There was always a way of compressing and exciting the sensibilities with a minimum of words. New events were also being constantly added. Needless to say, this is what the oral tradition is all about. (Tomás Rivera 366)

Rivera’s endeavor to “imitate” popular narrative forms should not be interpreted as just a stylistic resource. Rather, as I suggested above, it needs to be seen as a communicative strategy that seeks to engage the reader in an active process of literary (re)creation. Per his own implicit admission in “Remembering,” Rivera’s opting for a narrative mode that was familiar to his intended readers was of the utmost importance. While earlier novels such as José Antonio Villarreal’s Pocho or John Rechy’s City of Night initially failed to connect with a Chicano/a audience;... Rivera’s success (aided, no doubt, by the efficient marketing strategies of the Grupo Editorial Quinto Sol) was based upon “imitating” not only a Chicano/a reality but his readers’ storytelling practices and preferences as well.

Rivera’s essays also emphasize the pleasure of reading as a ceremony of rejoicing in a shared experience. Even within... y no se lo tragó la tierra, the idea of a literary communion of sorts is explored through the figure of Bartolo, the itinerant bard:

14. For Villarreal, see Bruce-Novoa; for Rechy, see Bruce-Novoa, and also Martín-Rodríguez, “Between Milton and Proust.”
Bartolo pasaba por el pueblo por aquello de diciembre cuando tanteaba que la mayor parte de la gente había regresado de los trabajos. Siempre venía vendiendo sus poemas. Se le acababan casi el primer día porque en los poemas se encontraban los nombres de la gente del pueblo. Y cuando los leía en voz alta era algo emocionante y serio. Recuerdo que una vez le dijo a la raza que leyeran los poemas en voz alta porque la voz era la semilla del amor en la oscuridad. (113)

Bartolo passed through town every December when he knew that most of the people had returned from work up north. He always came by selling his poems. By the end of the first day, they were almost sold out because the names of the people of the town appeared in the poems. And when he read them aloud it was something emotional and serious. I recall that one time he told the people to read the poems out loud because the spoken word was the seed of love in the darkness. (215)

This episode works in a specular manner for Rivera’s own activity as a writer because, even if Rivera does not use the proper names of his own townsfolk, as Bartolo did, his novel can be said to reflect their lives through those of his characters. As Julián Olivares rightly suggested, mimetic writing becomes for Rivera a kind of moral obligation:

We can perceive . . . [in Rivera’s statements about his works] that Rivera had an ethical obligation to write of his people, to record their collective experience, to document the existence of a people. In this regard, he chose to write of the people with whom he was most ideologically and socially tied: the migrant workers. As a result, his people can read of themselves, and those who are aware of this type of existence can say: “sí, así era.” (in Rivera’s Tomás Rivera 45–46)

In thus establishing a bond between author and reader, Rivera turns around Plato’s admonition against poets and the moral effects of their works. In Rivera’s mind, the poet’s task is justified precisely as an ethical obligation: that of telling those stories that the official discourse had silenced, and telling them in a manner that is both meaningful to his audience and respectful of his audience’s ways.

15. For more on Bartolo’s poetry, see Martín-Rodríguez, “Paper Trails” 152–59.
16. The figure of Bartolo has generated considerable interest among critics. Morales, for instance, considers him a representative of community and of the oral tradition. As such, he emblematizes Rivera’s desire to recreate reality as the oral tradition does.
Like Rivera, most Chicano/a writers in the 1970s attempted to document the experiences of their communities in a more or less mimetic way. Rolando Hinojosa’s early works were perceived at the time as *costumbrista* (centered on the depiction of customs and manners) precisely because of their mimetic quality, although Hinojosa’s experimentation with multiple genres precludes such a reductionist interpretation of his writings.\(^{17}\) Even Rudolfo A. Anaya, who referenced myths and supernatural events in his fiction much more frequently than the other writers already discussed, seems to have embraced the need to reflect in his stories an experience familiar to his first and most immediate audience. Along with the universalistic dimension that myth may bring to *Bless Me, Ultima*, for instance,\(^{18}\) we also find in that novel a careful description of folkloric practices that reflect those characteristic of New Mexican rural communities at the time. In his case, it is not the kind of anthropological or picturesque description typical of the works of Anglo American writers who visited New Mexico;\(^{19}\) rather, Anaya adopts an insider’s perspective in order to minimize the distance between characters and readers: what happens to the characters is something that could have happened to the reader as well or that, at least, is part of the audience’s collective memory. Paraphrasing Olivas, a reader of Anaya could very well say “Yes, my grandmother told those kinds of stories as well.”

The predominant mimetic drive that I am positing as typical of Chicano/a 1970s narrative had its exceptions from early on. In 1975, two rather successful novels seriously challenged the tenets of predictable reader’s response. Alejandro Morales’s *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* combined experimental techniques associated with the French *nouveau roman* with Spanish expressionism and *tremendismo* to portray an urban reality in almost hallucinatory ways. Though easily recognizable, the experiences depicted in *Caras viejas* do not allow the reader the kind of positive identification that was possible with Rivera’s *Tierra*, since the characters are mostly drug addicts, alcoholics, and violent youngsters. Moreover, the novel’s presentation techniques are far from the folk practices of the oral tradition, which further complicates the reader’s emotional involvement with the storyline.

Ron Arias’s *The Road to Tamazunchale*, on the other hand, is as far from the populist mimetism of the books published by Quinto Sol as it is from Morales’s expressionism. Perhaps the first postmodern Chicano writer, and

\(^{17}\) Martín-Rodríguez, *Rolando Hinojosa y su “cronicón” chicano*, chapter 2.

\(^{18}\) On the universalism of myth in Anaya, see Cazemajou 256.

\(^{19}\) Padilla (“Imprisoned Narrative?” 45) analyzes this Anglo American discourse on New Mexico.
one of the earliest postmodern authors in the United States, Arias delights in playing with the ontological limits of reality in a way that disrupts mimesis in its most traditional sense. Still, *Tamazunchale* would fit well with the newer understanding of postmodern mimesis that Varsava explores:

Postmodern fiction is a *representation* of [the] questioning of the values and preoccupations of our epoch; in this lies its mimesis, its mimetic function. The literary ramifications of this questioning include the thematization of uncertainty, ambiguity, undeterminacy and a consequent concern for *form* that emphasizes the latter as a potentially liberating phenomenon. (182, original emphasis)

Indeed, the boundaries between the real and the unreal are extremely fuzzy in *Tamazunchale*: characters seemingly die but they keep reappearing in subsequent chapters as if they were still alive; they transform themselves into books or flowers; some of them come not from “reality” but from previous books by other authors, as is the case of David, the drowned man found in a dry riverbed. In this sense, *Tamazunchale* represents a more radical challenge to traditional mimesis than *Caras viejas* does, since Morales’s reader may still recognize a well-known reality beyond narrative distortions, while the reader of Arias is thrown into a much more literary world (or a *formalist* world, in Varsava’s sense of the term) that is, by necessity, further removed from everyday experience, even if geographic and cultural elements are still recognizable.

From that moment on, the mimetic literature that was so successful in constructing an image of Chicanas/os as a group started diversifying to the point where no dominant style or trend could be identified. At the same time, the increasing visibility of Chicana literature, first heralded by works by Estela Portillo-Trambley, Berta Ornelas, Isabella Ríos, and Bernice Zamora in the 1970s, is emblematic of a shift from the pursuit of commonalities and group identification to an interest in the exploration of internal differences. The ensuing boom of Chicana narrative in the 1980s and beyond produces an interesting phenomenon in which new mimetic works begin to appear. These works, in particular those produced during the 1980s, position themselves at a special juncture that allows them to be a commentary on both reality and literature. In the latter sense, novels like Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, because of the multiple ways in which they respond to a largely patriarchal literary

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20. See my “Border Crisscrossing” 198.
21. Tatum provides some useful categories and groupings in chapters 5–7.
tradition (which includes 1970s Chicano literature), can be said to “read” and comment on previous texts, to the extent that we can almost hear the implied authors say “no, así no era” when confronting previous male Chicano depictions of family and society, which they now problematize and rephrase. In the former sense, books by Chicana authors share with their female readers the kind of bond that Rivera and Anaya, among others, sought to create with a gender-undifferentiated Chicano/a audience. Thus, in most works by Chicanas, female readers find a recognizable feminine, Chicana experience that they may perceive as “real” and/or as part of their experience as well. This is what poet and essayist Pat Mora refers to as “elements of commonality” that Chicana authors share with their readers.22 As a consequence, the 1980s signal the beginning of a new cycle in which mimesis contributes to the formation of a Chicana group awareness by bringing authors and readers together in the creation of a new literary reality. This is best exemplified by Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, in which the author explores the tension between representational mimesis (that is, one that attempts to be faithful to the reality that characters and/or readers inhabit) and its utopian counterpart, understood as a literary mode that attempts to represent not what the world is like but what it could or should be. Since I have explored the metaliterary aspects of *Mango Street* elsewhere,23 there is no need to repeat my arguments here. I will only add that utopian mimesis, as defined above, is best described in the story “A House of My Own,” especially in its oft-quoted final paragraph: “Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108). For the reader of *Mango Street*, the stories in the book are an artistic rephrasing of social realities well known to most Chicanas (and many other readers): marginality, substandard living conditions, domestic and gender violence, an education that teaches girls to “grow down,”24 and poverty, among other salient aspects. But “A House of My Own” opens up (and never closes) the possibility of other texts and other realities. The blank page is not dependent on a prior reality or praxis; rather, it stands as a yet-to-be-fulfilled potentiality; it seems to suggest that literature has a role in portraying the world we inhabit, but also in imagining better worlds. Considered from a reader’s perspective, the blank page also works metaphorically as the

22. Mora talks about poetry specifically: “A Chicana poet also uses elements of commonality with her listeners: the importance of family, the retelling of familiar tales” (127). I believe that the same can be said of all other genres, and that several other common elements could be added to the list.


24. The idea is borrowed from Annis Pratt’s work on the female bildungsroman (14).
ultimate statement against censorship and other forms of social control. The blank page astutely circumvents the issues confronted by Teresa de Aguilar y Roche centuries earlier: if the book has no content, no parent or authority figure can determine it unfit for the female reader. In a book where patriarchal authority is almost absolute (cf. the stories about Sally, Minerva, Marin, and most of the women in the neighborhood), the utopian emptiness of the blank page signals the possibility of alternative subject positionalities and of an alternative literary praxis. Paraphrasing Cisneros's text, we could define this new praxis as not that of a man’s nor a daddy’s, but one in which people like Teresa de Aguilar, Mercedes Alamar, Esperanza Cordero, and others, would encounter freedom and openness, rather than barriers and censorship; one in which literary discourse would not only reflect the world outside but create new worlds from scratch.

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